

The Royal Society of Edinburgh Mock Trial

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'Trident; should we keep it?' The case for yes.

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Secretary of State for Defence of the United Kingdom 1997-99
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I started a lifetime in politics at Ardnadam Pier at the Holy Loch beside Dunoon exactly fifty years ago, protesting at the arrival of the American Polaris submarines in that quiet Argyll sea-loch.

I proudly carried a poster which said 'Ban the Bomb' and was a profound but defiant embarrassment to my father of the same name who was head of the local police CID.

My admission of this bit of my history to President George W Bush came as a shock to him when I led NATO until he realised that were the same age and when I was marching with enthusiasm he was drinking with the same spirit.

I was to go on in my political life to be the guardian of Britain's independent deterrent submarines and then to be Secretary General of the NATO alliance which relies in the very final analysis on nuclear security. Some would say that was some rite of passage.

But worldly experience was to undermine my faith in that bald slogan I carried past Lazaretto Point in 1961. Whereas in these youthful days I had the thought that by giving up Britain's deterrent we would start a benign chain reaction of disarmament, the hard reality was that there were massive reductions in nuclear arsenals after the end of the Cold War by the US, Russia, Britain and France with all the de-targeting, de-alerting and confidence building measures between the P5 powers. However it did nothing, absolutely nothing, to stop India, Pakistan, North Korea and Israel acquiring nuclear weapons, Iraq and Iran to want them with only the threat of an Iraq-style invasion forcing Col Gaddhafi to disclose and destroy his planned acquisitions.

And when as this country's Defence Secretary, in the 1998 Strategic Defence Review, I made the biggest ever unilateral reductions in our deterrent strength, so that our country now has the smallest stockpile of nuclear warheads and is the only nuclear weapons state with a single system, there was absolutely no reciprocation and today the Chinese are substantially increasing its nuclear forces and Russia is upgrading its strategic nuclear capability.

There was no benign chain reaction, no reversal of proliferation and it was not because the nuclear weapons states had dragged heels on NPT obligations but

because these new states had their own and usually local reasons for acquiring nukes. North Korea in relation to China. India in relation to Pakistan and vice versa. Iraq (under Sadaam) and Iran in relation to each other, and Israel in relation to both.

So, whatever we on these islands do, or even what the Americans and Russians do, these rationalisations and deep seated drivers will remain. To believe otherwise is to make a serious and irresponsible miscalculation.

Proliferation is indeed dangerous, it's risky, it's expensive and it is worrying but it is a different issue. Ballistic missile technology is spreading and so is chemical and biological weapon knowledge, but it is unrelated to nuclear deterrence by the major powers.

So here is the rub.

Do we give up, without conditions or reciprocation, Britain's nuclear deterrent?

That's what the debate on Trident is all about.

There is no cheap, safe, effective way for Britain to stay with deterrence – as my witnesses will be spelling out. Only Trident with one its four submarines on continuous patrol, unseen, undetectable and invulnerable can guarantee that no enemy of ours will miscalculate and believe it can win a conventional war.

If we end the Trident system, or chose not to continue with it by building new submarines, then we will be out of the business effectively for ever. To try to recreate it in the face of any emerging new threat to us it would take 20 years to do - as well as at huge cost.

We are in deterrence with Trident – or we irrevocably give up for good our independent deterrent.

In a volatile, fractious and highly unpredictable world, to take such a momentous decision on behalf of future generations would be, and I put it to you with great seriousness, a profoundly irresponsible step to take.

Nuclear deterrence is stable, understandable and successful. For 65 years it has prevented the kind of great power wars which disfigured the 20th Century and indeed many centuries before it.

And who will dare to predict the nature of the world and its risks and threats in the next 30-40 years when the renewed Trident will be in service?

After all, who predicted the Arab uprising his year? Of the few who did, how many predicted it would be Tunisia and Egypt which would be the first to go?

How many people predicted the suddenness of the Berlin Wall coming down or the Soviet Union disintegrating just 30 months after it was driven from Afghanistan?

It was precious few, even of the pundits, who would have dared to prophesy that by the second year of the new millennium all but one of the members of the Warsaw Pact and three Soviet States would be full members of the European Union and of NATO?

And did we really imagine that foreign terrorist would drive two civil airliners into New York's Twin Towers, or that Saddam would invade Kuwait, or that tiny, starving North Korea would launch a ballistic missile over Japan's air space?

So who, among us will say, hand on heart, that they know that there will be no enemy, no threat to us or our allies emerging or maturing over the next forty years?

In a world of constant surprises, is this really the right time to make a once in a lifetime choice to abandon our deterrent and leave nuclear deterrence to the Americans and the French?

That is the real issue before us tonight and the Parliament of this country will have to decide.

But I want to ask you to think about the following questions.

If this country was to give up nuclear deterrence and if, just if, the other major nuclear weapons states were to do likewise, and just suppose that we managed also to persuade India and Pakistan and North Korea and Israel to do so as well and got Iran to end its nuclear ambitions. And what if there were to be a genuinely thorough intrusive inspection regime and some form (although this stretches my imagination a bit far) of enforcement of the Zero option to prevent cheating, what then?

We cannot dis-invent the nuclear weapons technology. And was the world that existed before nuclear weapons were invented so wonderful and peaceful that it is worth returning to? Hardly.

And would not some countries, especially those with suspected and hostile neighbours want to be ready in private to recreate nukes just in case an aggressor cheated on the new non-nuclear regime?

How stable would that supposedly nuclear-free world be?

I leave you to ponder the answers to these important questions.

Let me make two final points to help you with your decision.

If Britain were to act alone by ending Trident now and to opt out of national deterrence (but of course leaving the American nuclear umbrella in place and with France as the only European nuclear power) would we actually be believed?

Would it really be seen as a selfless act of supreme leadership in non-proliferation?

Or would others smell a rat? The suspicion in a cynical and very suspicious world would not be to give the benefit of the doubt to us, but would be to suspect that such an act of national self-relegation must be cover for us having found a new, secret and effective way of protecting ourselves.

From my own personal and extensive experience at the top of world politics I can tell you that it would not act as a generator of trust and copy-cat moves but rather to more tension, suspicion and a yet bigger arms race.

Trident is not a war-fighting weapon – it is the very opposite. It is a political statement. It is designed to stop an aggressor even thinking that he can win a conventional war. If it were used then deterrence would have failed. But with the silent submarines out there under the oceans the world is a safer place because the usual risk-taking and national gambling which characterised centuries of conflict would, if tried today, inflict immeasurable damage on the aggressor himself. It would not be worth him taking the risk and no one has done so for sixty-five remarkable years.

I conclude,

We live in an unpredictable and complex world.

Power is shifting from the West to the East and South.

From the developed countries to the emerging economies with their new clout and ambitions.

From stable nation-states slotted into ideological groupings to an increasing number of fragile and failing states spreading instability and terror and migration and violence, piracy and crime into new unstable neighbourhoods.

Is this the time, of all times, to step into the unknown by giving up the British deterrent which since the end of the Second World War has ended major power inter-state warfare?

So I say with feeling, the young political enthusiast who was me fifty years ago and who carried that Ban the Bomb banner still believes with a passion in building a world of trust and stability and prosperity based on openness and common values so that nuclear weapons would be neither wanted nor necessary.

But I believe that you need to have that kind of world before you do away with nuclear deterrence. And that's why I am asking you to vote yes tonight.