

Editorial

Trident Undone

In late 2014, the US Navy awarded an \$84 million cost-plus-fixed-fee modification contract for ‘tactical missile tube manufacturing’. In total, according to the US Navy, 17 missile tubes will be manufactured:

‘12 for the UK Successor lead ship, four for the OR [Ohio class ballistic missile submarine Replacement] First Article Quad Pack and one for the Strategic Weapons System – Ashore (SWSA) test facility.’

What is this arcane language telling us?

The \$84 million is to fund ‘joint United States and United Kingdom Common Missile Compartment (CMC) missile tube manufacturing’. According to Rob Edwards (*Sunday Herald*, 23.11.14), 70 per cent of this cost is being paid by the UK. Curiously, 12 of the first 17 tubes are for the ‘UK Successor lead ship’. This is curious for two reasons. Firstly, the UK government has deferred until 2016 the ‘main-gate’ decision on Trident replacement. Secondly, the UK government has repeatedly claimed in public that it would use only eight tubes. Is it now being compelled to build in capacity for four additional tubes and, in so doing, facilitating significant expansion at some time in the future of the number of nuclear warheads carried on British submarines?

The US Navy signed the specification document for the Ohio Replacement (OR) programme in September 2012. As one online commentator remarked at the time:

‘As far as I can tell, all this says is that the USN has finalized the missile-tube specifications, which the UK will have to copy. Everything else is still up in the air at this point.’

And, indeed, the UK is copying, and paying mightily for the privilege of ‘mingled asset ownership’, as the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) describes the UK’s so-called ‘independent nuclear deterrent’. According to the website globalsecurity.org, ‘The Common Missile Compartment that the US and UK are working on in tandem has cost the UK \$329 million since 2008 and the US \$183 million since 2009 (as of 2011)’. The US wants its first Ohio class replacement submarine ready for 2029.

Dr Julian Lewis MP strenuously defended UK independence of control of Trident, if not of manufacture, during a path-breaking Parliamentary debate on the Mutual Defence Agreement between the United States and

the United Kingdom, on 6 November 2014, excerpts from which we print in this issue of *The Spokesman*. He asked his debate co-sponsor, Jeremy Corbyn MP, if he accepted that:

‘... it is entirely a matter for the United Kingdom Government whether the deterrent would be fired, as opposed to used – fired in response to a nuclear attack on this country – and that the United States could do nothing to prevent that from happening?’

An interesting nuance there – ‘fired, as opposed to used’. Could the US indeed do nothing to prevent firing of their ‘mingled asset’?

For his part, Jeremy Corbyn was highly sceptical about such ‘independent’ control. This crucial issue of control is thrown into sharp relief by Commander Robert Green, who urges a ‘paradigm shift’ away from Trident.

Jeremy Corbyn went on to probe possible testing of plutonium at the Atomic Weapons Establishment Aldermaston, and potential breaches of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. He pointed out that it would be completely illegal to use or test plutonium in the United States. He asked ‘was the plutonium from the UK, or was it imported from the USA?’ and ‘were the results shared with US scientists and military personnel, either at the time or after the experiments took place?’ Like the Delphic Oracle herself, the Minister replied that he would write later ‘with such detail as I can’.

Dr Lewis dropped a bombshell when he spoke of the Conservatives’ ‘love gift to the Liberal Democrats’ to defer signing the main-gate contracts on Trident replacement until after the Coalition Government concluded in 2015. This was ‘entirely a result of coalition politics and a back-door deal with the Liberal Democrats, who are opposed to renewing Trident,’ he said.

Meanwhile, the Scottish National Party, Plaid Cymru and the Green Party have publicly declared willingness to support an incoming Labour Government, after the forthcoming UK General Election of May 2015, on condition that it scrap Trident replacement, which is ‘economic lunacy at a time when we’re facing the scale of public sector cuts’, according to SNP leader Nicola Sturgeon. Labour leader Ed Miliband says:

‘I want to see disarmament, but I want to see multilateral disarmament, I’m not in favour of unilateral disarmament. What does that mean? That means we have got to have the least-cost deterrent that we can have, and that’s my philosophy.’

Scrapping Trident and its replacement would indeed be a ‘love gift’ to humanity. Who will grasp the opportunity?

Tony Simpson