

Defence Committee 3 November 2005:

Chairman: Thank you. There are a lot of issues we are going to have to cover this morning and the first one that we would like to go into is the nuclear deterrent.

**Q2 Robert Key:** Secretary of State, you say in your Department's report published last week, paragraph 171, that in a recent poll undertaken by Ipsos 81 per cent of people said that the UK needs strong Armed Forces. That is no surprise. When it comes to the nuclear deterrent and the fact that you are going to have to make decisions with the Government during the lifetime of this Parliament and given the answer yesterday in the House of Lords from Lord Drayson about nuclear weapons in which he laid out what I can only describe as a very large number of nuclear weapons still around in the world, do you think it is going to be very difficult to persuade the British people that we need to renew our nuclear deterrent?

John Reid: Let us be absolutely clear on what the present position of the Government is and then I will turn to a replacement because the question you are asking me is very relevant but it concerns events 15 years away and up to 50 years away. I think what the public is most interested in is what the present position is and the present position has been laid out quite clearly by the Government, ie we will retain Britain's minimum nuclear deterrent. That is a pledge that we made in the last manifesto nearly six months ago and one that we will keep. You may ask how long that manifesto pledge lasts. Technically it is for the life of a Parliament, but I think all reasonable people would assume it to apply for the life of the **Trident** system. That is where we are. We intend, at the same time as minimising our deterrent, which we have done, and keeping our obligations under the Non-Proliferation Treaty, to maintain the nuclear deterrent. The question to which we must now turn is about what we might do in 15 years' time in terms of addressing the situation when the present warheads or missile system or nuclear submarines from which they are launched come to the end of their useful life. That is precisely the discussion on which we are now embarking. There are a great many questions to be asked about the nature of the threats we might face then, about the assumptions on which we work at present and being willing to take part in multilateral negotiations at the right time. We have always maintained that as long as some other nuclear state which is a potential threat has nuclear weapons we will retain ours. That is the

assumption from which we start but it has to be tested in discussions with others and it will be. Even if we decide that we want to keep the nuclear deterrent, we then have to ask whether we want to keep it in the same form, submarine launched, sea launched, air launched or land-based nuclear weapons, and then we have to ask ourselves about the cost, and we will work through those points. For the foreseeable future we will be maintaining the nuclear deterrent. We are now entering a discussion about whether that foreseeable future will extend beyond the 15 to the 50-year point.

**Q3 Robert Key:** The Prime Minister has said that decisions are likely to have to be taken in the life of this Parliament, although we are looking a long time into the future. I understand why you have to be very discreet about the information that can be made public. Do you agree that if we are to have a proper debate, and it must be an informed debate, it will be necessary to come clean with people and to give a certain amount of information about the basis for the discussion that you have said already that you wish to have? How far can we go?

John Reid: I have tried to do that not only in Defence Questions and defence debate in the House and I am sure that will continue but, also, last night with my colleagues in the Parliamentary Labour Party, today in front of this Committee and I am sure this is something that will continue to be discussed and debated. In a sense the decision is really quite simple and that is whether we stand by the assumptions that we have used so far, which are that we should minimise the nature of our deterrent, that we should be prepared at a given stage, if the Russians and the Americans get down to a certain level of nuclear capacity, to hand our nuclear weapon in, but that throughout this process of complying with the NPT and along with those assumptions also to have the other assumption, which is as long as another potential enemy has nuclear weapons we will retain ours. That is the decision in principle. That has to be taken in practical terms against what we think will be the threats in 15, 25, 30 years' time and then we have to decide, if we want to go ahead and if we can afford it, what the nature of our deterrent would be. I would merely make one point. I have heard it said that because there are new threats from terrorism that in itself makes the nuclear deterrent redundant because, of course, it is said you cannot use the nuclear weapon against terrorists. It is equally true that you cannot use Special Forces to deter a nuclear attack. That does not mean to say that Special Forces are redundant. The truth of the matter is we face

a range of threats at this moment running from individual acts of terrorism to nuclear threats. We need a range of responses that include Special Forces, individual acts of dynamic heroism if you like, right through to nuclear deterrent. Not all of those responses are responses to every threat but the range of them is necessary in order to meet the range of threats. That is the assumption we have at the moment and it is that assumption that we will test against our analysis of what might be future threats.

