

## Beyond War Plan UK: civil defence in the 1980s

By Steve Fox

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In the 1950s and 1960s Britain had a very creditable civil defence structure. After nuclear attack the country would be governed by regionally-based commissioners from Regional Seats of Government. Below them, doing the work, were local authorities and the 300,000-strong Civil Defence Corps and other voluntary groups. By 1968 this had all been effectively scrapped and civil defence was put on a "care and maintenance" basis. There was a slight upturn in 1974 when regulations were made requiring local authorities to make plans. But it is apparent that little happened in concrete terms at any level between 1968 and 1980.

In 1979 the Conservatives came to power and soon announced a review of Civil Defence or as the Home Secretary called it "a review of civil preparedness for home defence". The full results of this were never published, but it would not be hard to guess what was found after more than a decade when virtually nothing had been done.

In 1980, as a result of the review, some immediate measures were introduced. One important measure was to shorten the expected warning period from 3-4 weeks to seven days. Another was the idea that there may be a conventional non-nuclear war which should be planned for. Before, all plans had been based on the idea that the war would produce an immediate and all-out nuclear strike. In more specific terms the United Kingdom Warning and Monitoring Organisation (UKWMO) was to be modernised, improvements were to be made to the Wartime Broadcasting Service (WTBS) and the 'Green Goddess' fire engines were overhauled. More importantly, more money was made available to local authorities for their civil defence measures and to provide for the Emergency Planning Officers to oversee them. It also appears that an unannounced decision was made to refurbish the SRHQs (discussed later).

It was around this time that public interest in civil defence saw an upsurge. We saw the publication and general (albeit largely uninformed) condemnation of the Protect and Survive booklet and later the screening of the film *The War Game*. However, the 'peace movements' were also more active and we saw the growth in the Nuclear Free Zones (NFZ) movement amongst local authorities and the revival of CND.

1982 should have seen the running of Exercise Hard Rock, planned to be the biggest civil defence exercise since the 1960s and involving all the county councils and the SRHQs although these would not have been fully manned. Unfortunately it was a public relations disaster and about half the councils, mainly NFZ authorities, refused to take part. As a result in July that year the Home Secretary announced that he was not satisfied

with the state of local authority planning for civil defence and Hard Rock was postponed. The efforts of the NFZs probably came as a relief to the Government which no doubt found it and the local authorities would have had nothing to play the exercise with.

The 1974 regulations mentioned earlier had required every County Council and the GLC to make plans on a variety of subjects such as the control and co-ordination of action necessary as the result of a hostile attack, instructing the public, the provision of facilities for the disposal of human remains etc., in other words a complete battery of measures to prepare the county for the aftermath of war. In reality however there had been little interest in or money for civil defence and few local authorities had meaningful plans.

Following the abandonment of Hard Rock the government put in hand plans to sort out the local authorities who would be the people would actually do something in an emergency as opposed to the Regional Commissioner and his staff who would just make policy. This resulted in the 1983 local government civil defence regulations which more or less covered the same ground as the 1974 ones but with some vital differences. A major difference was that the 1974 regulations simply required plans to be made but the 1983 one required these plans to be kept up to date.

Additionally, the 1983 act required local authorities to take part in any training exercise organised by the Minister. In other words there would be no repetition of the Hard Rock fiasco. They were also required to establish "emergency centres" although in line with the softly-softly approach these were not to be called war rooms, bunkers or controls but the much more acceptable "centres".

The 1983 regulations appeared to be much more forceful and no doubt the Government expected things to happen as a result. But it appears that very little did happen. Some councils remained ideologically opposed and did nothing. Others said they had no money or asked for more information. Even so, it must be realised that all they were required to do was to produce plans on a given range of subjects. There was no requirement for any actual preparations beyond the emergency centres and some staff training.

