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Mr. Duncan Smith: It is quite remarkable that a matter of hours after your welcome elevation to the Chair, Mr. Speaker, the Government, for all the crocodile tears shed about bypassing Parliament, chose, on this prime issue of the defence of the realm, not to come anywhere near the House to make a statement about it. After all, this announcement represents the loss of a quarter of our front-line fleet in one fell move. The Government chose simply to try and slide the news away on a quiet Saturday, without any comment.

Some answers to questions need further clarification. The Minister said that he could not give any exact times or be specific. Is the problem that our dockyard facilities

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are insufficient at the two places about which we have heard? If that were the case, would it be possible to use facilities in other NATO nations, and have the Government made such a request? The Minister will recognise that it is a priority to get those submarines back into service immediately.

The hon. Gentleman talked about using other assets, but what specific arrangements are there to cover this gap in capability? For example, he talked about securing the patrol of Trident, our new deterrent, but as it is clearly not possible to use surface ships to glide around indicating where Trident is, how does he intend to do that? Is there a chance that we may be able to fill some of that capability by bringing some of the Upholder class back into service by arrangement with the Canadians, to whom they are about to be leased? Would that assist, and has any arrangement been made for it?

The third question relates to the Swiftsure class that the Minister discussed. We have two classes of hunter-killer submarines: Trafalgar and Swiftsure. Swiftsure has been in service since the 1970s, and for much longer than Trafalgar. Are the Government saying that they have discovered a problem on Swiftsure or that Swiftsure vessels have proved pretty reliable during their time in service and that they will be the first boats to be put back into service as there is literally nothing wrong with them? Will the Minister withhold all boats from service simply because there may be a possible defect that has not materialised in any other vessel? Finally, what will happen to the crews during this period? Will skeleton crews be left on the boats, and will they lose some of their skills? How will the Minister cover the gap in capability for individual crew members?

Such questions ought to have been raised in the House earlier and answered immediately. The Government should not avoid their responsibilities in this way and it is essentially a damning position for them to be brought to the Dispatch Box by the Opposition on this matter.

Mr. Spellar: I thought that I had had my fill of pompous speeches yesterday, but the speech of the hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr. Duncan Smith) follows that great tradition. In reply to his fairly inadequate response, there is a defence debate on Thursday and defence questions on Monday, and on both occasions he could easily raise such matters without any difficulty.

I shall, however, deal with the hon. Gentleman's questions now, starting with those relating to the Upholder class of submarines, which the Conservative Government scrapped in 1993. When the Labour party came to power, that decision had already been taken and the programme was well

advanced. *[Interruption.]* As the hon. Gentleman rightly says, we followed on from the previous Government's failure to dispose of the Upholder submarines which, however, we managed to sell to our ally, Canada. One submarine has already gone to the Canadians and, of course, I have made inquiries about the availability of the others. The first one will not be available until next March, so that does not seem to be a suitable alternative.

The hon. Gentleman discussed the shortage of facilities. The critical difficulty relates not to facilities, but to the time scale of the repair. The repair itself is fairly basic and, in engineering terms, uncomplicated. However, the

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time for repair is increased by the need to run down the reactor, let its nuclear material cool off, and drain the coolant. The repair is undertaken, tested ultrasonically and by other means, and then the coolant is refilled, which is a time-consuming operation, given the need to prevent airlocks and so on in the system--as anyone who has dealt with radiators at home will understand, although this operation is undertaken a much higher level of tolerance. The reactor is then started up. Frankly, repair facilities are not the bottleneck, and we are looking at making sure that we have enough teams available to undertake this work. Indeed, the Navy are working on that at the moment.

On other assets, as the hon. Gentleman rightly identified, we have surface vessels with towed arrays. We also have Nimrod aircraft, and shall examine using them more intensively, but that is satisfactory only in the short to medium term. We are already having discussions on other possible facilities with our ally, the United States.

On the question of examining for the defect on the Swiftsure class, it is simply a case of looking at the cooling system and ascertaining whether individual vessels have the generic defect. If they have, we shall, of course, include them in the programme of repair and maintenance.

The hon. Gentleman rightly raised another question about crews, the answer to which will partly depend on the nature of the repairs and where the vessels will be tied up. As I understand the situation, if the vessels are in a tidal berth, they require more crew on board for watch and engineering functions, and engineers will also be required. If the vessels are in a non-tidal berth, fewer crew will be required.

The hon. Gentleman rightly raised a question about maintaining skills through training. Surprisingly enough, the Navy is already looking at that, as I am sure that he would have expected it to. Some sailors may not be required for those watch and engineering functions--if so, the Navy intends to allow them more shore leave to spend time with their families because there will inevitably be some disruption.

Let me answer the questions that the hon. Gentleman did not pose, either, in effect, in his letter or in his questions today, about the length of time involved. Until we have a full report from Navy engineers, we shall not be able to identify the length of time required. Had the hon. Gentleman waited a few days, I might have been in a better position to give him an answer.

