

Sony Cyber-Shot T7710.1 megapixels for
exceptional quality photos

Enter now »

Cyber-shot SONY

guardian.co.uk

Government accused over Polaris files

Richard Norton-Taylor

guardian.co.uk, Saturday March 10 2007 23.50 GMT

The Guardian, Saturday March 10 2007

A [larger](#) | [smaller](#)

The government has been accused of suppressing documents that showed how ministers in the 1970s were kept in the dark about defects and escalating costs of the Polaris nuclear weapons system.

Lord Owen, in power when Labour upgraded Polaris, Trident's predecessor, has been prevented from having access to papers which he claims are highly relevant to the government's plans to renew the Trident nuclear weapon system.

Some documents were withdrawn from the National Archives when he asked to see them. Lord Owen wanted to see them to help back up his case that the government should consider placing nuclear warheads on cruise missiles, potentially a much cheaper option than the intercontinental ballistic Trident system the government wants to renew.

He said Tony Blair argued that Britain's nuclear missiles must be able to hit any target in the world. By implication, that meant the ability to penetrate Moscow's anti-ballistic missile (ABM) shield, and any future ABM system China may build around Beijing.

The documents withdrawn by the government reveal how officials kept vital information about the nuclear deterrent from ministers. Field Marshal Michael Carver, then chief of the defence staff, admitted in 1975 that Britain's missiles could not hit Moscow. Yet this information was withheld from ministers, chiefly because they did not want the chancellor, Denis (now Lord) Healey, to know.

Officials in the Ministry of Defence were worried the Treasury would respond by saying the whole project should be scrapped.

When Lord Owen told Sir Gus O'Donnell, the cabinet secretary what had happened, he replied that the MoD told him one file had been released at the archives "in error" and had now been "recalled". He said the MoD was now "reviewing the public status of a number of other documents".

Lord Owen, who was foreign secretary between 1977 and 1979, said yesterday: "Without openness and learning from the past, it is difficult to make decisions for the future. What is driving the process is embarrassment."

The MoD said yesterday that some of the documents had been "misfiled" and that was why they were in the National Archives. They had now been "recalled for further review."

guardian.co.uk © Guardian News and Media Limited 2008