

## Independent letters 16 June

### We need a debate on nuclear weapons

Sir: Unlike Julian Lewis (Letters, 14 June), I found the Defence Secretary's answers to Parliament concerning the future of the UK's nuclear weapons refreshingly lucid. The fact that the Government has yet to reach a decision on Trident's replacement is welcome, given that it is only six weeks since the general election.

The Government will need to take many factors into account in reaching a decision in this parliament, one of which is the UK's obligation under Article VI of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. As Dr Reid acknowledged in the House of Commons on 6 June, "If we replace the existing system with a massive increase in our capability, that may not be compatible; if we reduce capability, that may well be compatible" (column 987).

Contrary to previous occasions, before any final conclusions are drawn we need a thorough national debate about whether this country's security is best served by the retention of weapons of mass destruction. Overlooking the absence of any mention of the matter in its recent manifesto, the Conservative Party should play its part in that discourse too.

DR STEPHEN PULLINGER

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Sir: Julian Lewis states that his repeated efforts to extract an answer from the Labour Party about its intention to replace the strategic nuclear deterrent have been met with evasive and ambiguous answers. Was it not ever thus, regardless of which party was in government?

That master of the evasive answer, Geoff Hoon, did admit under questioning from Mike Gapes at a Defence Committee meeting last year that options for a replacement for Trident were under active consideration but declined to say what they were. In an interview with Jeremy Paxman more recently, the Prime Minister indicated that Britain would remain a nuclear weapon power indefinitely.

Interested parties should be able to agree that this issue must be approached in a more mature way than merely re-running the "you will leave us defenceless" farce of the 1980s. There is still time - just - to press for executive accountability to parliamentary democracy. The Government must present geostrategic, legal, economic and moral justifications for retaining a nuclear weapons capability and be prepared to defend its case under questioning, both inside and outside Parliament.

Such a debate would be unlikely to result in parliamentarians dividing along party lines. There are many people outside Parliament who have no political affiliations who would also like to contribute to such a debate. The question Julian Lewis should be asking is, "Will this government initiate a parliamentary and public debate on the advisability of replacing the strategic nuclear deterrent?"

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Sir: I can only conclude from Dr Julian Lewis's bizarre letter ("Will Labour really replace Trident?") that he is engaged in some strange sort of reverse-scaremongering in an attempt to convince us, flying in the face of reality, that "Labour" will do what is right and sensible.

His suggestion "that the Government may yet decide to leave the United Kingdom with no nuclear" weapons when Trident gives up the ghost is absurd in the light of this government's record on war and weapons of mass destruction (as long as they're ours, America's or Israel's) and the statement, the first of its kind, by the previous "Defence" Secretary, Geoff Hoon, that the Government might use our nuclear "deterrent" (excuse the excess of ironic inverted commas) in any case other than such weapons' first being used against us.

The idea of Britain's abandoning nuclear weapons remains preposterous. Which is truly tragic.

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