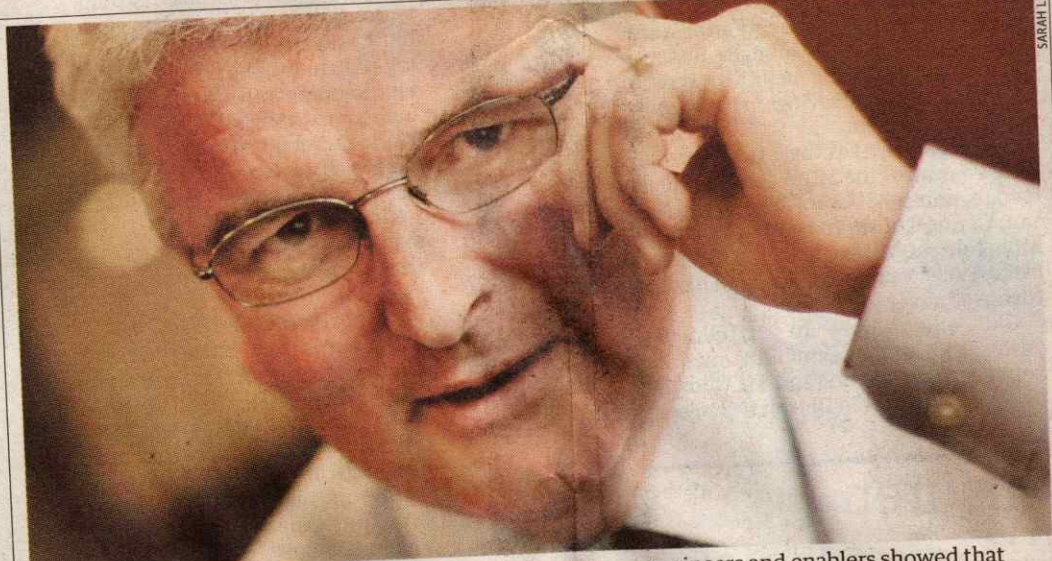


# 'No one ever suggested it was going to be easy'

Patrick Wintour

Des Browne, the defence secretary, is due to announce an expansion of the increasingly controversial British mission in southern Afghanistan to MPs early next week after completing negotiations with the Treasury, he told the Guardian.

Mr Browne insisted yesterday that the extra troops did not betray an original underestimate by the Ministry of Defence of likely Taliban resistance. He angrily dismissed politicians who said the mission's purpose was cloudy as "not just seeking short-term political gain, but putting troops on the ground at risk". Six British troops have been killed since the deployment, with reports that the force is insufficient and



SARAH LEE

lacks air support. He said: "It was always the case that troop numbers were going to be reviewed and that we would not reach full operational capability until the end of last month. There is no one who has said to me the nature of the response is different to what we expected. "The deployment was always going to inform us better than the pre-plan part of the assessment." He added that the fact that part of the request from the chief of the defence staff relates to

engineers and enablers showed that reconstruction in some areas was going faster than envisaged. The aim was to create "inkspots" in which areas of security expanded, followed by trade and justice, making it possible to free the province from drugs and the Taliban. "The objective, supported by the international community, is to let the writ of the Afghan government run in the south and east, as it has increasingly in the north and west, against a background

## Defence minister backs nuclear arms

Patrick Wintour  
Richard Norton-Taylor

The defence secretary, Des Browne, yesterday strongly hinted he would join other senior ministers in supporting the retention of a British independent nuclear deterrent. He highlighted "the terrifying prospect" of a state with nuclear weapons linking up with a terrorist group.

He promised an open debate but said: "There has been significant leakage from the North Koreans' nuclear development. We will need to look into what we know about non-state actors such as al-Qaida who are playing a significant and dangerous role in the future of our security."

He said the government would publish a white paper this year setting out its views on the deterrent, but would not rule in or out whether MPs would vote on the final decision. He suggested that one

possibility was to extend the life of the existing system.

His comments came as a former Labour defence secretary, Denis Healey, said there was no military justification for keeping Britain's nuclear deterrent. Lord Healey, who played a key role in maintaining the Polaris nuclear weapons systems in the 1960s, said the only reason for maintaining the deterrent was "political", to bolster Britain's influence abroad.

"Nuclear weapons are infinitely less important in our foreign policy than they were in the days of the cold war. I don't



Mr Browne would not rule in or out whether MPs would get a vote on the replacement of Britain's nuclear deterrent

think we need nuclear weapons any longer," he told BBC News 24's Straight Talk. "I think the military case now for nuclear weapons has gone."

In answer to a parliamentary question yesterday Mr Browne made clear that MPs would only be consulted on the future of Britain's nuclear deterrent after minister had come to a decision. A decision would be taken before the end of the year. However, he refused to disclose how much had been spent developing new arming and firing systems for the Trident nuclear warhead, on grounds of national security.

Nick Harvey, the Lib Dem spokesman who raised the question, said Mr Browne answers "make a mockery of the prime minister's promise to hold the 'fullest possible parliamentary debate' on Trident"

He added: "Refusal to comment on warhead design work at Aldermaston appears to be further evidence of an intention to suppress debate."

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