

Continuously at sea

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In April 2019, Members of the Westminster Parliament debated 'continuous at-sea deterrence' (CASD), which for 50 years has seen nuclear-armed Royal Navy submarines slowly patrol the oceans. Several speeches stand out, particularly those by Members who live with nuclear weapons on their doorsteps. We reprint some extracts.

◀ Westminster Abbey, 3 May 2019, dying quietly at CASD anniversary service

Ronnie Cowan (Inverclyde, Scottish National Party): ... When I rose to make my maiden speech on 1 July 2015, I touched on the Trident programme, because it is close to my heart. In fact, it is very close to my constituency. At the time, I mentioned that Trident seemed to be a bit of an abstract concept. People know it is out there, but they do not know what it is, how much it costs, how much it cannot be used, and what it is actually doing as a deterrent.

If you stand on the shore of my constituency, you will often see Vanguard class submarines moving silently through the deep waters. They catch the sunlight, which shimmers along their long, sleek, black bodies as they cut through the surface of the water. Their colour may suggest giant eels, but they lack the elegance. They are, however, engineering marvels. It takes some doing to fire a missile from beneath the water's surface, project it through the water until it breaks free, and manage two controlled explosions that project the missile to a pre-defined target where ballistic missiles carrying nuclear warheads are released and either explode on impact or are exploded automatically at the required height to cause maximum death and destruction. Mankind has never lacked ingenuity when it comes to inventing ways of killing each other. I cannot help but wonder what else we could have achieved with all that time, effort, ingenuity and money.

The issue we have is that successive Governments of the United Kingdom have supported and expanded the nuclear weapons programme at eye-watering cost. Why? When I sit in the House of Commons, I talk to many Members who

support Trident. I can tell them that these weapons can kill tens of millions of people. But they know that. I can tell them that the watershed will be poisoned, crops will fail and many more will die in the most degrading ways from famine, pestilence and plague. But they know that. I can share stories of survivors, such as Setsuko Thurlow, who told me of people falling to the ground, bellies extended and bursting as they hit the ground, of people trying to carry their own eyes that had fallen out of their heads, and of people with their flesh falling off their bones as they died in agony.

I can also tell Members that weapons of mass destruction have not stopped wars across the globe from Vietnam to Afghanistan. But they know that. I can tell them that WMD are no protection from terrorism. But they know that. I can tell them that the £205 billion could be spent on health, education, housing, transport or even financing our conventional armed forces. But they know that too.

The majority of supporters of weapons of mass destruction are just like me with one vital difference. They believe that WMD are a deterrent. They believe their existence has kept us safe. As those weapons have existed during a period in which we have avoided wars on the scale of the First and Second World Wars, I can see where they are coming from. If people believe that keeping their guard up is keeping them safe, then lowering their guard is a frightening thing to do. In this case, they are so frightened that they are prepared to carry out the greatest atrocity humankind has ever perpetrated, and have it done in their name. Well, not in my name. Not all countries believe that nuclear warfare is required. Maybe as many as nine countries feel the need to have nuclear weapons, out of 200.

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West, Scottish National Party):

I start by declaring an interest. My husband served on Trident submarines for most of his 17-year service in the Royal Navy. His final post before retiring was as the weapon engineer officer on *HMS Victorious*. He brought her through refit in Devonport and sea trials from Faslane, and he carried out the firing during the 2009 demonstration and shakedown operation [DASO] off the coast of Florida ...

Following the DASO firing, *Victorious* re-entered full service and, following an extremely busy year, the crew carried out a deterrence patrol over Christmas 2009. It gives me great pleasure to say that my granny's Christmas tree went on that patrol. When my husband finally left *Victorious*, he forgot to take my granny's Christmas tree. I wonder if any crew members would be able to confirm whether that Christmas tree – a little white optical fibre fellow – is still on board. For the role he played, my husband received the Commander-in-Chief, Fleet commendation, an

award that still hangs proudly in our home in Whiteinch in Glasgow.

Despite my pride in my husband's service, my opposition to Trident has been constant. As a teenager my views were formed over the Cold War and fears of mutually assured destruction, and my earliest political campaigns, long before I ever thought to consider Scottish independence, were against Trident. Over time the indiscriminate nature of these weapons, which are designed to cause such widespread devastation, has meant that I will never support Trident or its successor. That is regardless of whether we can afford these platforms, which, to be frank, as conventional forces are being cut to the bone, we cannot. In fact, our maritime capabilities are so depleted that we no longer have any major warships based in Scotland. This is at a time when threats from Russia are at their greatest for a generation. We have repeatedly had to rely on our allies when incursions occur. On at least two occasions in 2016, Russian submarines were suspected of operating off Faslane, and the UK had to seek assistance from its allies to help track those intruders. Those incursions fit a pattern of Russia testing defences and seeking crucial information about the Vanguard boats, namely the acoustic signature that allows them to be tracked. If Russia were able to obtain a recording of the signature, it would have serious implications for the UK's deterrent.

