CABINETS AND THE BOMB

In March 2007 a group of historians working on British nuclear and defence policy met at the British Academy alongside some of the former officials and ministers involved in the original decision-making processes, to reflect upon the handling of British nuclear defence policy in the post-war period. In front of them was a set of declassified government records from the National Archives, detailing the story of the British nuclear deterrent and how ministers came to their decisions. In this article, **Catherine Haddon** *draws upon edited extracts from the contributions of various participants in that discussion.*

DURING THE Second World War Britain was instrumental in initiating the atomic bomb project that culminated in the destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki by the US in August 1945. In 1947 the Labour Government opted to develop a British atomic bomb, and in 1954 a Conservative administration under Winston Churchill resolved upon a more powerful thermo-nuclear weapon – both of which were to be delivered by aircraft. Successive British governments have since been faced with the lurking question of the form in which this deterrent should be maintained, and at what cost. After Prime Minister Harold Macmillan and President John F. Kennedy negotiated the 1963 Polaris Sales Agreement for a submarine-launched ballistic missile force, Britain's submarines-launched missiles have effectively been bought off-the-shelf from the Americans, with UK warheads. This policy continued with the Thatcher Government's decision in 1980 to purchase Trident as a successor to Polaris, and with the 2006 Exchange of Letters between the US and UK Governments on updating Trident and replacing the British Vanguard Class sub-marines that carry it.[1] Although the British Academy discussion spanned a wider period, the age-range of the group provided a fascinating insight into the 'public rationale and private rationale', as one contributor put it, by which successive governments have dealt with nuclear defence matters since 1963.

Professor Peter Hennessy described Harold Macmillan's achievement with President Kennedy when they met at Nassau in the Bahamas in December 1962:

> Looking back at Nassau it was a most amazing political feat, because a large weight of American opinion advising Kennedy was against it. I remember Philip de Zulueta [Macmillan's Private Secretary] telling me that Harold did his classic 'Veteran of the Somme' routine – 'Friends in peace and war' – and when he had finished there wasn't a dry eye in the room. It was the most amazing personal *tour de force*.

The nuclear deterrent was sometimes a contentious issue among ministers. This was particularly true of the Labour Governments of 1964–70, whose 1964 manifesto seemed to call for the cancellation of Polaris. Peter Hennessy believes that, despite the manifesto, Prime Minister Harold Wilson

> had no desire to give it up … he got [the decision to continue with four Polaris submarines] through the Cabinet with hardly a whisper … but given that CND [Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament] … had been at its height – they had captured the Labour Party Conference just a few years earlier – it was another classic Wilsonian feat of getting it through.

Dr Kristan Stoddart agreed, citing 'private assurances ... given to the US … before entering office that [Labour] would not get rid of the deterrent'.

During the 1960s Soviet and American Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) advances showed the Polaris 'A3' missiles to be susceptible to close exo-atmospheric nuclear explosions. The US response was a programme called 'Poseidon' to upgrade the missiles with 'multiple independently-targetable re-entry vehicles' (MIRV), which allowed the warheads in each missile to be aimed separately. Dr Matthew Grant reminded the group that, even as Wilson had reached agreement on keeping Polaris in November 1964,

> it was only a couple of months before the Americans announced Poseidon … and Patrick Gordon Walker from Washington writes to Wilson [in January 1965] saying 'We have just bought this brand new weapon system and now it has been consigned to the junkyard of Steptoe and Son, so we have just committed to catching up and now we are being left behind.' … The Americans, by moving on to [Poseidon], had shown Polaris to be devalued.

