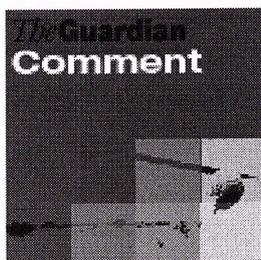



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It's time for us to give up the nukes

The deterrent is out of date, and the money could be better spent

Roy Hattersley
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[The Guardian](#)

The Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament enjoys a special place in modern history. No other recent protest movement has been proved so conclusively - diametrically, demonstrably - wrong.

Not so long ago, its members made regular predictions that Armageddon would soon follow the Soviet early-warning system mistaking a flock of geese for a cruise missile, or a crazy American general pressing the doomsday button just to see if it worked. Their righteousness was beyond dispute but their judgment was hopeless

The deterrent deterred. It kept Europe at peace - or at least free from a major war - for half a century. What the marchers on the road to Aldermaston called "the balance of terror" held the power blocs apart. It meant that the west could not go to the assistance of Hungary and Czechoslovakia, but it also ensured that west Berlin and Austria remained free from Soviet imperialism.

The world has moved on. But one element in the old strategic equation remains. It was absurd for Britain to waste money on what Harold Wilson called "the so-called British, so-called independent nuclear deterrent". It still is. Fifty years ago, we should have limited our role in the alliance to providing convenient bases for our American allies. Now we should abandon the nuclear weapons business altogether.

It was Clement Attlee - normally a man of indomitable common sense - who hung the nuclear millstone round the nation's neck. It was the one foolish decision of his premiership, made all the more painful for his admirers because of the reasons by which it was justified. He believed that, without an atom bomb of its own, Britain would not be a major world power. The French felt the same and were happy to admit it. Attlee at least had the grace to feel guilty. He kept his nuclear aspirations from most of the cabinet for almost nine months and hid the cost of the programme in the government estimates.

No one seriously imagined that the British bomb - or the British missile warhead into which it evolved - could ever be used

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without US agreement. In recent years, it has not even been possible to deploy it without American assistance. "Targeting" is a mutual enterprise. What is the target now? The defence establishment declines to provide an answer. The stock answer to all questions about our nuclear future is: "Decisions about the deterrents will be taken during the lifetime of the next parliament." A codicil usually follows. Nothing is ruled out. Something ought to be.

It would be absurd to spend money that is desperately needed for other government enterprises on "upgrading" and "hardening" the missile system so that it can be used, as it always must be, in conjunction with the US. The deterrent is out of date. Deterrence is dependent on potential enemies playing a sophisticated game with each other. At the height of the cold war, Moscow, Washington and London (and, no doubt, Paris) spent huge sums and employed mighty intellects in making judgments about conflicting intentions.

I recall a discussion in the Ministry of Defence, almost 40 years ago, which examined the question: "If Soviet conventional forces moved into West Germany, and Nato exploded a tactical nuclear device in an uninhabited part of Russia, would the Kremlin regard that as a sign that massive retaliation would follow, or as proof that we flinched from using our strategic weapons?" It may be that similar games are being played in Delhi and Islamabad. But I doubt if either Iran or North Korea is likely to spend much time on similar exercises.

It is those so-called rogue states from which we now feel in danger. In the bad old days, when we feared aggression from the Soviet Union, we possessed a nuclear weapon so that we would never have to use it - or go to war with almost equally lethal conventional weapons. That was the point that CND could never understand. In the modern world, where deterrence is impossible, the only reason to keep nuclear weapons is the genuine belief that one day they might be used. They are not going to stop a man with a suitcase full of ricin wiping out Greater London. Obliterating the country from which he came will provide little consolation.

The next (Labour) government will be bright enough to accept the strategic logic of abandoning the "so-called independent" nuclear weapon. But it may regard a return to reliance on conventional forces as the global equivalent of being relegated from the Premiership into the Coca-Cola League.

The idea that military might is proof of national greatness is an outdated notion that a radical and reforming government should dismiss with a combination of derision and contempt. In the meantime, there might be a case for resurrecting the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament. During the next two or three years it would actually have something sensible to say.

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