

Nuclear Deterrent

3. Michael Gove (Surrey Heath) (Con): When he intends to initiate discussions on the future of the British nuclear deterrent. [8653]

5. Mr. Chris Mullin (Sunderland, South) (Lab): When he expects a decision to be made on a new generation of nuclear weapons; and if he will make a statement. [8655]

The Secretary of State for Defence (John Reid): Decisions on any replacement of the United Kingdom's nuclear deterrent are likely to be necessary in the lifetime of the current Parliament, which will of course last some years. I have no doubt the issue will be raised whenever we discuss defence in this House.

Michael Gove: Can the Secretary of State assure me that he will no longer appease the hard-left sentiments of the unilateralist disarmers who are sadly so numerous on Labour's Back Benches? Will he end prevarication on this question and give us a firm commitment that the nuclear deterrent will be modernised urgently in the interests of the defence of this country?

John Reid: I can certainly say to the hon. Gentleman, who is relatively new to the House, that I have never appeased nor will I appease those who call, in today's circumstances, for unilateral nuclear disarmament, such as the former Conservative Secretary of State for Defence, Mr. Michael Portillo, who did so several weeks ago. Nor will the hon. Gentleman find me, unlike colleagues of his on the Front Bench, co-authoring articles in *The Guardian* with the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament.

Mr. Mullin: All I am looking for is a little transparency. With respect to my right hon. Friend and, indeed, my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister, with whom I raised this subject the other day, official pronouncements on the subject so far have been

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remarkably vague. May we know when the decision has to be taken and, in due course, what the cost is likely to be and, perhaps, what the purpose of a new generation of nuclear weapons will be? Is my right hon. Friend in a position to assist with inquiries? If he is not, who is?

John Reid: As they would say in Glasgow, "Ah'm yer man" when it comes to assisting my hon. Friend. I have been pretty transparent. First, we pledged no longer than two months ago in our manifesto—to which my hon. Friend was as committed as I was, as far as I am aware—that we would retain the minimum nuclear deterrent, so that is our position. Secondly, the minimum nuclear deterrent that we have at the moment will last us between 10 and 20 years. Thirdly, as far as the situation beyond that is concerned, I have said to my hon. Friend that we have not started even considering, far less taking decisions on, the details of that. That is why I cannot give him costs for the various alternatives. That is as straight as I can make it. It also has the benefit of being honest, even though it may not satisfy my hon. Friend.

Adam Price (Carmarthen, East and Dinefwr) (PC): More than 50 years ago, a Tory Government made a unilateral announcement that the UK would no longer develop offensive biological and chemical weapons. Would not a similar announcement that there would be no successor to **Trident** make a positive contribution to the global process of eliminating those weapons of mass destruction?

John Reid: Well, we are talking about events 10 to 20 years away. Although the hon. Gentleman may think that making such decisions arbitrarily is a good method—

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP) *indicated assent.*

John Reid: I see the hon. Gentleman nods, but at this very moment his party is discussing whether to join NATO, which would of course mean joining the nuclear club. What is sauce for the goose has to be sauce for the gander. The

House should consider the matter carefully, rather than taking any arbitrary decisions. If the hon. Member for Carmarthen, East and Dinefwr (Adam Price) can tell us off the top of his head what the situation will be in 10 to 20 years' time, we would all greatly benefit from that.

Mr. Robin Cook (Livingston) (Lab): Can my right hon. Friend say whether, in the event that he intends not only to retain the deterrent but to replace it, he would expect the defence budget to be increased? If he does not expect that budget increase, would it not be entirely rational to decide that it might be wiser to husband his budget for the peacekeeping and stability missions that the British forces do so well and which, as I can testify, greatly enhance Britain's standing in the world?

John Reid: If my right hon. Friend will allow me, I would rather study the options and their implications before drawing conclusions from any of those options,

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whether on the basis of cost or anything else. When we consider the dynamics of change over the last six years, we find, in terms of our nuclear deterrent, that on the one hand we have reduced to a single form of nuclear deterrence—the only nation to do so; we have abolished the WE177 freefall bomb, detargeted our missiles and reduced the number of warheads and the number of boats we have at sea. On the other hand, since then, we have discovered that North Korea, Pakistan, India and, formerly, Libya were in the process of developing programmes, and there may have been aims in Iraq, too. The situation is constantly fluid and it behoves all of us to give the matter serious and prolonged consideration rather than pre-empting or prejudging it, or making arbitrary decisions on something so important.

Dr. Julian Lewis (New Forest, East) (Con): As the co-author of the article to which the Secretary of State referred, may I advise him and the House that it is a sorry state of affairs when a former head of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament and a former leading opponent of CND have to get together to write such an article to try to persuade the Government to let the debate begin? Our key question to the Secretary of State is not will he keep **Trident** until the end of its useful life, but will he continue to possess nuclear weapons as long as other countries have them? When the people of Britain are asked, two thirds say yes, we should, and one quarter say no, we should not. Hardly anyone is undecided. Why is the Secretary of State undecided?

John Reid: I am decided and I have told the hon. Gentleman what I have decided. Unfortunately, I am in government and he is not—that is really the source of frustration. However, I am glad that he raised the matter, because when we consider what could possibly bring CND and Conservative Front Benchers together on defence—[Hon. Members: "Debate."] It is not a matter of debate. We have debated it at every Question Time; every time we have a debate on defence we debate the issue, so it cannot be lack of debate that brought them together. The fact is that it has nothing to do with a serious decision about our strategic needs, whether nuclear or otherwise, but that CND and Conservative Front Benchers want to discomfit the Government. Well, they can continue debating, but I am afraid that they do not discomfit me in the least.

Mr. Gordon Prentice (Pendle) (Lab): Last Wednesday, the Prime Minister told my hon. Friend the Member for Sunderland, South (Mr. Mullin) that he wanted to listen to the views of the House. How will he discern those views? Will we just have open-ended debate, or will there be a vote at some stage where opinions can crystallise?

John Reid: The answer to the first question is that I discern those views by listening, although listening does not necessarily mean that I accept them; it depends on the rationale and logic of what is put to me. As regards debate, I find myself in the peculiar position where I am attacked from both sides of the House for not debating the issue and by my hon. Friend for endless debate on it.

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Sudan

4. Mr. Tobias Ellwood (Bournemouth, East) (Con): If he will make a statement on British forces being deployed to Darfur. [8654]

The Secretary of State for Defence (John Reid): The UK continues to play a significant role in seeking to improve