

In January 2005, the Prime Minister's inner ministerial group on nuclear weapons met to agree increased funding for Aldermaston's human and physical capabilities to ensure it would be in a position to design warheads for a successor system to Trident D5 if the Cabinet should so decide.<sup>129</sup> Seven months later, the Defence Secretary John Reid announced in Parliament that an average of an additional £350m per annum would be invested in Aldermaston over three years.<sup>130</sup>

On 16 November 2005, the first meeting took place in the Cabinet Office of the Official Group on the Future of the Deterrent chaired by the Cabinet Secretary, Sir Gus O'Donnell. It met again on 14 December 2005 under the chairmanship of Sir Nigel Sheinwald, the Prime Minister's Foreign Policy Adviser. It met four more times between April and November 2006, preparing the options for consideration by Tony Blair's Ministerial Group on the Future of the Deterrent, which consisted of the Prime Minister; the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Gordon Brown; the Foreign Secretary, Margaret Beckett; the Defence Secretary, Des Browne and a mixture of officials drawn from the O'Donnell/Sheinwald group.<sup>131</sup>

The Prime Minister's group met twice—on 27 June 2006, for an interim discussion, and on 15 November 2006 for a final one.<sup>132</sup> The full Cabinet met for the first time on 23 November 2006 to consider possible future threats to the UK that might require the retention of nuclear weapons. On 4 December, without 'any dissenting voices', the Cabinet decided to authorise construction of a new generation of missile-carrying submarines to sustain the UK deterrent over the period 2020–2050.<sup>133</sup> That afternoon, the Government published a White Paper, *The Future of the United Kingdom's Nuclear Deterrent*.

Parliament was informed that

We have . . . decided to maintain our nuclear deterrent by building a new class of submarines. . . A final decision on whether we require three or four submarines will be taken when we know more about their detailed design.

We have also decided to participate in the US life extension programme for the Trident D5 missile, which will enable us to retain that missile in service until the early 2040s. Our existing nuclear warhead design will last into the 2020s. We do not yet have sufficient information to know whether it can, with some refurbishment, be extended beyond that point or whether we will need to develop a replacement warhead: a decision is likely to be necessary in the next Parliament.<sup>134</sup>

In a 'Foreword' to the White Paper, Tony Blair advanced a mix of reasons for the UK's remaining a nuclear power some 60 years on from Attlee's GEN 163 deciding to make it so.

We cannot predict the way the world will look in 30 or 50 years time. For now some of the old realities remain. Major countries, which pose no threat to the UK today, retain large arsenals some of which are being modernised or increased. None of the present recognised nuclear weapons states intends to renounce nuclear weapons, in the absence of an agreement to disarm multilaterally, and we cannot be sure that a major nuclear threat to our vital interests will not emerge over the longer term.

We also have to face new threats, particularly of regional powers developing nuclear weapons for the first time which present a threat to us. . . And we need to factor in the requirement to deter countries which might in the future seek to sponsor nuclear terrorism from their soil. . . We believe that an independent British nuclear deterrent is an essential part of our insurance against the uncertainties and risks of the future. . . I believe it is crucial that, for the foreseeable future, British Prime Ministers have the necessary assurance that no aggressor can escalate a crisis beyond UK control.<sup>135</sup>

In 2006, unlike 1980, the emphasis was much less on a second centre of decision-taking, and much more on national, rather than alliance, needs. The stress on an independent centre of decision-taking had a French tinge to it.

On 7 December 2006, Tony Blair and President George Bush exchanged letters arranging Britain's participation in Trident D5's 'life extension programme' under the terms of the 1958 agreement and the 1963 Polaris Sales Agreement while undertaking that 'any successor to the D5 system' will be compatible with UK submarine launch systems.<sup>136</sup>

Downing Street published these letters on 19 December 2006.<sup>137</sup> On 14 March 2007, the House of Commons voted 409 to 161 to renew the Trident system (88 Labour MPs voted against). The gist of the Government's motion was

That this House supports the Government's decisions, as set out in the White Paper *The Future of the United Kingdom's Nuclear Deterrent* (Cm 6994), to take the steps necessary to maintain the UK's minimum strategic nuclear deterrent beyond the life of the existing system and to take further steps towards meeting the UK's disarmament responsibilities under Article VI of the Non-Proliferation Treaty.

Earlier, the Government had defeated a motion to delay the decision by 413 to 167 (95 Labour MPs voted for the amendment).<sup>138</sup> Before the debate, Tony Blair said the vote would not 'bind' future parliaments, and that the House of Commons might debate and vote again when the contracts were about to be let for the new submarines between 2012 and 2014.<sup>139</sup>

The possibility of future votes had been stressed in a letter Margaret Beckett and Des Browne had sent to potential Labour dissenters on the morning of the vote. The note was principally directed at the proposers of the amendment, John Denham, Labour MP for Southampton Itchen, and Dr Alan Whitehead, Labour MP for Southampton Test.<sup>140</sup>

Even allowing for the possibility of a series of future votes, it seemed highly unlikely in the spring of 2007 that the upgrading of Trident would be halted in its tracks. It seemed highly probable, therefore, that the UK would be a nuclear weapons state for at least a century from the first atomic test of 1952 into the 2050s.