

Submission to the Labour Party's International Policy Commission

Britain's Defence and Security Priorities

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This submission to the International Policy Commission relates to its present consultative document, 'Britain's Defence and Security Priorities'. It reflects both my feelings as a party member and my analysis of Labour's historic strategy – which has almost always been one of multilateral disarmament against the background of an independent UK nuclear deterrent.

Within weeks of the exploding of an atomic bomb over Hiroshima, and in great secret, the recently elected Labour prime minister Clement Attlee wrote a memorandum on 28 August 1945 for a small number of senior Labour cabinet ministers, amongst which was Ernest Bevin, the then Foreign Secretary. In that document Attlee recorded his reading of the consequences of the dropping of atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki: noting that atomic weaponry had rendered all military and civil defence plans out of date, and concluding that "the only answer to an atomic bomb on London is an atomic bomb on another great city".

Attlee's memorandum showed a remarkable degree of prescience, for it is perhaps the first record we have of a senior politician recognising that in the nuclear age "mutually assured destruction" was the best guarantee of safety for the nation, and for the world. Attlee was not naïve about this – he recognised, for example, that possession of such weapons would give the UK leverage with the USA, which he did not entirely trust to act in the best interests of its allies, as well as defend against more overt antagonists such as the USSR.

Attlee also recognised in August 1945 that there were moral questions to be answered by those advocating the possession of atomic weaponry. Indeed his initial desire was to see an accord between the great powers that such weapons would never be used. But he concluded that such an agreement was unlikely. His view was that the clock could not be turned back, that the technical knowledge required to develop atomic weapons would spread ineluctably, and that against that background it was essential for the UK to possess such weapons if it was to have any chance of safety in an unpredictable and sometimes dangerous world. In January 1947, with distrust of the Americans rising, Attlee, Bevin, Morrison and three other cabinet ministers took the final decision to authorise the development of the UK's own atomic weapon. They hoped for the best in terms of multilateral negotiations to rid the world of atomic weapons, but they prepared for the worst having concluded that offensive capability was the best form of defence and that mutually assured destruction was the best guarantee of peace.

Thus the creator of Britain's independent nuclear deterrent was Clement Attlee, a Labour prime minister, and its development was undertaken by a Labour government that the present Labour Party rightly lauds for its achievements. When looking back to those achievements Labour has a tendency to focus on its securing of social security in the new welfare state. We should remember, however, that it also achieved security in the realms of foreign and defence policy.

Subsequently, the possession of an independent nuclear deterrent has almost always been at the heart of Labour's foreign and strategic policy. The only exceptions were a) a single year in 1950-61 when unilateral nuclear disarmament was embraced by Conference (largely as a means by which the

then Labour leader, Hugh Gaitskell, might be given a bloody nose for his attempt to rewrite Clause IV of the party's constitution); and b) the years between 1982 and 1989 during which Conference embraced the idea of unilateral nuclear disarmament in 1982 and Labour subsequently fought and lost two general elections in 1983 and 1987, with unilateral disarmament as part of its proposed programme (in 1983 going down to its worst defeat since 1918).

For 63 of the past 71 years, therefore, the official policy of the Labour Party has been that the UK should possess its own independent nuclear deterrent. This is not to say that during those 63 years Labour was against disarmament, but its approach was to seek multilateral disarmament rather than to disarm unilaterally. And since 1948 Labour was always careful to frame the UK's possession of a nuclear deterrent within the framework of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation's commitment (in article 1 of the treaty which created it in that year) "to settle any international dispute in which they may be involved by peaceful means in such a manner that international peace and security and justice are not endangered, and to refrain in their international relations from the threat or use of force in any manner inconsistent with the purposes of the United Nations."

It was in this spirit of a parallel strategy of possession of nuclear capability whilst seeking multilateral nuclear disarmament that the first development of British air-dropped atomic bombs took place; that Labour subsequently endorsed the Macmillan's government's decision to buy the Polaris submarine launched ballistic missile (SLBM) system from the USA; that a Labour government subsequently upgraded that system under Harold Wilson in the 1970s (and that his successor as prime minister, Jim Callaghan, opened up talks with Jimmy Carter in 1979 about the possibility of the USA providing the UK with the Trident submarine launched ballistic missile as a replacement for Polaris); and that a Labour government after 1997 retained the Trident SLBM deterrent even as it retired the WE-177 air-dropped nuclear bomb, reduced the alert status of Trident submarines and 'detargetted' their missiles against a background reduced international tension following the end of the Cold War.

