

Trident – not in our backyard

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Tony Blair informed the House of Commons in June 2005 that he would ‘listen to Honourable Members before making any decisions on replacing Trident’. In subsequent statements, the government promised to hold a parliamentary debate on the nuclear deterrent’s future. In Blair’s words, this is ‘a huge decision for the country and it will probably be done in a far more open way than decisions that have been taken before’, [Blair’s evidence to Commons Liaison Committee, February 2006].

Why the sudden enthusiasm for debating an issue which previous governments had been notoriously loath to discuss in public? Possibly, in John Reid’s words, because ‘we are not going to have a secret Chevaline-like decision taken by some of the cabinet which then proceeds without any public discussion or debate’. He was alluding to Callaghan’s secret and very costly upgrading of Polaris in the 1970s which caused great ructions in the Labour Party when it was revealed after Mrs Thatcher had taken office.

But why announce that a decision was required when the Trident submarines would not need replacing for over twenty years? This question is more puzzling. A plausible answer is that a decision to maintain the nuclear deterrent over the long term, and to begin working on Trident’s replacement, was linked to the US-UK Mutual Defence Agreement’s renewal by Washington and London in 2004. Under this Agreement, which dates back to the 1950s and is unique among nuclear-armed states, the United Kingdom and United States trade nuclear materials and technologies and engage in joint research on warheads. The surmise is that its renewal sparked intergovernmental discussions on what Trident’s life extension and eventual replacement would entail, including the upgrading of Aldermaston’s warhead design capabilities. Friends in Washington have also told me that the Bush administration put heavy pressure on the British government not to consider abandoning the deterrent.

‘The Prime Minister, senior civil servants and military commanders would all be imprisoned for threatening to use nuclear weapons under controversial new laws proposed at the Scottish Parliament yesterday.

Michael Matheson, the Scottish National Party Member of the Scottish Parliament, launched a bill that would make it illegal for anyone to prepare or command a nuclear attack under Scottish law. This would make it impossible for the Westminster government to maintain Trident, the arsenal of nuclear warheads currently based on the Clyde ...’

The Scotsman, 10 January 2007

If this surmise is correct, which seems increasingly likely, Blair and his government are not interested in an open public debate which will weigh all the options, including Trident’s abandonment, before arriving at a decision. They are seeking Parliament’s rubber stamping of a decision already arrived at. I’ve heard sceptical government officials speak of their ‘resignation’ to the outcome. The rubber stamp is needed to lend stability to a heavy programme of investment extending over several decades and to discourage a subsequent government from trying to modify or overturn it.

Whatever Blair’s intentions may be, the decision on Trident is clearly regarded as a decision that will be taken in Whitehall, in close consultation with Washington, and approved by Westminster. No role is envisaged for Scottish political institutions. This is consistent with the Scotland Act of 1998 which reserves defence and foreign policy to London and takes particular care to ring-fence everything connected with nuclear technology. Yet the nuclear deterrent has a Scottish dimension that can’t be ignored. It is little appreciated in England, among politicians let alone the general public, that the UK’s nuclear forces are now located only in Scotland. The weapons deployed in England were dismantled when the Army and Air Force gave up their roles in the late 1990s. Whatever the Scotland Act may say, the nuclear Navy’s basing at Faslane exposes Scotland to potentially grave risks which, it is reasonable to argue, justifies the Scottish people’s special inclusion in the debate.

The counter-argument is that the United Kingdom is a unitary state with a unified defence policy, and that no single region of the UK has rights to obstruct the sovereign UK Parliament’s decisions on defence. Furthermore, Scotland is represented in Westminster by MPs who have full rights to express their opinions and cast their votes in the debating chamber. On top of this, Scottish MPs hold a disproportionately large number of ministerial positions in the present government and can be expected to be alive to Scottish interests.

Were it so simple. Beyond the immediate surroundings of Faslane where Trident generates employment, there is a long tradition of Scottish opposition to

nuclear weapons in general and their basing in Scotland in particular. It has been repeatedly expressed by the Churches and the Iona Community, by anti-nuclear protest movements, and by members of all the political parties. And of course there is one party – the Scottish National Party (SNP) – which has placed the eviction of nuclear weapons from Scottish soil at the centre of its political agenda. Come independence, the SNP has pledged to remove Trident and renounce nuclear weapons under international law.

Scotland's political institutions are involved in Trident's operation even under devolution. Although London retains sole responsibility for defence policy, the Trident system could not operate out of Faslane without the Scottish Executive and Parliament's extensive cooperation. This is because responsibility for policing, transport, land-use planning, environmental discharges and emergency services are devolved to Edinburgh. With Labour administrations in both Holyrood and Westminster since 1998, that cooperation has been unquestioned. It could no longer be taken for granted if different parties came to dominate the two Parliaments, especially if an SNP-led coalition hostile to Trident were to take office north of the border.

When these factors are taken into account, a decision by the government in London to replace Trident begins to look like a gamble upon Scotland remaining part of the Union over the next several decades, or at least upon the Scottish Parliament, whatever its complexion, being willing to cooperate fully and eternally with the Ministry of Defence. But is it such a gamble? Why has the SNP, despite Alex Salmond's initial fiery response to Tony Blair's announcement in 2005, so far appeared reluctant to take a strong stand against Trident replacement? Is it conceivable that the Party is softening its position even to the extent of being prepared to countenance Trident's stay in Scotland for reasons of political expediency? Or might it be moving towards adopting an essentially political rather than a principled approach to Trident and its replacement, allowing its stance to be determined mainly by calculation of its effects on the Party's more fundamental goal of attaining power and independence?

