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Dear Katy,

Thank you for your letter of 25 June on behalf of your constituent Mr John G Webster of Planetree, King's Cross, Isle of Arran, regarding the United Kingdom's nuclear deterrent.

The Government believes we need to take action to safeguard our national security at home and abroad. We are also committed to playing a leading role in making the world safe from the dangers of nuclear weapons and nuclear proliferation. As the Foreign Secretary has said, the recent Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty Review Conference was an important milestone in our long-term vision for a world without nuclear weapons. Now we have a map to help us move forward and will continue to work with all our partners to ensure we keep up momentum.

Within this context, the renewal of our nuclear deterrent, based on the Trident missile system, is clearly a controversial issue. It is not a decision to be taken lightly and I fully understand your constituent's concerns. However, it is not my view that this is the right time for the UK to give up its nuclear deterrent. In many respects, we face a more dangerous situation now than we have for several decades. There are substantial risks to our security from emerging nuclear weapons states and state sponsored terrorism, which we can best protect ourselves against through the continued operation of a minimum nuclear deterrent. Accordingly, this Government has committed to maintain and renew it.

The strategic need to possess a deterrent does not, of course, dictate how it will be delivered. As you may be aware, the Government is committed to scrutinise the renewal of Trident to ensure value for money. This will be a broad ranging and thorough assessment to identify savings, which will be conducted within the framework of the Strategic Defence and Security Review. The Liberal Democrats will continue to make the case for alternatives to the current policy of 'Continuous At Sea Deterrence',

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including some of those we identified before the election, and to test established thinking within the Ministry of Defence and across Whitehall.

Let me say that the Government welcomes the positive progress reflected in the recent statements by President Obama and President Medvedev. Since the end of the Cold War, the UK has cut the explosive power of our nuclear weapons by approximately 75%. Last month, the Foreign Secretary announced that we would review the circumstances when the UK might use nuclear weapons. In addition, he made public for the first time the maximum number of nuclear warheads we hold in our stockpile to assist in building a climate of trust between nuclear and non-nuclear weapons states. This goes further and is more transparent than any previous Government. We will retain only the minimum capability required to provide effective deterrence: our overall stockpile is of no more than 225 nuclear warheads.

Lastly, I would disagree with your constituent's assertion that renewal of the United Kingdom's nuclear deterrent makes a mockery of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. Renewal of the Trident system is fully consistent with our international obligations, including those on disarmament. The UK complies fully with its obligations under Article VI, which does not require unilateral disarmament and does not establish a timetable for disarmament, either nuclear or general. It does not prohibit replacement or updating systems currently held by the UK or any other nuclear weapon state signatories. Instead, Article VI places an obligation on all Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) member States to pursue negotiations in good faith relating to the cessation of the nuclear arms race at an early date, to nuclear disarmament, and on a treaty on general and complete disarmament. The UK shares the goal of a world free from nuclear weapons. Towards this end, we continue to press for multilateral negotiations towards mutual, balanced and verifiable reductions in nuclear weapons. It is, perhaps, worth noting that the UK is the only recognised Nuclear Weapons State to have reduced to a single delivery system (submarine launched ballistic missile system). The UK already maintains a minimum deterrent capability. The UK has made it clear that as soon as it becomes useful to do so, we stand ready to include our nuclear stockpile in broader multilateral disarmament discussions.

The NPT is the cornerstone of the non proliferation regime and by ratifying it countries recognise that a world free of nuclear weapons is in all our interests. The UK lives up to its side of the bargain as a Nuclear Weapon State (NWS) and our policies have been and will always remain fully consistent with the NPT. Non-Nuclear Weapon States (NNWS) share the responsibility to create and maintain the kind of security environment in which it is reasonable to expect the NWS to disarm.

The legal possession of nuclear weapons by the NWS should not be used as an excuse for the intransigence of other states with regard to nuclear proliferation. Erroneous claims that the NWS are failing in their disarmament obligations under the NPT only serves to reinforce this dangerous perception. Iran and North Korea signed up to the NPT, and all the obligations that go with being a NNWS.

I hope that this response has helped to explain the Government's position on this issue.

*Yours ever*

*Nick*

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