Are we increasing conventional capabilities to help deal with that? No: we decided to scrap the entire fleet of Nimrods. Although the Nimrods will eventually be replaced by the P-8, the first of which is expected in Lossiemouth in 2020, we have been playing Russian roulette for the past 10 years and will continue to do so unless we increase conventional capabilities, particularly around the north of Scotland. If we were to find ourselves under attack, as has happened in Crimea, our defences are being whittled down to two options: we can either nuke them or chase them away with pitchforks. How on earth does that make us safer?

The hon. Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr) said that the SNP does not speak for Scotland. Okay, we may not speak for some of Scotland, but our position on Trident is supported by the Scottish Government, the Scottish Labour Party, the Scottish Greens, the Church of Scotland, the Catholic Church in Scotland and Scottish civil society. I would suggest that it is the Tories who are out of kilter with the Scottish people.

This is a debate to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the continuous at-sea deterrent. I take no pleasure in the money and resources that have been funnelled into this vanity project, which allows Britain to have a seat at the big boys' table at the UN, to the detriment of other parts of our armed forces. I take no pleasure in the money that is thrown into the maintenance and into the successor project, while at the same time child poverty is at

the highest level that many of us have seen in our lifetime.

I pay tribute to the men, and now women, who have made the commitment to serve. People often talk about the difficulties of separation and the three-month patrols, but those who have a partner on one of the boats will know that in many ways the patrol is the most settled time. The work-up period and testing, false starts and defects mean that families cope with massive upheaval in the lead up to the actual patrol, repeatedly saying big bye-byes only to have partners return the next day and children not really knowing whether this is the time that daddy will disappear. That puts enormous strain on families and relationships—a strain that is not always recognised.

It is time that the MoD considered the realities of modern-day families. In the past, partners and families would live close to the base with a ready-made support network. Recognising that spouses have their own careers is important to a modern-day armed forces.

Submariners do an incredible job and are the most highly skilled personnel in the armed forces. They have many career options on leaving, so retention issues leave serious skill shortages in the submarine service. The MOD has said that no submarine goes to sea without the minimum complement of suitably qualified and experienced personnel required to operate the boat safely, and that vacancies are managed to ensure that safety and operational capability is never compromised, but that is done off the back of submariners. Severe shortages of suitably skilled personnel meant that, in my husband's last year in the Navy, he had six days' leave. That included weekends. That is simply not sustainable. There comes a point when pride in serving cannot make up for poor conditions of service. Ultimately, many choose between service and seeing their children grow up. I argue that despite the money being thrown at Trident, its ultimate demise will be caused by a failure to support the personnel and by gaps in critical skills.

As we mark 50 years of the continuous at-sea deterrent and recognise the dedication of those serving in the silent service, I say that the time has come to invest properly in cyber, in conventional defence and in our personnel. Despite campaigning actively against the platform, I and my hon. Friends pay tribute to those who have served, and to those who continue to serve.

Caroline Lucas (Brighton Pavilion, Green Party): It is a real pleasure and honour to follow the hon. Member for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan), because she speaks with real authority and eloquence about

these issues. I am happy to speak as well in my capacity as chair of the cross-party group on nuclear disarmament. Let me put it on the record at the top of my speech that I am very happy to pay tribute to the submariners for their service to this country and to their families for the sacrifice that they make, which the hon. Lady has set out very clearly.

I do not think that there is any contradiction between paying tribute to that service and also being very clear that, for me, nuclear weapons are abhorrent. Others have said during this debate that it is inconsistent to have a nuclear deterrent if we are not prepared to use it. I absolutely agree with that, and I am very proud to say that I would not, under any circumstances, use nuclear weapons, and still less would I support the Prime Minister's position of a first use of nuclear weapons. I believe that nuclear weapons are indiscriminate, illegal and obscene.

