

6 THE DAY IN POLITICS

Greenpeace claims that overall bill will approach £33bn, but MPs commend programme's pricing efficiency

Trident cost 'triple estimate'

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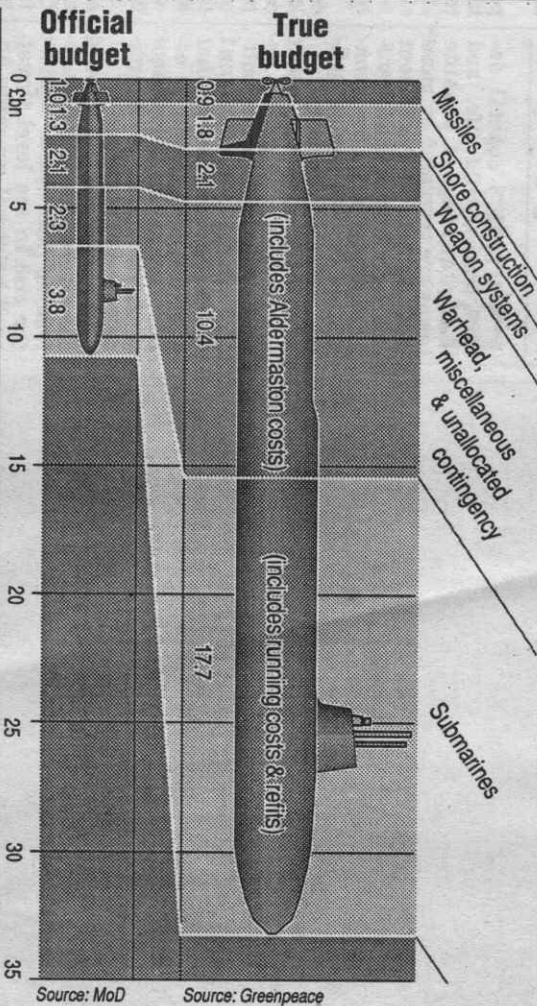
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THE full cost of the Trident nuclear deterrent, including its share of Aldermaston's secret warhead budget, has been calculated at more than three times the official estimate of £10.5 billion by the environmental pressure group, Greenpeace.

The only figure ever published by the Ministry of Defence is the initial construction cost of four submarines, broken down into broad categories that deliberately disguise the cost of the nuclear missile warheads. But in an effort to establish the full cost of proceeding with the programme — or cancelling the fourth boat, as Labour has proposed — Greenpeace has added operating costs over 30 years, submarine refits and a share of support costs which bump the total up to £33.1 billion.

The major additional items included in Greenpeace's estimate are: submarine running costs (£11.4 billion over 30 years); refits (£1.9 billion); a share of the propulsion reactor's development (£0.5 billion); shore construction costs not already included (£0.7 billion) and a share of Aldermaston's running costs and construction works attributable to the Tri-

The true cost of Trident

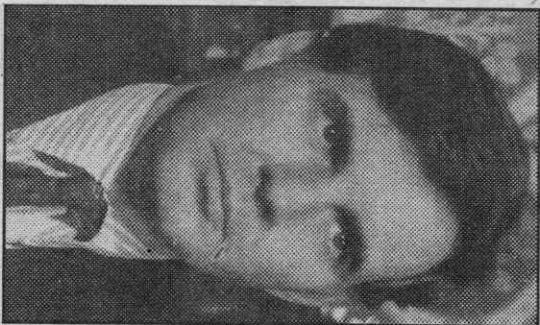


dent warhead programme (£7.9 billion). Aldermaston's budget is never officially published, on the grounds that this might help an enemy discover what goes on there. However Greenpeace says it has a breakdown of the £607 million figure for 1988-89 from a confidential memorandum to the Commons Public Accounts Committee. It then assumes that Trident warhead production currently accounts for 70 per cent of Alder-

maston's 'development, production and in-service support', and that the in-service support element will amount to 25 per cent for another 30 years. The new Minister for Defence Procurement, Jonathan Aitken, yesterday described the additional items included by Greenpeace as 'at best speculative'.

Greenpeace's alternative arithmetic coincides with publication yesterday of a Commons Defence Committee report on Trident warning that the first

submarine, HMS Vanguard, may go to sea without a fully functional command system. For a time, the Royal Navy's nuclear flagship would be dependent on outdated manual control systems. The problem has arisen in the computer software which should integrate the submarine's tactical weapons — that is the underwater detection sonar and self-defence torpedoes. The sonar's development is nearly four years late. But a more serious prob-



Jonathan Aitken: "Figures are, at best, speculative"

realised the water currents in the middle of the Gareloch might be stronger than alongside the jetty where the floating berth was originally to have been moored. Strengthening the facility for the currents might have cost an extra £35 million. Now the navy says it may be able to manage with its old equipment after all, costing only £4 million. In which case, the MPs comment, the mistake "may prove with hindsight to have been a blessing in disguise".

As a whole, the Defence Committee commends the programme's "generally good progress" and draws attention to "the gratifying and unusual spectacle of a major defence procurement programme coming in far below estimate". Its only gestures in the direction of the Greenpeace costing are an admission that the Defence Ministry's "attribution of costs specifically to Trident may have erred on the low side", and recognition that even now, the official estimate contains a "sizeable" figure of £356 million for unallocated contingencies.

In fact, the ministry's accountants have shown shrewd political sense in allowing themselves a large margin for contingencies, to absorb cost overruns as they occurred and prevent the programme exceeding its published budget.