

# Secret Cabinet papers from the 1960s show serious defects in Britain

**NIC OUTTERSIDE**  
Chief Investigative Reporter

SECRET letters show how the former prime minister Harold Wilson and his defence secretary Denis Healey managed to block an inquiry into serious defects with Britain's early Polaris submarines and hide the costs of repairs.

Last night the Ministry of Defence said the two vessels were later refabricated and there was no danger to the crews of the vessels or of a nuclear accident.

Secret cabinet memos, declassified ten weeks ago but hidden among other documents until discovered by *The Scotsman*, reveal that in 1966 Mr Wilson and Mr Healey managed to defer an inquiry into the fault.

The two men blamed the previous Conservative government for ordering substandard steel, and the Americans for failing to alert them to similar failures in US nuclear submarines.

The newly declassified documents reveal that the structural problems in the hulls of the Polaris HMS Resolution and the nuclear-powered hunter-killer submarine HMS Dreadnought, seriously worried the Labour administration, which six months earlier had cancelled an order for a fifth Polaris submarine.

In a "Secret" memorandum dated 17 October, 1966, to Mr Healey, and copied to the power minister, Roy Mason, Mr Wilson said: "The Sunday press are chasing the story of cracks in the steel plates in the Polaris and other submarines. Presumably the responsibility here lies in the hands of the previous [Conservative] government, but now we are in our third year this will be hard to sustain."

Mr Wilson goes on to suggest an independent inquiry into the fault adding: "We shall not avoid one ... because the costs involved are bound to lead to acid comment by the Comptroller and Auditor General and the Public Accounts Committee."

In another secret memo Mr Mason admitted that the specification for the steel had been "inadequate". He added: "In light of this we should tread warily."

Confidential minutes of a meeting between Mr Wilson and Mr Healey reveal that the specification for the steel for the £162 million construction of the Polaris submarines had been set by the Admiralty. The cracks in the steel were revealed when



**Harold Wilson: Worried about press interest**



**Denis Healey: Difficult to avoid independent inquiry**

the hulls had been instrument-tested.

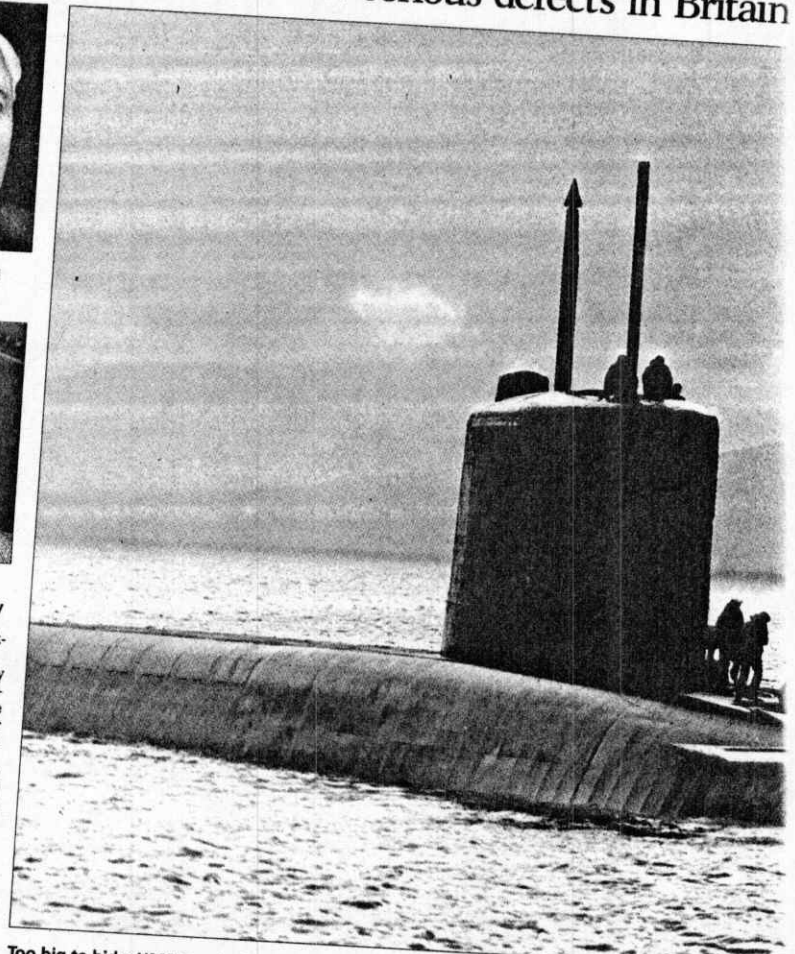
Mr Healey blamed a "highly sensitive" US defence department which failed to warn the British Government of similar structural problems in their nuclear Mike-class submarines.

He said arrangements had been made to buy new steel from the US to "solve the present problem". He persuaded the prime minister to defer any inquiry.

Mr Healey's stance is formalised in a "secret" letter to the prime minister dated 25 October, 1966, in which he said: "I think it would be inadvisable to commit ourselves to an independent inquiry ... the American interest could raise very serious problems."

Mr Healey suggested that the cost of the replacement steel would be hidden within the £1.7 billion nuclear submarine programme. He said: "I am advised that the technical nature of the problem, and the cost involved in relation to the expense of the whole nuclear submarine programme, make it improbable that the C and AG [Comptroller and Auditor General] and the Public Accounts Committee's interest will be aroused."

Following an exchange of secret memos between senior civil servants in the MoD, press inquiries were allayed by a



Too big to hide: HMS Resolution, above, on Loch Fyne, and HMS Dreadnought were at sea when t

## Woodlan fears of r

**KAREN McVEIGH**

THE police vans sitting on the banks of Loch Long were a sure sign that something was happening.

"We've had no trouble, we're just monitoring the situation," said one of the several police officers, parked along the road from the Clyde Submarine Base at Couplport.

Following the trail from a painted Women's Peace Camp sign along a path, marked with yellow ribbons, through the woods to the huddle of tents, tarpaulins and 20 or so bedraggled-looking women sitting drinking tea, you could be forgiven for wondering what all the fuss was about.

The problem, for local residents, is 67-year-old Georgina Smith. The veteran anti-nuclear campaigner, who won a five-year court battle to allow women into Greenham Common in 1990, has recently purchased 35 acres of Ministry of Defence land on a hill overlooking the Couplport base.

Mrs Smith says she simply invited a few people for the weekend to celebrate International Woman's Week by setting up a peace camp on her land in



Peace p...

"She was permanent peace thousands all over very lovely His wife pressed fear

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