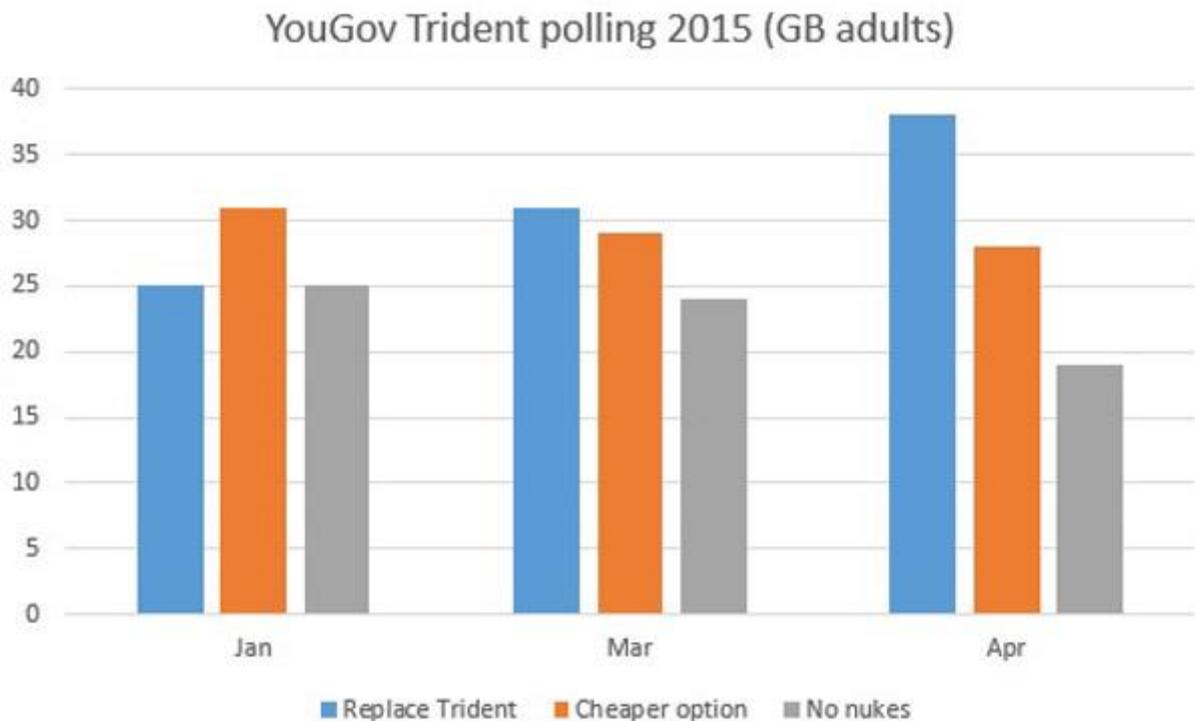
I believe that at this time Labour should look back into the history of the party and recognise that it embodies important lessons that should inform present policy. A key lesson of that history is that it would be a strategic error to abandon the Labour Party's long-standing recognition of the need for an independent UK nuclear deterrent.

Of course, taking the decision to replace the UK's nuclear deterrent will be expensive; and, of course, we would all like to spend the money on something that would promote greater social justice. But the arguments in favour of replacement are compelling.

First, the cost of renewing the deterrent will be spread over many years. Estimates for Trident renewal suggest that process will represent 5-6 per cent the UK's annual defence budget. That is a significant sum but one that, nonetheless, seems to me to be a comparatively small price to pay to maintain the security of the UK in increasingly uncertain times. In framing our decision we should remember that the latest estimate of the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute is that Russia still has around 4300 nuclear warheads, China 250, Pakistan 120, India 110, Israel 80 and North Korea 10. The figures for our allies are USA 4800 and France 300. The UK has 225, a relatively small number but one sufficient to secure both safety through the threat of mutually assured destruction and considerable international influence.

Second, British public opinion remains in favour of nuclear weapons. Opinion polls indicate that less than one in five of the public subscribe to the idea of unilateral nuclear disarmament, and polling by

YouGov over the past 3 months suggests a hardening of attitudes, with the option of replacing Trident with an equally powerful deterrent becoming the most popular choice.



Source: <http://blogs.channel4.com/factcheck/> (22 April 2016)

The lesson of history is that when the Labour Party puts itself on the wrong side of public opinion on the nuclear weapons issue it suffers electoral defeat. Neil Kinnock summed things up pithily in November 2015: “What I do know is the British people will not vote for unilateral disarmament. And that reality has to be dealt with.” In short, given public opinion, a decision about the renewal of the UK nuclear deterrent is a decision with potential consequences for the electability of the Labour Party. Put bluntly, Labour will not be elected unless it is seen to be a credible government-in-waiting able to take decisions in the broad national interest rather than in the interests of particular sections of the Party.

Third, we need to remember that a large number of workers will find themselves out of a job if the decision is taken not to replace the nuclear deterrent. The opposition of a number of large trade unions to the proposal not to replace Trident is instructive. Len McClusky has made Unite’s position on this clear: ‘communities depend on the defence industry for their prosperity, for jobs, for a future for young people, and for economic security. No trade union that I lead is ever going to allow any of that to be put at risk.’ The needs of a relatively small number of workers should not in themselves determine a decision on the renewal of the nuclear deterrent; but equally the economic cost of a decision not to undertake such a renewal would be considerable, with tens of thousands of skilled and well-paid jobs at risk, and it should not be discounted.

In short, there is a compelling case for renewal of the nuclear deterrent for it makes political, economic, and strategic sense. In the spirit of Clement Attlee we should continue to support the UK’s possession of an independent nuclear deterrent, and the systems necessary to deliver it – whilst at the same time continuing to strive, as Attlee also strove, for the elimination of such weapons via multilateral negotiation.

This is not to say that Trident necessarily has to be the means by which a nuclear deterrent is secured. As the polling indicates, many voters would prefer a cheaper option. If a cheaper but effective deterrent were to be found I for one would support it. So far, however, it is not clear to me that such an option is available (and it is revealing that such an option is not referred to in the present consultative document on 'Britain's Defence and Security Priorities'). In the absence of such an option, renewal of Trident is I am afraid a regrettable but essential step.