Aluminium Foiled

The sorry history of the Invergordon aluminium smelter project charts the slide into nightmare of the “white heat of technology” dreams held by planners in the Sixties. Nuclear power would provide vast quantities of cheap and reliable electricity, government would set up large investment schemes in “remote” [i.e., remote from Whitehall] areas, the economy would boom. Particularly, aluminium smelters and nuclear power were used to justify each other, as at Wylfa on Anglesey and with the deal between British Aluminium and the SSEB over the building of the Hunterston B Advanced Gas-cooled Reactor.

It was the reality of nuclear power — expensive and unreliable — which brought the Invergordon smelter project to a halt with a bump, and with disastrous consequences for the Highlands. But, as Peter Roche and Mike Holderness explain below, the consequences go much further. They make the case for abandoning Torness now stronger than it’s ever been.

The long-running saga involving both Scottish Electricity Boards and British Aluminium has finally ended with the closure of the aluminium smelter at Invergordon, at a cost to the taxpayer of £113 million. The loss of 800 jobs is devastating in an area where there is little prospect of further employment. However, the story is not yet completely over, and the knock-on effects of the Scottish economy may cause further redundancies.

The Invergordon smelter was one of the main employers in the Highland Region and Scotland’s biggest single electricity user. The smelter came into operation in 1972 and has used almost a quarter of the North of Scotland Hydro-Electric Board’s entire output since 1974.

British Aluminium contributed to the establishment of Hunterston B nuclear power station. They agreed with the South of Scotland Electricity Board to pay a proportion of the station’s running costs, in return for receiving electricity at a cheap rate. This complex contract, however, did not prevent the imposition of a series of crippling electricity price increases.

Delays in construction meant that Hunterston B was completed four years later than the expected 1977 start date. In 1980, 1,000 gallons of salt water was accidentally allowed to flood the pressure vessel. The reactor eventually came back on stream two and a half years later, by which time the total cost of the accident had mounted to £57 million.

This led the NSHEB to instigate proceedings against British Aluminium to recover £47M worth of disputed charges (see Bulletin No 25). RA disputed the charges because they did not believe that they were liable to pay extra charges due to a seawater leak and the rocketing price of nuclear fuel reproduction.

The Chairman of British Aluminium blamed the closure squarely upon high power costs. The Government had offered a subsidy of £47M claimed by the NSHEB and...