Come what may, the decision on Trident will depend mainly on how the argument develops within the Labour Party, and how it may or may not become entangled with the question of Blair's succession. Within Scotland as elsewhere in the United Kingdom, the Labour Party faces strong opposition within its own ranks, as demonstrated recently by the West Lothian Council's call on Tony Blair and Des Browne to scrap Trident. There have also been signs of cracks at the top of the Party following Margaret Beckett's observation, in an interview in the *Sunday Times* in October 2006, that circumstances were 'very, very different' from when the UK deterrent was developed, and that it would be 'a very good thing for all of us as a country to think carefully about what the situation of today is'.

Inattention is one possible explanation for the SNP's reticence. With so much else happening, the Party's élite may be waiting for the government's publication of its White Paper on Trident replacement to kick start its own deliberations on strategy. It might also point to its activism in the House of Commons this autumn

‘... Alex Salmond, the SNP leader, wants to introduce a levy on convoys delivering and removing the devices from the Faslane naval base on the Clyde. He said the ‘Trident toll’ would bring in £85 million to Scotland’s coffers each year.

The tax is the latest move by Mr Salmond to prove Scotland can challenge Westminster policy without full independence. He said: “It is right to tax the bad things on environmental grounds – and nuclear weapons are among the very worst. We hope this will make the UK government think again about bringing a new generation of nuclear bombs to Scotland’s shores”.

The Scotsman, 22 January 2007

when it joined others in successfully pressing the government to grant a vote on the issue. Yet the SNP did so mainly, it seems, to ensure that the Labour Party would be exposed to division within its ranks, one of its main objectives across the board in Westminster and Holyrood, when the time for decision arrived. This tactic was also evident when Nicola Sturgeon challenged Jack McConnell in the Scottish Parliament in June 2006 to say whether he supported Gordon Brown’s indication, in his Mansion House speech, that he backed Trident. She drew blood through Mr McConnell’s obvious embarrassment, his bizarre proposal that the United Kingdom should offer to disarm if Iran disarmed, and his subsequent slapping down by the Party in London for having strayed into defence matters.

This said, the vote in Westminster on Trident will doubtless be presented as a test of Party loyalty now that Blair and Brown are apparently adopting a common front and the Party is aware of the electoral damage caused by internal division. As the Conservatives are likely to support Blair and the Liberal Democrats are equivocal on this issue, the outcome will depend more on the scale of the revolt against him than on the opposition that the SNP and others can muster.

The trouble for the government is that the case for Trident’s replacement is not cut and dried. It will probably argue that the United Kingdom can ill afford to abandon its nuclear force when North Korea, Iran and other states are acquiring nuclear weapons, when Europe and Nato need to retain their capabilities now that the nuclear-armed China and India are on the rise, and when the UK’s international standing hangs on it. The implication that France would attain a nuclear monopoly in Europe if the UK disarmed would be registered in the public mind even if the government could not draw direct attention to it.

The SNP’s uncharacteristic caution probably has other roots. With its eye on gaining power and laying the political foundations for a future referendum on independence, the Party’s leaders realise that the usual grandstanding on nuclear weapons might no longer serve their political purposes. Why? Because if establishing a reputation for sound governance and cooperation is paramount prior to the referendum, it will have little choice but to assist the government in London

with the operation of Trident once it holds power in Holyrood. It cannot pick a fight with London, the United States and other Nato members on such a sensitive issue without significant risk to its reputation.

It may even have dawned on the Party's strategists that Trident could be an asset if and when the time comes to negotiate the terms of independence. At that moment achieving international recognition, membership of the European Union, and a favourable economic settlement with London would become the highest priorities. On all counts, its negotiating partners would probably be less cooperative if Trident were being evicted, and more cooperative if a prospective Scottish government would consent to the rump UK's retention of the base at Faslane.

However, the United Kingdom is no longer directly threatened with nuclear attack. There are plenty of voices, inside and outside government, saying that the UK's security would be better served by spending the tens of billions of pounds on other things. With the armed forces embroiled in Iraq, Afghanistan and the Balkans and with heavy demands for expenditure on other equipment, it is not easy to defend keeping Trident so that it can wander aimlessly, as currently, around the Atlantic. On top of this, any British proposals to reinvest in nuclear weapons sits uneasily with its signing on to the 'unequivocal undertaking by the nuclear weapon States to accomplish the total elimination of their nuclear arsenals leading to nuclear disarmament'. This was a pledge solemnly given by the UK government at the 2000 Review Conference of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. Lastly, there are concerns in several quarters that Trident's replacement will again tie the UK to American coat-tails when it should be seeking greater independence to avoid further disasters in foreign policy.

So the decision on Trident's replacement may be a close call. Where the politics of the Union will become truly interesting is if Westminster approves the decision yet a substantial majority of Scottish Labour MPs votes against it and a message of strong dissent is conveyed by the Scottish Parliament. The decision would lack legitimacy in Scotland, would probably be unstable down the line, and could even be corrosive to the Union. There are people who are aware of this deep inside the Ministry of Defence. As recently expressed to me, Scottish discontent should nevertheless be containable with some 'deft politics'. I wonder.