Let us just think what that first strike, which the Prime Minister was so proud not to rule out, could really mean. The heart of a nuclear explosion reaches a temperature of several million degrees centigrade. Over a wide area, the resulting heat flash literally vaporises all human tissue. At Hiroshima, within a radius of half a mile, the only remains of the people caught in the open were their shadows burned into stone. People inside buildings will be indirectly killed by the blast and the heat effects as buildings collapse and all inflammable materials burst into flames. The immediate death rate in that area will be over 90%. Individual fires will combine to produce a fire storm as all the oxygen is consumed. As the heat rises, air is drawn in from the periphery at or near ground level. This results in lethal hurricane-force winds and perpetuates the fire as the fresh oxygen is burned. The contamination will continue potentially for hundreds of thousands of years. The Red Cross has estimated that 1 billion people around the world could face starvation as a result of a nuclear war.

Let me be very clear: I hate all war, but there is something particular about nuclear war. Simply saying that it is in the same category as other forms of war is wrong. What is wrong as well is to say that we cannot uninvent things that have already been invented. We saw what happened when it came to chemical weapons, biological weapons and cluster munitions being banned. If there was more support from countries such as the UK, nuclear weapons could be banned as well. There was the UN treaty on the prohibition of nuclear weapons, and I found it frankly outrageous that the UK Government could not even be bothered to turn up to the talks. That was a campaign that was run throughout the world. One hundred and twenty two countries supported the nuclear ban treaty. The International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons won the Nobel peace

prize for its efforts. The treaty is a strong and comprehensive text, with the potential to achieve a world without nuclear weapons. It opened for signature in September 2017 and will enter into force when 50 states have ratified it. It has so far been signed by 70 states and ratified by 22, and more and more are signing up.

I want to counter the argument made from the Labour Benches that the treaty is somehow not multilateral. It is, not least because there is no requirement for a country to join; there is no requirement on a country to have forgone their nuclear weapons before joining. If the UK had used its considerable clout on the world stage to have really shown some leadership on this issue, there could have been at least a chance of getting the countries around the table to have gone away and begun the process multilaterally of getting rid of their weapons.

... It is very easy to characterise those of us who are against nuclear weapons as somehow not living in the real world, so perhaps I could just remind the House that there are plenty of people within the military world who do not think that nuclear weapons are a useful tool going forward. Back in 2014 senior political and diplomatic figures—including people such as the former Conservative Foreign Secretary Sir Malcolm Rifkind, former Defence Secretary Des Browne and former Foreign Secretary Lord Owen—came together with very high ranking military personnel to say that they believe that the risks posed by nuclear weapons and the international dynamics that could lead to nuclear weapons being used are being underestimated, and that those risks are insufficiently understood by world leaders.

The Government's main argument for replacing Trident appears to be that it is the ultimate insurance in an uncertain world. I argue that they fail to acknowledge that it is our very possession of nuclear weapons that is making that world more uncertain. Nor have the advocates of nuclear weapons ever explained why, if Trident is so vital to protecting us, that is not also the case for every other country in the world. The Secretary of State did not answer me at the beginning of this debate—it seems a long time ago now—when I put it to him that we have no moral arguments to put to other countries to ask them not to acquire nuclear weapons if we ourselves are not only keeping them but upgrading them. I put it to him again that a world in which every country is striving for, and potentially achieving, nuclear weapons would be an awful lot more dangerous than the world we have today.

... So far there has been very little recognition in this debate of the fact that nuclear weapons systems are themselves fallible. According to a shocking report by Chatham House, there have been 13 incidents since

1962 in which nuclear weapons have very nearly been launched. One of the most dramatic, in 1983, was when Stanislav Petrov, the duty officer in a Soviet nuclear war early-warning centre, found his system warning of the launch of five US missiles. After a few moments of agonising, he judged it, thankfully and correctly, to be a false alarm. If he had reached a different conclusion and passed the information up the control chain, that could have triggered the firing of nuclear missiles from Russia.

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith, Scottish National Party): Parliamentary questions I have asked uncovered the shocking fact that since 2006 there have been 789 nuclear safety incidents at Coulport and Faslane, and half of the incidents at Faslane have taken place in just the past four years. Does the hon. Lady agree that it is a very serious worry that nuclear safety incidents are on the rise under the watch of a Government who should not have control of a TV remote, let alone the most dangerous weapons on the planet?

Caroline Lucas: I thank the hon. Lady for her intervention. She rightly shines a spotlight on issues that far too rarely get covered in the media or even in debates such as this one.

The UK Government have shamefully refused to participate in the treaty negotiations I have been describing while nevertheless claiming that they share the goal of a nuclear weapons-free world. But it is not too late to make amends. The Government should now engage constructively and work towards signing that treaty and supporting the global moves towards the total elimination of nuclear weapons. That, unlike a willingness to launch nuclear weapons and incinerate millions of innocent people, or to waste billions on a weapon that will never be used and therefore serves no evident purpose, would be the true test of a Prime Minister's leadership.