The eventual British response was a programme called 'Super-Antelope', which was to upgrade Polaris, not by MIRV, but rather through the use of Penetration Aid Carriers [PAC] and improvements to the British-produced warheads. However, the Super-Antelope programme was still in its infancy at the time a Conservative Government entered office in 1970. There were doubts over whether the Americans would make Poseidon, as a MIRVed system, available to the UK. Sir Richard Mottram wondered also whether new Prime Minister Edward Heath was perhaps looking at moving away from dependence on the US as he contemplated the future of Super-Antelope:

> My own view was that [Heath] was cautious about getting himself even more locked in to a US-unique solution to our deterrent, when there might be a more UK-based opportunity which would potentially open up possibilities later for working with the French. And so I felt this was the one moment in all of this post-war period when a European solution as a gleam in people's eyes was around, and this was impacting upon how the Prime Minister thought about those choices.

At this time money was the big concern. Lord Carrington recalled:

> Ted Heath was very much a pro-defence man. He believed very much in defence, and in that period when there was …

[1] *The Future of the United Kingdom's Nuclear Deterrent*, Cm 6994 (Stationery Office, December 2006).

The Trident submarine HMS Vanguard, *with the Polaris submarine* HMS Resolution *in its wake. Photo © Crown Copyright/MOD, image from www.photos.mod.uk. Reproduced with the permission of the Controller of Her Majesty's Stationery Office*

> question but this is the Ministry of Defence'… I said 'Can you imagine an animal that is like a large antelope? Do you have any on your list?', and they said 'There is a South African creature called a Chevaline' and I thought that sounded rather good, a bit like eating horse, but nevertheless I wrote a little Minute saying 'This seems to be London Zoo's view on a suitable name' and it was adopted immediately.

The renamed programme continued when Labour returned to office in 1974. Yet rising costs meant officials were again examining the future of British nuclear policy. Sir Ronald Mason sees himself as one of the reasons for this:

> It was a time of great difficulty, that 1978, 79, 80 period… I began to be determined that [Chevaline] was the last of a truly national programme. The reason I came to that view was not so much concerned with costs and programme over-run but I was also Chairman of the Defence Equipment Policy Committee, and I therefore had an overall view of the conventional defence equipment programme. I could take a view on the enormous demand on technical resources that Chevaline was making, and I felt that was a poor bargain and not an auspicious precedent.

Severe economic problems again distracted ministerial minds. Sir Richard Mottram remembers working on a review led by Mason and the diplomat Sir Antony Duff in 1978:

> I was signed up to be the Secretary of this work by [former Permanent Secretary at the Ministry of Defence, Sir] Michael Quinlan and then week after week went by without agreement within the Government that this work would be done. That was because each of the key players in the end-Labour Government had a different view about how they wanted to handle this problem… Back and forth it went … just trying to get the work established.

> economic distress … Of course [Chancellor of the Exchequer, Anthony] Barber didn't, no Chancellor does, and he was very much against [Super-Antelope]. We had a terrible row, I remember, about what was going to happen to the rest of the defence budget … but I don't remember there being very much dissent except on the grounds of expense.

Sir John Nott, who was Economic Secretary to the Treasury at this time, gave Barber's side:

> the situation with regard to public expenditure was completely desperate. Tony Barber had been trying to get Heath to agree to a substantial reduction in public expenditure for at least 18 months … I [think] Tony Barber would have abandoned the deterrent if he could have done so in order to get the public expenditure down, although Barber was very pro-defence.

It was only in late 1973 that the Polaris upgrade programme was given the official go-ahead. Sir Kevin Tebbit, Assistant Private Secretary to Lord Carrington, remembered the moment:

> there was a day when Lord Carrington came into the office and said 'We have decided we are going to do Super-Antelope alone and so we had better rename it', and we were tossed the question 'What should the name be?' and none of us really knew. But I rang up the London Zoo and I said 'I can't tell you why I want to ask you this

Sir Kevin Tebbit put this even more succinctly:

> often decision-makers are insufficiently sensitive to the point that unless you are sustaining a technological capacity throughout a period, when politicians decide to drop in from time to time to decide what they want to do next, they tend to forget that everything has to keep happening when they are not paying attention, otherwise they don't have the options.