One idea of the new civil defence measures was that civil defence was to be opened up to public scrutiny and no longer be secret. Hence the publication in 1980 of the Protect and Survive booklet. But perhaps the most interesting publication was the Emergency Planning Guidelines for Local Authorities which was issued in 1985. The content of this large book can be seen from its original title of the Consolidated Circular. It brought together, usually in a modified and toned-down form, all the various Emergency Services Circulars issued by the Home Office covering areas such as the role of the local authority, warning and monitoring, the role of the police, water services etc. More importantly it published

the plans for regional government after a nuclear strike.

I mentioned earlier that after a nuclear war the country would have divided into regions, each headed by a Regional Commissioner with full powers to govern internally. He would control the region through his own staff and the former local authority structures suitably modified for war. As an interim stage by the 1970s we had Sub-Regional Commissioners who would oversee the survival phase after the attack in their part of the region. This phase would last for a few weeks or months after which control would be handed over to the Regional Commissioner who would continue to put the region back on its feet and prepare for the re-establishment of national government. The Sub-Regional Commissioners had their own hardened SRHQs.

It always seemed nonsense to expect a sub-regional administration do the work and then hand over to some one else. Why not let the Regional Commissioner do it from the start? This is what was introduced in 1984. From then each region would be divided into zones with the Commissioner in a headquarters in one zone and a deputy in another HQ. Each would have a staff of about 120. The headquarters themselves were the same buildings as the SRHQs and became known as Regional Government Headquarters or RGHQs.

During the early 1980s the SRHQs or RGHQs themselves were substantially improved. Some were finally built, such as the former cold store at Hexham and the Rotor bunker at Hack Green. Others, such as the Rotor bunkers at Skendelby and Bolt Head were radically modernised. There were even some completely new ones. The old anti-aircraft control room at Ullenwood near Cheltenham was abandoned in favour of a new bunker at Chilmark in Wiltshire. The Dover tunnels were abandoned in 1985 and a couple of years later the new RGHQ at Crowborough was opened to replace it. Senior staff were designated for the RGHQs and the Civil Defence College at Easingwold ran a course for them.

Also during the mid-1980s the UKWMO was revamped. New communications kit was installed in the RGHQs and then county emergency centres and on down to district level. The last new message switches (which replaced the obsolete teleprinters) were installed in the early 1990s - just in time to be removed when the whole system was closed down.

Other things were happening at the central government level. There was a lot of research on the effects of blast and radiation, shelter surveys were started and plans were issued for private shelters. New information for farmers and on emergency feeding were introduced. The siren system was modernised.

There was an extensive questionnaire on local authority preparedness in 1985/86. I have not seen the results but can guess the basic message because in 1986 the Home Office introduced the Planned Programme of

Implementation of PPI. This required county councils to submit an annual plan to the Home Office saying what they had done in the previous 18 months and what they intended to do in the following 18. They were also required to submit copies of the plans they were making under the 1983 regulations over a three-year time period. This was followed by general guidelines on what constitutes a plan and how to draw it up. The Home Office however, would not (and under the Regulations could not) dictate the content of the plans of the individual county councils. By 1989 therefore councils should have completed the plans they were told to make in 1983. Unless they did this they risked losing their civil defence grant. The timing is perhaps indicative of the urgency with which civil defence was taken at all levels.

In the mid-1980s the government was in a public relations battle with the 'peace groups' and was responding with the idea that civil defence planning could also be used for peacetime emergencies - the so called 'all hazards' approach to what was increasingly being called 'emergency planning'. This in turn led to the 1986 Civil Protection in Peacetime Act which allowed civil defence resources to be used for peacetime emergencies.

I should perhaps pause to mention the Emergency Planning Officers of the county councils and fire and civil defence authorities, who, together with volunteer scientific advisers and other volunteers, did all the work in civil defence. Often they had little assistance and, when the end came, they were hardly even thanked. The plans they produced were often massive tomes with long detailed lists of what to do, in what order, where to set up rest centres, how to measure radioactivity, etc. However, to my mind, having looked at several there always seems to be something fundamental missing. There are really detailed lists of what to do, only rarely do they consider on how to do it or who is going to do it. Despite all the effort they lack practicality and realism.

