

Nuclear Free Local Authorities

briefing



Date: 8 January 2006

No. 58

Subject: UK Nuclear Weapons Policy

1. Introduction

The NFLA AGM on 7 December 2006 agreed revised terms of reference including:

...To consider and recommend action which can be taken by local authorities and others to support and/or enable:

- *efforts to prevent the retention and proliferation of nuclear weapons and technology assisting that proliferation...*

The 2006 AGM also carried the resolutions annexed to this Briefing.

Days earlier, on 4 December 2006, the Government published a White Paper – *The Future of the United Kingdom's Nuclear Deterrent* - setting out its case for continuing to maintain a nuclear weapons capability through to the middle of this Century. To give effect to this policy Government proposes to support work by the United States to maintain the Trident missile in service through to the 2040s and replace the current nuclear propelled Trident submarine fleet with a new submarine fleet by the mid 2020s.

Announcing the White Paper in Parliament the Prime Minister said "...It is our intention, at the conclusion of that (public and parliamentary debate) process in March of next year, to have a vote in this House...". In his foreword to the White Paper the Prime Minister says:

...We now look forward to a substantial period of public and parliamentary debate in which the issues can be aired freely. But I am confident that that debate will only confirm that maintaining our nuclear deterrent is in the best interests of the country's future security. (p5)

The White paper can be downloaded from

<http://www.mod.uk/DefenceInternet/AboutDefence/CorporatePublications/PolicyStrategyandPlanning/DefenceWhitePaper2006Cm6994.htm> Whilst the Prime Minister welcomes public *debate* it appears a public *consultation* has not been initiated. At no point is the term *consultation* used and the submission of comments on the White Paper is not invited. No address is provided where comments may be directed, and no deadline is provided for comments. Nonetheless, this NFLA Briefing Paper considers the main points from the White Paper, attempts to highlight relevant considerations for local authorities, and provides some links to more detailed analysis. Local authorities are urged to support the concerns about UK nuclear weapons policy outlined in this Briefing and requested to:

1) submit comments on the White Paper to:

The Rt Hon Des Browne MP, Secretary of State for Defence, Main Building, Whitehall, London SW1A 2HB Fax: 0207218 6538 Email: public@ministers.mod.uk, and
The Rt Hon Margaret Beckett MP, Secretary of State for Foreign & Commonwealth Affairs, King Charles St, London SW1A 2AH Fax: 0207 008 2746 Email: margaret.beckett@fco.gov.uk

2) release comments to local press and media, and

3) release comments to your Members of Parliament to assist in their preparation for the Parliamentary debate and vote in March.

THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT VOICE ON NUCLEAR ISSUES

2. Main Points from The Future of the United Kingdom's Nuclear Deterrent

Section 1: Maintaining our Nuclear Deterrent

The Government says the current fleet of four Vanguard Class (Trident) submarines were introduced into service at intervals from 1992 and have already undergone work to extend their operational life by 5 years. Therefore "...the first submarine would be going out of service around 2022 and the second around 2024..." (p10) at which point continuous deterrent patrols could no longer be assured...if no replacement were in place by then. Decisions on a replacement programme are needed now because "...it might take around 17 years from the initiation of detailed concept work to achieve the first operational patrol...". (p10)

Section 2: The Policy Context

Government policy set out in the 2003 Defence White Paper (Cm 6041 –1) is to work towards "...a safer world in which there is no requirement for nuclear weapons...". "Through the NPT (1970 Nuclear Non Proliferation Treaty) and a wide range of fora ... we continue to work multilaterally to help and encourage others to reduce their stockpiles...". (p13) However, nuclear proliferation risks remain and "...Most of the 40 members of the Nuclear Suppliers Group...have the technical ability and means to initiate a viable nuclear weapons programme...". (p14) Maintenance of the UK's deterrent is fully compliant with NPT nuclear disarmament obligations because the NPT sets no timetable. The International Court of Justice in 1996 "...rejected the argument that such use (of nuclear weapons) would necessarily be unlawful." (p14)