Mrs. Linda Gilroy (Plymouth, Sutton): I thank my hon. Friend for his statement. Does he appreciate that the people who live in communities adjacent to the relevant facilities--such as the Royal Naval Devonport dockyard in Plymouth, which will carry out the work--need to have confidence in their safety and that of their families? Will he join me in expressing confidence in the highly skilled work force and their ability to carry out the work swiftly and effectively? Will he also give me an assurance that his door, and those of his ministerial colleagues, will be open to

Members and our constituents, because the spotlight will no doubt remain on this issue?

Mr. Spellar: With regard to Tireless and any of the other submarines, I reassure my hon. Friend that the safety

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of the crews or the general public has at no time been at risk in any way. We operate under an extremely tight and strict safety regime, and independent bodies overlook our work. We want to assure Members of Parliament and local representatives and communities of our on-going commitment to safety in this programme. I welcome this opportunity to pay tribute to the skilled work force who will undertake the work.

Mr. Menzies Campbell (North-East Fife): From one Glasgow boy to another, Mr. Speaker, I add my warm congratulations on your elevation. On this occasion, Kelvinbridge salutes Springburn.

Does not the Minister's answer punch a substantial hole in Britain's defence capability for the foreseeable future? That capability was substantially weakened by the decision to sell the Upholder class of submarines. That decision was taken purely for financial reasons by the previous Government. That would have been embarrassing at the time of the cold war. Would it not also have been embarrassing during the Kosovo campaign, when one of those submarines was responsible for using the Tomahawk cruise missile system? Is not that an argument for fitting Tomahawk cruise missiles to the new type 45 destroyers?

Finally, does not this occasion provide an opportunity to put some flesh on the bones of a European security and defence policy? Should not the Government seek co-operation with our European allies and, in particular, co-ordinate patrols with the French with regard to the nuclear deterrent that France deploys alongside the United Kingdom?

Mr. Spellar: I thank the right hon. and learned Gentleman for dividing the Opposition on this matter. I assure him that we have long-standing and close relations with the United States Navy in such matters and that we are already undertaking discussions with it. That welcome move should provide a degree of confidence and reassurance.

On the right hon. and learned Gentleman's point about Upholder submarines, he knows that that decision was taken in 1993. Several Conservative Defence Ministers have since been through the MOD but none of them saw fit to change that decision. There is an argument that having a wider variety of vessels and types of class is an advantage. Of course, huge costs are associated with that--not only in terms of training and operational experience but in support systems and maintenance facilities. That is always a required balance.

The decision to scrap the Upholder class was taken by the previous Administration. That decision has gone by and, therefore, we have to work as effectively as we can with the constraints and the vessels that we have.

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Mr. John McFall (Dumbarton): I add my happy congratulations to you, Mr. Speaker on this, your first day. The Minister said that the decision would have no effect on the Trident programme. However, he also said that it would affect the operational programme. What effect will it have on the Clyde submarine base at Faslane? As my hon. Friend knows from a recent meeting with me, we have a very committed work force there. Will he ca'canny

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on the proposals for possible privatisation so that we ensure the maintenance of that base and that good work force long into the future?

Mr. Spellar: My hon. Friend knows that discussions are taking place with the private sector on ship support and that those discussions also involve public sector yards. Indeed, even the work that will be undertaken on the submarines will involve both private contractors and the existing work force. He is right to identify the enormous reservoir of skills at Faslane. Obviously, its work force will be playing a significant role--along with those at Devonport, as was mentioned in a previous intervention--in getting the submarines operational again as soon as possible.

Mr. David Curry (Skipton and Ripon): Given the immense cost of the infrastructure that is needed to maintain a nuclear fleet because of the safety implications, does the Minister think that it is time to reconsider the option of a new generation of diesel boats rather than the proposed Astute class? Will he re-examine the option for diesel-powered submarines, which are cheaper and quieter than nuclear submarines? They have been given increased capability through air independent propulsion, are ideally suited for coastal warfare, easier to repair and, potentially, have a much better export market. Is it not time to go back to basics? Surely we should not go back to Upholder, but consider the future generation of nuclear boats.

Mr. Spellar: That is an interesting proposition and one that I do not recall spokesmen on either Front Bench raising during consideration of our submarine capability under the strategic defence review. Essentially, we and a few other countries have a blue-water international capability. We would not be able to achieve that with diesel submarines, which would also not be appropriate to maintain the nuclear deterrent, unless the right hon. Gentleman is proposing that we should review that policy too.

Mr. Andrew Miller (Ellesmere Port and Neston): My hon. Friend may know that I have sailed on one of these boats--with the hon. Member for Mid-Worcestershire (Mr. Luff), the Opposition Whip--and I was particularly impressed by the high level of consideration for safety. In trying to help public understanding of the issue, will my hon. Friend stress that this was a coolant leak, not a radiation leak and that the processes he described in response to my hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Sutton (Mrs. Gilroy) are the normal processes engaged in when cooling down a reactor prior to such work?