Talking of 'who was going to do it', there was much emphasis on the role of volunteers in the 1980s. The government appointed a Community Advisor, circulars on their roles were issued, sample training courses were written and so on. These volunteers would lead the effort at parish and street level, instructing their fellow citizens what to do, helping to staff rest centres and feeding centres, providing reports on fallout levels etc. They would have been the bedrock of civil defence. The counties and RGHQs could make plans but without people at the grass roots level nothing would have happened. These volunteers were the equivalent of the ARP people of World War Two or the Civil Defence Corps wardens. Hundreds of thousands would have been needed. London FCDA said it would need 50,000 just to run its emergency feeding centres. But there never seems to have been more than 25,000 volunteers in England and Wales by the late 1980s. (This is a government figure and would be based on returns from district councils.) The actual returns from Essex councils suggest that this is a very ad hoc figure and the majority were untrained

and in any case "trained" usually only meant attending a one-off set of talks on the basic planned civil defence structure. The answer was to put faith in "crash training" not only of council employees with designated tasks but also of the thousands of citizens who were expected to offer their services in the period of tension.

In October 1988 the Home Office produced a report on how things were going. It said things were going along OK. All councils had submitted plans as required, but the quality varied and "even the best clearly require further work" particularly at district level. In more concrete terms, and perhaps illustrative of the real state of affairs, the report said that only half of the required county emergency centres were operational and only 140 of the 400 required by districts. These were actually lower figures than had been declared in 1986.

But once again we need to step back. I said earlier that one new idea in the 1980s was the acceptance that the war might remain non-nuclear or might have a conventional period. Much of the planning for a total nuclear strike could be useful to a conventional bombing situation and in many respects what we actually had may have been of value against relatively small, localised damage.

During a conventional phase the message would have been 'business as usual'. The government, both central and local, would have continued as before although with additional tasks. There was however a new creature introduced at regional level - the Regional Emergency Committee (REC) made up of civil servants and representatives of the uniformed services. This would have been a mini regional government, although without any executive powers. Its planned role was as a communications channel, or mediator between central government, the government departments, police, military etc. Its role however always seems to have been a bit of a problem and whilst apparently a good idea in local government exercises, it was little used.

On the subject of exercises, I mentioned earlier the collapse of the planned national level exercise called Hard Rock. For whatever reason this exercise was never reinstated. Instead the Home Office instituted a series of regional level exercises from 1986. These were for the councils in a region to practice their transition to war plans and covered areas like staffing a rest centre, collecting ration documents, staffing an emergency centre and so on. They seem to have been generally useful and a lot was learned of the practicalities. For example Exercise Vireg, held in 6 South East region, appeared to show that the planners had been working on the basis that they would use their School Meals Service kitchens as emergency feeding centres - only to be told that the gas supply would have shut down along with the water supply at a very early stage,

The net result of all this effort was that by the turn of the decade

Britain had the best prepared civil defence system for a quarter of a century. However, it was now the age of glasnost and the Cold War came to an end. In 1990 all work on bunkers and other infrastructure was suspended. Soon after, in July 1991, the Home Secretary announced that civil defence plans must reflect the new realities and would now be retained in such a state that they could be brought to readiness within three months rather than the previous seven days. At the same time the Royal Observer Corps was stood down. The following year a further review announced that new regulations would be introduced to remove all the civil defence functions of local authorities and the siren warning system would be scrapped. In a throw away addition the end was announced of central Government civil defence planning and the scrapping of the RGHQs.

So after 1993 there was nothing left. Local authorities have abandoned their war plans although they have responsibilities under new 1993 regulations for civil protection where the latest buzz phrase is "Integrated Emergency Management". The haste to dismantle the system is reminiscent of what happened to civil defence at the end of the Second World War and has left many people to question its wisdom.

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