Section 3: Nuclear Deterrence in the 21st Century

"Five enduring principles underpin the UK's approach to deterrence...": prevention; minimum destructive power; ambiguity (about when and with what force to strike); collective security (through NATO); and being an 'independent centre of nuclear decision making' to defend the UK's 'vital interests' (i.e not be dependent on the United States or France). This must be maintained to insure against an uncertain future where "...the number of states armed with nuclear weapons may have increased by 2050." (p18) "Weak and failing states will continue to offer safe havens for international terrorists...Increasing pressure on key resources such as energy and water...may increase interstate tension. The rapid and uncontrollable development of military-relevant technology by the civil sector will make potential adversaries increasingly capable...". These factors "...could lead to an increased risk of conflict involving a nuclear armed state." (p18)

"Any state that we can hold responsible for assisting a nuclear attack on our vital interests can expect that this would lead to a proportionate response." (p19)

Section 4: Ensuring Effective Deterrence

"Our preference is for an invulnerable and undetectable system...(with the range) to deter threats anywhere in the world." (p22) "...(W)e believe that our existing capability to deploy up to 48 warheads on the submarine deterrent patrol is sufficient...coupled with the continued availability of a lower yield from our warhead...(to deter) smaller nuclear threats." (p23)

Section 5: Deterrent Options, Solutions & Costs

"Four generic options were subject to detailed assessment and comparative costings: a large aircraft equipped with cruise missiles; silo-based ballistic missiles; and both surface and sub-surface maritime platforms equipped with ballistic missiles." (p24) The least vulnerable and detectable system is "...a new class of submarines (sufficient for continuous deterrent patrols) and we plan shortly to commence detailed concept work." (p25) "(O)ur initial estimate is that the procurement costs will be in the range of £15-20 billion...; £2-3 billion for the possible future refurbishment or replacement of the warhead; and £2-3 billion for infrastructure over the life of the submarines. There would be savings from a three boat solution but these would not be in proportion to the reduction in the number of submarines." (p26) "Additional investment averaging £350 million per annum..." over three years to 2008 to sustain the capabilities of the Atomic Weapons Establishment at Aldermaston was announced last year." (p27) "Once the new fleet of SSBNs comes into service, we expect that the in-service costs ...will be similar to today (around 5-6% of the defence budget)." (p27)

Section 6: Industrial Aspects

"It would be our intention to build the new SSBNs in the UK, for reasons of national sovereignty, nuclear regulation, operational effectiveness and safety, and maintenance of key skills. But this is dependent on proposals from industry that provide the right capability at the right time and offer value for money." (p28) "The disposal of the Vanguard class submarines is still some way off, and it is therefore too early to estimate the possible decommissioning costs...We are also working with industry to ensure that any future nuclear submarine is designed to facilitate the safe decommissioning and storage of nuclear materials." (p29)

Section 7: Future Decisions

In future years decisions on replacement to the Trident D5 missile (2040s) and a new UK warhead (depending on uncertain service life of current warhead) will be needed. "These agreements will ensure that, if future UK Governments wish, they will have the option of retaining a nuclear deterrent capability throughout the lives of the new class of SSBNs." (p31)

3. Commentary

Sustainability

A key issue is sustainability – a principle that local government seeks to incorporate across its practice as a whole. How sustainable is a doctrine of nuclear deterrence in the long-term. Clearly the doctrine survived the bipolar post war 'East – West' world that emerged from the ashes of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and lasted until the collapse of the Soviet Union at the end of the 1980s. However, whether that same doctrine is capable of survival in a multi-polar world that we now inhabit is much more questionable. States with a nuclear weapons capability have increased and continue to do so. Sub-state groups

like Al Qaeda are believed to be seeking a nuclear weapons capability. The White Paper itself acknowledges, "...Most of the 40 members of the Nuclear Suppliers Group...have the technical ability and means to initiate a viable nuclear weapons programme..." (p14). Whilst clearly we cannot unilaterally opt out of a world where nuclear weapons proliferation results from the spread of civil sector nuclear 'know how', it is evident that deterrence doctrine has failed to discourage this trend. Signalling an intention to continue as a nuclear weapon state undermines the credibility of the UK's stance against proliferation. It is in our long-term safety and security interests to examine whether continuing as a nuclear weapon state creates more problems than it solves. The national interest is not served by failing to consider the costs and benefits of a credible and sustainable non-nuclear security policy.