Indecision was not the temperament for which Margaret Thatcher would be remembered. The Duff-Mason Review recommended buying the latest, fully MIRVed US missile system, Trident, and was passed to Mrs Thatcher (on Jim Callaghan's instruction) when the Conservatives won the 1979 election. Thatcher swiftly resolved to ask for Trident C4, the latest American system, in November 1979. Sir John Nott remembered the way the she told the Cabinet of the decision in July 1980:

> the Prime Minister said in a rather off-hand way at the end of a full Cabinet meeting, 'We have made a decision that we are going to [do Trident] – and I was Trade Secretary, I had nothing to do with Defence but I was on the Overseas and Defence Policy Committee and none of this was mentioned there, and I raised my voice and said, 'Prime Minister, don't you think it is possible that on such an important strategic decision for the country the Cabinet should be briefed on this decision?' No one supported me; there was complete silence around the Cabinet table, and the Prime Minister looked rather shocked and upset and she said 'Well, of course we had to announce it because it was going to leak [to the New York Times]', and that was the end of the discussion. It took about 30 seconds. When I was approached by Margaret Thatcher to become Defence Secretary [in 1981] we had a very jovial meeting with Denis Thatcher and whisky and everything else, and she said 'Are you sound on the nuclear question, John?' and I said 'Well, I believe I am.' When I joined the Ministry of Defence, because of the way that this was handled, the secrecy involved, I thought that if we ever made a different decision we ought to brief the whole Cabinet. Indeed [in 1982] when we went to D5 [the latest, most advanced US successor to the C5 missile] I went to the Prime Minister and said 'I think we ought to brief the Cabinet on the whole nuclear issue.' She was very, very unhappy about this and I am sure was strongly advised by the Cabinet Office that on no account should the full Cabinet be given this briefing. Anyhow I persisted, and in the end the whole Cabinet was briefed, and in my judgement even if something had leaked from an unfortunate member of the Cabinet it would have enhanced deterrence and not reduced it… The secrecy was, to my mind, completely unnecessary.

The Polaris Sales Agreement was further updated to provide for the British purchase of Trident II (D5) in March 1982. The system has been in service since 1994 and is now subject to plans to extend the life of D5 and to replace the Vanguard Submarines that carry the missiles. Ultimately, as David Young pointed out, the overarching issue that all governments since 1947 have had to face and still do, is that

> once you give this up you are done, you will never go back, you can never afford to start again, so it was not made explicit but it was certainly around that 'If we do this we stay in the game and it may well be important that we do', and in the end over and above the financial and military arguments there is a powerful political argument.

Author's note: Sincere thanks are due to all involved in the production of this article, and especially the participants listed below.

Participants quoted:

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Sir Ronald Mason was Chief Scientific Advisor at the Ministry of Defence 1977–1983.

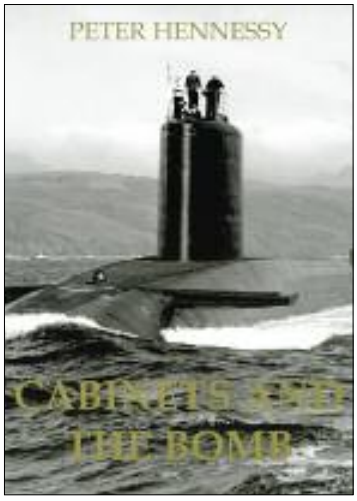
Sir Richard Mottram was Permanent Secretary to the Ministry of Defence 1995–1998 and has been Permanent Secretary, Intelligence, Security and Resilience and Chairman of the Joint Intelligence Committee, Cabinet Office, since 2005.

Sir John Nott was Secretary of State for Defence 1981–1983.

Dr Kristan Stoddart is a Research Fellow at the Mountbatten Centre for International Studies, Southampton University.

Sir Kevin Tebbit was Permanent Secretary to the Ministry of Defence 1998–2005.

David Young, Ministry of Defence official, 1963–1982.



Cabinets and the Bomb, a volume of documents with a narrative commentary by Peter Hennessy, is published by the British Academy in November 2007.
Catherine Haddon, a postgraduate student at Queen Mary, University of London, acted as a research assistant on the book.