

A new generation of nuclear weapons? Let's talk about it

The Trident decision must not be made in secret

Marjorie Thompson and Julian Lewis
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Just three days before the last general election, Tony Blair was reported to have secretly decided that Britain would build a new generation of nuclear weapons to replace Trident. The story was denied, which is why so many believed it to be true.

Since then it has been very difficult to get a straight answer out of either the prime minister or his new defence secretary, John Reid. In the debate that is happening without them, there have been some surprises. Among them is the assertion by Michael Portillo, the former Tory defence secretary, that "the case for Britain having an independent nuclear deterrent depended on the existence of the Soviet Union". With the downfall of communism, he says, the capability became redundant. It is time Blair and Reid stopped trying to circumvent what is undoubtedly an unpalatable debate for Labour.

In December 2003, the defence white paper *Delivering Security in a Changing World* stated: "Our minimum nuclear deterrent capability, currently represented by Trident, is likely to remain a necessary element of our security ... Decisions on whether to replace Trident are not needed in this parliament but are likely to be required in the next one."

That parliament has now arrived, but there is little sign of those decisions being opened up to democratic debate. Why is this? History gives us a clue. The transition from the V-bombers to Polaris saw the first wave of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament break on to the British political scene in the late 1950s.

The transition from Polaris to Trident, coupled with the deployment of US cruise missiles, saw the second wave of CND rise up even more dramatically in the early 1980s. The hugely expensive Chevaline upgrade of Polaris attracted no debate or protest between these dates, because no one knew anything about it. Is this New Labour's model for the Trident replacement programme?

For more than 20 years the authors of this article have debated, disputed and totally disagreed about almost every aspect of British nuclear-weapons policy. From our opposite perspectives, we anticipate that any announcement on a successor to Trident will swiftly rekindle CND. This prospect gives New Labour nightmares. Yet, irrespective of one's viewpoint, it is essential that key questions are addressed.

To what extent, if any, are nuclear weapons relevant after September 11? Have they any role at all after the end of the cold war? Is a new generation of British nuclear weapons compatible with the non-proliferation treaty and its strictures on vertical proliferation? Can British nuclear disarmament be safely reconciled with the unpredictable nature of international relations? Could conventional military campaigns be stymied by enemy WMD that cannot be stalemated? And what type of successor generation, if any, could Britain afford to deploy and maintain?

It is beyond the scope of this article to attempt to answer any of these questions: we would be unable to agree on a single point. But we both know that these are the key points that need to be publicly debated - and that this is unlikely to happen.

Reid was repeatedly asked in the House of Commons on June 6 if the government intends to replace Trident and keep nuclear weapons as long as other countries have them. He equivocated: "Labour's recent general election manifesto spelled out our commitment to the retention of the independent nuclear deterrent. However, as I confirmed to the house on May 18, no decision on any replacement for Trident has been taken either in principle or otherwise."

What are we to make of this? If no decision on replacement has been taken in principle, then it is possible that no replacement will occur; but the Labour manifesto committed the government "to retaining the independent nuclear deterrent". Did this refer only to the existing Trident system or to the maintenance of a British nuclear-weapons capability in general, whenever Trident comes to an end? Reid is not saying.

Nor was he pleased to be questioned from his own backbenches by such committed anti-nuclear MPs as Harry Cohen and David Chaytor. He was probably lucky that more Scottish MPs were not in the chamber given some of their constituents' concerns about hosting Trident and any submarine-based successor system. These concerns will no doubt find a voice in the Scottish parliament too, whether or not it is supposed to have jurisdiction over defence.

At Westminster, a series of written questions has produced singularly evasive answers. What is the relationship between the new building programme at Aldermaston and the next generation of British nuclear weapons? Answer: to "keep open options in respect of any decision on whether or not to replace Trident". What preliminary assessments have been made of the relative merits of extending the life of Trident and of replacing it with a new system? Answer: "We have not yet made an assessment of the relative merits of such options."

Do the options for the future of the UK deterrent include not proceeding with a new generation of weapons? Answer: "The Labour party's manifesto for the 2005 general election made clear our commitment to retain the UK's independent nuclear deterrent. Although decisions on any replacement for Trident are likely to be taken in the current parliament, it is too early to rule out, or rule in, any particular option."

The prime minister has been no less delphic. Asked last Wednesday by Chris Mullin for an assurance that "before any irrevocable decisions are made, he will take parliament into his confidence", Blair said that the government "will listen to honourable members before making any decisions on replacing Trident". No decisions had yet been taken, he said, but "they are likely to be necessary in the current parliament".

Labour's manifesto commitment "to retaining the United Kingdom's independent nuclear deterrent" was again trotted out, but immediately qualified with a promise of "plenty of opportunities to discuss that before the final decision is taken".

So there you have it (or not). We are going to keep Britain's "independent nuclear deterrent" but we are not ruling out "any particular option" - including an option of not proceeding with a new-generation weapons system at all.

If, as is claimed, we are bringing democracy to Iraq, we should not be stifling it in the most important and controversial area of British military policy - whether or not we continue to possess nuclear weapons.

· Marjorie Thompson was parliamentary officer, vice-chair and chair of CND between 1983 and 1993; Julian Lewis MP was a director of the Coalition for Peace Through Security in the 1980s and is a shadow defence minister