Climate Change

Climate change is the number one environmental challenge but it is also a security challenge. It contributes to resource scarcity and instability that results in international conflict. Oil is a contributor to climate change and a source of conflict (see: <http://www.greenpeace.org.uk/contentlookup.cfm?&ucidparam=20061207113448>). We need to radically reduce international carbon emissions by the middle of this century or, as the *Stern Review on the Economics of Climate Change* published in October 2006 concluded, face serious economic as well as environmental consequences. *The Guardian* reported on 4 November 2006 that "...Intriguingly, calculations by economic and environmental researchers as well as the Guardian suggest a striking parallel between the amount needed to cut emissions, and one of the most controversial areas of government spending - the cost of renewing and maintaining Britain's Trident nuclear deterrent."

Nuclear Non Proliferation

At the 2005 conference to review the operation of the 1970 Nuclear Non Proliferation Treaty (NPT) the then UN Secretary-General, Kofi Annan, asked member states to consider the consequences of a third use of a nuclear weapon (after the bombings at Hiroshima and Nagasaki): "...As shock gave way to anger and despair, the leaders of every nation...would have to ask: How did it come to this? Is my conscience clear? Could I have done more to reduce the risk by strengthening the regime designed to do so?" More recently Kofi Annan spoke of 'mutually assured paralysis' - a failure to multilaterally implement the nuclear disarmament obligations of the NPT.

China and India (which stands outside the NPT) say they are both ready to negotiate multilateral nuclear disarmament. Opinion polls in many countries including the UK and US and other nuclear weapon states consistently show 4 out of 5 people favouring multilateral negotiations. International Mayors for Peace (www.mayorsforpeace.org) are leading a lobby of over 1500 towns and cities across 120 countries to secure by 2010 an agreement on multilateral nuclear disarmament by 2020. Hans Blix, former head of the UN's International Atomic Energy Agency has called for a "...World Summit on disarmament, non-proliferation and terrorist use of weapons of mass destruction..." (see Annex). The US, France and UK have rejected these calls and favour renewal of their nuclear arsenals. This weakens the authority of the NPT and spurs more proliferation.

The International Court of Justice in 1996, to which the White Paper refers, in fact said it "...cannot conclude definitively whether the threat or use of nuclear weapons would be lawful or unlawful in an extreme circumstance of self-defence, in which the very survival of a State would be at stake". The ICJ concluded that in general, threatened use or use of nuclear weapons is illegal in international law. It is important to note that UK nuclear weapons use has been threatened in circumstances that would be illegal in international law. In advance of the invasion of Iraq in 2002 the then Defence Secretary, Geoff Hoon, signalled his readiness to use nuclear weapons if UK armed forces came under Iraqi attack by chemical or biological weapons. It is alleged, though denied by Government, that a nuclear armed submarine was deployed to Ascension Island during the Falkland Islands' war in 1982. In fact the White Paper appears to confirm the UK's willingness to use nuclear weapons illegally when it says: "Any state that we can hold responsible for assisting a nuclear attack on our vital interests can expect that this would lead to a proportionate response." (p19)

Opportunity costs

Government estimates: submarine costs at £15 - £20 billion; warhead costs at £2 - £3 billion; infrastructure costs at £2 - £3 billion; Aldermaston development £1 billion; and running costs at about £1.5 billion per year. Decommission costs are not estimated though the costs arising from current defence nuclear activities is about £10 billion (see http://www.acronym.org.uk/uk/Worse_than_Irrelevant.pdf p24). Assuming a similar decommissioning and waste management figure for a replacement deterrent programme and associated infrastructure over an operational life of 30 years, then total expenditure could amount to £75 - £80 billion: *more* than the estimate reported by *The Guardian* to "...almost guarantee emission reductions from 150m tonnes of carbon a year today to the necessary level of around 60m tonnes by 2030."

The same *Guardian* article reports "The Energy Savings Trust calculates that a one-off investment by government of about £4bn could insulate nearly 6m cavity walls, saving almost £2bn per year in reduced energy bills and nearly 12m tonnes of carbon - almost 28 % of Britain's domestic emissions." Circa £75bn is substantially more than one years total spending by UK local government. CND's *Alternative White Paper* (<http://www.cnduk.org/pages/altwhitepaper.pdf>) says: "It is estimated that £25 billion is equivalent to 60,000 newly qualified nurses and 60,000 new secondary school teachers for the next ten years." Trident replacement life cycle costs estimated here is also equivalent to about 12 years funding for the Department for International Development on current spending levels.

