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# MP calls for inquiry into claims of Polaris faults

By IAIN WILSON

A LABOUR MP has demanded an inquiry into reports that Britain has been without a fully effective nuclear deterrent for the past two years.

Mr John McFall, Dumbarton MP and a Commons Defence Select Committee member, believes the four-strong Polaris fleet could be down to one because cracks have been found in reactors.

He fears there will be no ocean-going, nuclear-armed back-up available when HMS Resolution returns from patrol later this month, and that gaps in deterrent cover could occur repeatedly until the Trident replacement programme is completed in 1995.

The MP also suspects at least 11 of Britain's 22 nuclear-powered submarines may be out of action because they use the same or similar reactors.

Mr McFall said yesterday that he wants Defence Secretary Mr Tom King and senior MoD officials brought before a public hearing of the committee to answer questions arising from confidential information in his possession.

The cracks, on pipes in the primary coolant system connected to the reactors, are said to have appeared in at least three of the four Polaris submarines.

They are HMS Renown, laid up for refit at Rosyth for more than two years; HMS Revenge, present location unknown; and HMS Repulse, which has spent only a month on patrol in the last two years.

The fourth, HMS Resolution, has not been inspected for cracks because it is on patrol.

One Polaris submarine should be at sea at all times, another ready to go at any time, the third in reserve, and the fourth undergoing refit.

Mr McFall, whose constituency includes the Faslane base for Polaris which will subsequently house Trident, said of the defects: "They mean we have been without an effective deterrent for two years."

"I want to know why, and the current state of the deterrent. I also want to know just how many vessels in the nuclear-powered fleet with similar reactors are affected."

The Polaris faults are identical to those which led to last week's announcement that two hunter-killer submarines, HMS Warspite and HMS Churchill, will join HMS Conqueror, the submarine that sank the General Belgrano, on the scrapheap despite nearing the end of £100m refits.

Mr McFall said: "The Government claim has been that we need all four Polaris boats for an effective defence. A situation in which two of them cannot be maintained is two too many in the long term. In theory, we need four because three have to be operational to maintain a defence."

It is understood the MP and other select committee members may have an opportunity later this month to question Mr King at a hearing on the defence document, Options for Change, which proposes cuts in the armed services because of changed East-West relations.

In July, Mr King announced plans to cut the nuclear-powered fleet from 22 to 16.

The Navy yesterday insisted that Britain's nuclear capability has not been undermined. A spokesman said: "The Polaris deterrent is being maintained, at sea and on patrol, as it has been for the last 25 years."

However, he declined to comment on the operational deployment of individual submarines in the Polaris fleet, or discuss "technical" matters. He added: "I am not allowed to comment on Mr McFall's allegations, which presumably will be raised in Parliament."

A spokesman at Faslane said: "I cannot comment on the material condition of our submarines or their whereabouts."

Ironically, an unidentified

nuclear submarine heading for the base yesterday appeared to be in trouble near Weymss Bay in the Firth of Clyde. Escorted by three tugs, it was belching thick, black smoke. A Faslane spokesman said of the incident: "It was routine submarine operations. There was no question of towing and no question of the submarine in any way being in distress."

The smoke was apparently coming from diesel engines, used to power the submarine when on the surface.

The Scottish Green Party yesterday called for a fundamental re-think of defence policy in light of the disclosure that Polaris submarines are suffering "serious structural faults".

It gave unequivocal backing to the Scottish CND campaign to cancel the Trident programme, close all American bases in Scotland, and withdraw from Nato.

However, the Greens' Paisley South by-election candidate Ms Lizbeth Collie said: "It is a matter of regret that CND still finds it so hard to criticise the Labour Party who have unashamedly abandoned their peace principles by backing the retention of three Trident submarines on the Clyde."

"The Government want four Tridents, the Liberal Democrats two. What's the difference when each has the firepower equivalent of 3000 Hiroshimas?"