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For Nancy Tait - House of Commons Debate 20th Oct. 6.00 p.m.

COMMENT ON THE OBSERVER ARTICLE OF SUNDAY 29TH AUGUST BY CHRISTINE MOIR

Asbestos: Why there is no substitute

The above article comments on research at Surrey University into polypropylene reinforced cement (NETCEM) intended as an alternative to asbestos-cement flat and corrugated sheeting. The article implies that the product will not be satisfactory because it "tends to sag" or because it "fails combustibility tests". These are misleading statements in relation to the serviceability of the product.

The British Standard snow load of $0.75kN/m^2$ has been continuously applied at 20^oc to NETCEM sheets at the University for $2\frac{1}{2}$ years and the creep deflection in a span of 1.38m has been constant at 3mm since 1 year. This is a much lower deflection than the distortion normally found with new asbestos-cement sheets and is well within allowable limits. Deflections at 0^oc under realistic snow conditions would be considerably less than this.

To imply that "failing combustibility tests" is critical in the intended uses of the material which are for agricultural and single storey industrial buildings is again very misleading. Timber, plasterboard and many other widely used building materials also fail this test but are nevertheless indispensible in building construction. Asbestos-cement itself is notoriously bad under severe fire conditions because it can disintegrate violently.

The U.K. Building Regulations are extremely complex and are very thorough when safety in fire is considered and are best discussed with the Fire Research Station. The regulations will ensure that the properties in fire are satisfactory for the proposed uses and independent tests by the University's licencees to confirm this were carried out before they proceeded with their extensive developments. Test marketing in Europe will be carried out only when the product fully meets the requirements for roofing and cladding.

To summarise, the article of 29th August is grossly misleading and I would be happy to discuss at the University the information given above and to show evidence of the large industrial investment in the alternative being developed mainly in the Netherlands and in Italy, but not yet in the U.K.

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