Safety, Transportation, Emergency Planning & Waste

The MoD released details in February 2005 of 19 UK nuclear weapons accidents at home and overseas since 1960 during loading, unloading and transportation. The most notorious accident is probably the warhead carrier (complete with 2 warheads) that slewed on ice into a ditch and overturned near West Dean in Wiltshire in January 1987. A second warhead carrier slewed whilst braking to avoid the first vehicle. Nuclear warheads continue to use the road network and Trident replacement will require road transports for decades to come. Despite the security surrounding warhead movements there is a constant risk of malicious acts or accidents on an increasingly congested road network. Emergency plans for warhead transportation accidents suggest respiratory protection may be required by the public out to 5 kilometres downwind though in reality this could be much further. Countermeasures for nuclear reactor accidents or incidents on berthed submarines may be required out to 30 kilometres. About 5% of the current intermediate level nuclear waste inventory (over 10,000m³), requiring management for many decades to come, has been created by the UK's nuclear weapons and nuclear propulsion programmes. The MoD's own public consultation in 2004 about the future storage of decommissioned nuclear submarines showed strong public opposition to any new nuclear submarine construction because the waste issue remains unresolved.

Resolutions carried unanimously at Nuclear Free Local Authorities AGM, Civic Hall, Leeds, 7 December 2006

Trident Replacement

This AGM:

- calls for the abolition of UK nuclear weapons and the redirection of resources to support the development of public services and tackling climate change.

Proposed: Bury Metropolitan Borough Council
 Seconded: Shetland Islands Council

7 December 2006
 Civic Hall, Leeds

Weapons of Mass Destruction

This AGM:

- Recalls that on 1 June 2006 the Weapons of Mass Destruction Commission Chairman, Dr. Hans Blix, presented the Commissions report "Weapons of Terror" to the United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan in New York.

- Notes the report contains sixty concrete proposals on how the world could be freed of nuclear, biological and chemical weapons.

- Agrees with the findings of the WMDC that:

Nuclear, biological and chemical arms are the most inhumane of all weapons. Designed to terrify as well as destroy, they can, in the hands of either states or non-state actors, cause destruction on a vastly greater scale than any conventional weapons, and their impact is far more indiscriminate and long-lasting.

So long as any state has such weapons especially nuclear arms others will want them. So long as any such weapons remain in any states arsenal, there is a high risk that they will one day be used, by design or accident. Any such use would be catastrophic.

Notwithstanding the end of the Cold War balance of terror, stocks of such weapons remain extraordinarily and alarmingly high: some 27,000 in the case of nuclear weapons, of which around 12,000 are still actively deployed.

Weapons of mass destruction cannot be uninvented. But they can be outlawed, as biological and chemical weapons already have been, and their use made unthinkable. Compliance, verification and enforcement rules can, with the requisite will, be effectively applied. And with that will, even the eventual elimination of nuclear weapons is not beyond the worlds reach.

Over the past decade, there has been a serious, and dangerous, loss of momentum and direction in disarmament and non-proliferation efforts. Treaty making and implementation have stalled and, as a new wave of proliferation has threatened, unilateral enforcement action has been increasingly advocated.

Therefore:

- agrees with the WMDC that *Governments and relevant intergovernmental organizations and non government actors should commence preparations for a World Summit on disarmament, non-proliferation and terrorist use of weapons of mass destruction to generate new momentum for concerted international action.*

- calls on HM Government to a) give support to a World Summit b) signal its resolve to strengthen the international Nuclear Non Proliferation regime by terminating any further work on a replacement for Trident, and c) announce an early date to withdraw the Trident fleet from active service.

- supports all lawful campaign action in the UK to secure support for no Trident replacement.

- calls on all NFLAs to give support to the work of international Mayors for Peace and endorse their 2020 Vision campaign that calls for international agreement by 2010 on a Nuclear Weapons Convention to dismantle nuclear weapons by 2020.

- resolves to incorporate and develop these arguments in its response to the Governments White Paper on The Future of the United Kingdoms Nuclear Deterrent and other relevant inquiries.

Proposed: Preston City Council
 Seconded: Dundee Council

7 December 2006
 Civic Hall, Leeds

For more information about the issues raised in this Briefing contact:
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