**Q4 Robert Key:** Secretary of State, I wonder if you would agree with me that maybe for the last decade there have been discussions about battlefield nuclear weapons, a little nuclear weapon that would somehow do much less damage, but that that actually is a trap and that if you have a very small nuclear weapon it would be just as dangerous and much less effective than a big one. Is it not a good idea to start educating us, the general public, 81 per cent of whom want to see a strong defence? How are you going to do that? How do you see this process evolving over the next two or three years, up to the time when you are going to have to take a decision during the lifetime of this Parliament?

John Reid: You are right to say that there has been a discussion about the types and nature of nuclear weapons and nuclear deterrent. You are also right to imply that among our major colleagues in the Security Council they retain multiple systems of nuclear deterrence. The French have got two, the Russian have got three and the Americans have got a range of nuclear deterrents as well. We have reduced ours to the absolute minimum. Under this Government we have reduced our fire power by 70 per cent, we have reduced the number of warheads to less than 200, we have reduced the number of warheads per boat to no more than 48, we have reduced the number of boats at sea and we have reduced the state of readiness and targeting and so on. We are the only country in the world which has actually got rid of a complete system of nuclear deterrents[1] because up until this Government came in we had two systems, one of them was the WE177 airborne free-fall bomb and the other one was the submarine launched **Trident** D5. We got rid of the former. We have reduced ours to a minimum. Unfortunately over recent years, despite the fact that we have contained the number of new states that have developed nuclear weapons and therefore we have got less than, say, John F Kennedy would have expected 30 or 40 years ago when he predicted that by the

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turn of the century we might have 40 states, as we have been reducing other states have been acquiring. We know that India has nuclear weapons, Pakistan has nuclear weapons, North Korea and so on. Probably more worrying is the fact that some countries have been trying to develop nuclear weapons by deceiving the world and not complying with their own obligations under the Non-Proliferation Treaty, for instance Iran. Therefore, you are right to point to the need for an informed discussion on this because if we are looking at trends over the past ten or 20 years and looking forward 20 years, I think it would be naive to believe inevitably that there will be no further proliferation, however hard we are committed to that.

**Q5 Mr Borrow:** It seems to me that this is a crucial decision which is for the medium to long term. If it has not to be made during this Parliament and by this Labour Government, it may well be a decision which comes in under a different government altogether and therefore any public debate needs to lead to a public consensus and ideally a cross-party consensus on what happens after **Trident**. Do you agree that that can only happen if there is the maximum amount of information in the public domain to allow the public to reach a public consensus which politicians can then use in making any decision?

John Reid: It is not absolutely essential the decision is taken during this Parliament but it would be highly desirable in my view. It is not absolutely essential that you have a cross-party consensus but in my view that would be desirable. It is also desirable with any such important issues that there is the maximum information and consensus across the public as well as across Parliament. The history of these matters is, despite the raging controversies that have been going on for 25, 30 or 40 years, that there has been a fairly consistent two-thirds majority who believe in the simple proposition that as long as a potential enemy has a nuclear weapon we should retain one. That is not to say that is necessarily right or that it will not change, but that has been the traditional position in terms of what we can take out of the scientific evidence from opinion polls. Let me just comment on the timescale. If you leave aside any replacement in 15 or 20 years' time, whether that replacement is an update or a renewed type of system with new submarines or whatever or whether it is a completely new system, we still have to maintain the safety and reliability of our present deterrent. That means that the various elements of the deterrent have to be maintained, that is the warhead, the missile system and the boats in

simple terms. That involves a degree of expenditure which any government that succeeds this one would have to pay anyway otherwise we would be losing the key obligation of Government, which is to keep safe, reliable and secure our means of security. There will be an ongoing need for governments to maintain our present deterrent until the end of its useful life while we have the discussion and decision about how and when we replace the present system.

Chairman: This will lead us on to a long debate over the coming years and this Committee will play a part in that. Let us move on to the issue of European defence and NATO.