

on the conduct of the

Navy strategy challenged Over Soviet encounter

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3.2.87

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LABOUR Defence spokesman Mr Martin O'Neill yesterday challenged Ministers to state whether there had been a change in the Nato role of Britain's hunter-killer submarine fleet.

His question, which came during a Commons debate on the Royal Navy, followed reports that a British hunter-killer, or SSN submarine had lost its towed sonar system in an encounter with a Russian submarine in the Barents Sea.

Mr O'Neill, who pressed his case despite an earlier declaration from Defence Minister Mr John Stanley that he could not be drawn on any question of submarine operations, said it was legitimate to ask what the submarine, HMS Splendid, was doing in the Barents Sea if the reports that it had been there were correct.

Traditionally, the main function of SSN was to protect the sea-lanes and watch over the Greenland-Iceland-Norway gap, but it had never been clear that Britain would be "locked into" the offensive strategy of the US Navy, he said.

Mr O'Neill told MPs: "If UK and US boats are to be found in the Barents Sea, then surely this will threaten the security of the Soviet submarines. Will this not increase the possibility of a Soviet first strike and thus threaten stability?"



Martin O'Neill:
"Foolhardy exercise."

"Surely at a sensitive time like this, for us to be blundering around in the Barents Sea is a foolhardy exercise as far as Nato-Soviet relations are concerned."

Mr O'Neill said that while he recognised that the Minister would be "far less forthcoming than the Nato allies on the other side of the Atlantic would be," he felt it was necessary to indicate whether there had been a change in British involvement in the Nato strategy.

"The over-secrecy and paranoia of the Government on so many issues pollutes and distorts our discussions and debates on defence matters in this House," he said.

Trident order

Opening the debate Mr Stanley announced that the order for Britain's second Trident

submarine is to be placed later this year at a cost of about £800m. The order, which is certain to go to Vickers at Barrow, will mean that more than a third of the £9 billion missile programme will have been committed.

Mr Stanley, who strongly defended the Government commitment to Trident, attacked both Labour and the Alliance on their defence policies, saying that where the nuclear threat was concerned the Liberal and SDP parties were offering inadequate defence while the official opposition was offering no defence at all.

He warned that in Scotland, Labour's non-nuclear policy would mean the closure of Holy Loch, the loss of up to 2500 jobs at Faslane and Coulport and the immediate loss of the submarine refitting cycle on which over 2000 jobs at Rosyth were currently dependent.

Mr Stanley said: "The consequences of a non-nuclear policy in the naval field would be wide-ranging and immensely damaging."

"It would mean the end of Britain's strategic deterrent and the loss of the British people's ultimate insurance against nuclear blackmail."

"It would mean Britain unilaterally resigning from its Nato tactical nuclear roles at sea thereby weakening deterrents at a time when the Soviet navy and the Soviet naval air force are steadily

expanding their ability to use tactical nuclear weapons against Nato surface ships and submarines.

"The commitment of the party opposite to scrap Trident is seriously mistaken and highly irresponsible."

Of the Alliance he said that the Liberal and SDP parties were in the totally contradictory situation of being in a position of complete uncertainty as to which option for the replacement of Polaris they would support, and yet in a position of total certainty that it would not be Trident.

For Labour Mr O'Neill said it was the impact of Trident, more than anything else, which was restraining spending on new equipment in the Royal Navy.

"It is not enough to talk of dividing the cost of the programme over the whole period of development

"There is a continuing and consistent crisis of funding within the Navy and it is created, in large measure, by the Government commitment to Trident."

Mr O'Neill complained that the Navy was losing its most valuable and experienced personnel at present, with a 10% overall shortage of officers.

Blaming the outflow on poor morale and unsatisfactory working conditions he accused the Government of providing insufficient resources to give adequate support.