Mr. Spellar: I join my hon. Friend in paying tribute to the professionalism of our submarine fleet and those who work in it. I also echo his call to put the problem into perspective. Yes, it was a leak, but it was an extremely minor leak of coolant that was probably less radioactive than the surrounding Mediterranean. However, we have to be minded of maintaining very high safety standards. That is why we inspected Tireless and that is why, when it appeared that there was a possibility of a generic fault, we undertook further investigations. It is also why we are looking at

the whole fleet. I am sure that the House and

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the country would expect us to do no less than to follow those standards. Equally, we want to ensure that the fleet is back in operational service as soon as possible.

Sir Nicholas Lyell (North-East Bedfordshire): Congratulations, Mr. Speaker.

Are there not some internal inconsistencies in what the Minister is telling the House? Is he saying that all 12 of the submarines are unsafe and unseaworthy? If so, why did it take from May until October to take them out of service? If so, how can he tell the House that there was no question of crew safety being an issue? Why do Ministers appear to have taken what would seem to have been an operational decision?

Mr. Spellar: That question sounds like one that was prepared earlier; I thought that I had actually dealt with a number of those points during my contribution, but I will reiterate them.

Once we started to inspect the fault and examine it more closely, what we originally thought was a fairly small crack was larger and, quite frankly, the external investigation techniques would not have enabled us to ascertain that. Our experts then assessed that it was possibly a design/manufacture fault and could therefore have been generic across the fleet. That is why we undertook the further investigation.

As I said before, we are looking at the faults, but they are at an earlier stage in some of the other vessels. At the same time, however--as I pointed out in my reply to my hon. Friend the Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Mr. Miller)--we are talking about a very minor leak on the vessel. That does not mean that we did not take it seriously, but it also does not mean that there was any risk either to the crew or indeed to the general public. However, we did take the necessary prudent steps and will continue to take them. There is no inconsistency in those statements.

Mr. Jimmy Hood (Clydesdale): May I add my warm congratulations to you, Mr. Speaker? I cannot begin to tell you how pleased and proud I am for you and your family that you were elected yesterday.

I welcome the information that the Minister gave the House that we are due to have a defence debate--rightly so. I see that the Leader of the House is in her place. Will the Minister have a word with my right hon. Friend about holding defence debates a wee bit earlier in the week, in prime time, when more Members are able to be in the Chamber to debate such important issues? All too often, such debates are held at the fag-end of the week and not in prime time.

Will the Minister give us a status position for the Tireless submarine in Gibraltar? That is where we heard that the fault was first detected. Could we be told about the status of the repair to the Tireless?

What is the status of repairs to the diplomatic relationships with the Gibraltar Government? Some diplomatic mistakes were certainly made by either the Ministry of Defence or the Foreign Office or by both.

Mr. Spellar: I certainly hope that my hon. Friend is not implying that Thursday is not a normal parliamentary day. That might give rise to unfavourable comment elsewhere.

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We have been working with the Government of Gibraltar. My hon. Friend will be aware that the Chief Minister, having taken advice from an independent group of nuclear experts, indicated that the Government would not oppose the repair of *Tireless*. Of course, we have kept them informed of subsequent developments, and will continue to do so.

Dr. Julian Lewis (New Forest, East): While accepting that the Government experienced difficulties that were not of their own making in their dealings with Gibraltar over HMS *Tireless*, but given that there was known to be a problem with the vessel that prevented it from being inspected properly for five months, what steps did the Government take to look at other submarines of the same class, which we could have inspected during that long time, to see whether there was a generic fault? What steps were taken?

Mr. Spellar: I believe that the hon. Gentleman has misunderstood the situation. Initially, it was thought that there was a fault within *Tireless*. It was only on subsequent examination--not external examination but after having opened up the system--that it appeared that it was a different fault from that originally perceived, and that therefore, because of its nature, there was the possibility that it was a design/manufacture fault, which was therefore more likely to be a fault across the fleet, rather than an accident. As a result of that information, it was appropriate to conduct inspections, starting with stripped vessels that were already in refit or repair, to see whether they also suffered from that fault. I believe that that is a fairly straightforward, and fairly common, engineering procedure.

Mr. Tam Dalyell (Linlithgow): If it is not an engineering problem, might it not be--heaven help us--a metallurgical, metal fatigue problem? If so, what is the

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likely time scale of the repair, what is the unit cost, and are we sure that it is worth doing at all if it has to do with metal fatigue?

Mr. Spellar: I am tempted to reply to my hon. Friend in the way that I had to reply to his fellow countryman, Mr. James Naughtie, on Saturday and to say that, not being an engineer, I really need to wait on the engineers' report to have a better idea of the nature and cause of the fault and, of course, the suggested recovery programme.

Mr. Crispin Blunt (Reigate): May I congratulate you, Mr. Speaker, not only on the scale of your victory yesterday, but on your positive endorsement by a clear majority of the House? I gratefully express my gratitude for this early opportunity to catch your eye.

The Minister will now be aware of the importance of this weapon system, given the problems with it. Can he say anything about the capacity for emergency deployment while the repairs are taking place? Can he say anything about the policy, announced in the strategic defence review, to reduce the fleet from 12 to 10 boats in the next few years, and whether that will be put on hold for this period or reviewed altogether?

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