Independent Commission on the Future of UK Nuclear Weapons Policy
Evidence of Dr John Simpson in response to Three Questions, 9 May 2011

1. ***Should the UK remain a nuclear weapon state?***

Any response to this question has to start by asking how a nuclear weapon state should be defined. Legally, the UK will remain a nuclear weapon state, even if it has no operational or stockpiled nuclear weapons or means of delivering them, for as long as the NPT remains in existence. To alter this position, extraordinary legal, political and practical measures would have to be instituted to convince the international community that such a change is genuine and absolute.

In practice nuclear disarmament would involve a process of the UK extending the time it would take to become re-armed. Unless this process can be implemented on a cross party basis with international verification, the UK will remain in the uncomfortable position of still being perceived to be a nuclear weapon state irrespective of its actual capabilities. Such a process would have to encompass warheads, weaponisation facilities, fissile material stockpiles and delivery systems. At the moment, little thought has been given to how to convincingly make such a transition, and until and unless this is addressed seriously the UK will continue to be perceived as a nuclear weapon state irrespective of declaratory statements to the contrary.

2. ***If it should, is Trident renewal the only or best option that the U.K. can and should pursue?***

A precursor question to the issue of the future of UK nuclear weaponry and whether Trident is the best option to continue to pursue is the role the UK deterrent is to play in future UK security. At the moment it has two parallel roles. One is to act as a national deterrent against actions which directly threaten the security of UK territory. This "independent nuclear deterrent" role is the one UK governments have used domestically to justification for sustaining its strategic nuclear force. It has its origins in two areas. One was the folk memories of the UK "standing alone" in 1940. A second was UK defence commitments outside the NATO framework. After 1962, implementing these commitments was seen to require nuclear security guarantees to CENTO and SEATO states. Their implementation was through the stockpiling of tens of UK nuclear weapons in Cyprus, Singapore and on aircraft carriers. These extra-European roles ceased to be operative by the mid-1970s, but the types of weapons involved were then assigned for use by the NATO SACEUR or SACLANT.

The second role is the core driver for sustaining a UK nuclear deterrent force, namely the provision of strategic nuclear capabilities to NATO's SACEUR as part of a "common defence". Through the parallel US and UK commitments to SACEUR of equal numbers of strategic nuclear missiles at the Nassau meeting in December 1962, the UK and US agreed to provide jointly nuclear security guarantees to all the NATO states, and thereby make it unnecessary for them (with the exception of France) to develop their nuclear weapons. These commitments were distinct from the "theatre" forces that America continues to base in Belgium, Germany, Italy and the Netherlands (but not since the mid-2000s in the UK) for use by US and those countries forces; the US nuclear weapons and delivery systems stored and based in Turkey; and the aircraft and their gravity bombs which the UK committed to SACEUR through to the late 1990s.

Current NATO debates over its nuclear weapons focus on these theatre or sub-strategic forces. If they should be removed in the current NATO posture review, the sole visible US and UK (and French?) contributions to SACEUR's strategic forces will become the sole nuclear deterrent capability directly committed to the alliance (apart from its developing anti-missile capabilities). In these circumstances any UK unilateral withdrawal from playing a NATO strategic deterrent role alongside the US seems highly unlikely, because of the uncertainties of the continuation of the US NATO nuclear roles (and NATO itself) that this would generate. The other side of this coin is that because the UK is prepared to shoulder this deterrent burden with the US, the latter is prepared to assist the UK in practical ways to sustain its deterrent force. It is this collective defence role, and the need for a long range survivable system to implement it given the large geographic area that it covers, that largely drives the strategic need for a like-for-like replacement of the Trident nuclear missile system. Not to do so, would generate major uncertainties about Euro-Atlantic security. And it is upon the collective security provided by NATO that UK security ultimately depends, rather than our own possession of a national deterrent. Thus while there is room for manoeuvre on the numbers of missiles

and warheads procured and deployed, the long-range and guaranteed nature of the deterrent force appears essential for effective nuclear deterrence.

3. ***What more can and should the U.K do to more effectively promote global nuclear disarmament, non-proliferation and nuclear security?***

The UK is regarded by many non-nuclear weapon states as the most "forward looking" nuclear weapon state, as it has been prepared to unequivocally commit itself to seeking total nuclear disarmament and has openly sought to start an exploration with non-nuclear state and NGO partners of some of the technical problems of verifying the necessary disarmament process. It has also avoided complicating future nuclear arms control negotiations by deploying a nuclear delivery system that is dual-use, such as air or sea launched cruise missiles. A key question is therefore how the UK might further develop this strategy through to the next NPT Review Conference in 2015.

The first step in this process is to encourage the other four NPT nuclear weapon states to engage in a process of dialogue on moving nuclear disarmament forward at the meeting in Paris in July 2011 planned as a follow-up to a an initial working level meeting on some of these issues organised by the UK in London in September 2009. Among the items on its agenda will be mechanisms to enable the P5 to produce by 2014 a common set of metrics to measure practical and declaratory progress towards nuclear disarmament. This was agreed by them at the 2010 NPT Review Conference. At the same time, the UK will have to shoulder a major diplomatic burden as one of the three NPT depositaries in organising the 2012 regional conference to create a process for removing weapons of mass destruction, including Israel's nuclear capabilities, from the Middle East, a task now complicated by the current fluidity of the domestic politics of states within this region. In playing a major role in enabling the P5 to move forward on these commitments, the UK could assist in developing practical and declaratory momentum over these goals, and in so doing assist in creating a successful outcome to the 2015 NPT Review Conference.

It is also likely that this conference will take place at a point where the UK has still to make a decision on its future nuclear deterrent capabilities, and a UK general election is taking place. It would clearly be desirable for this election to occur before the Review Conference, so that the UK can have an effective government able to play a full and visible role in it, unlike the situation in 2010 where it was sidelined by the absence of such a government for the first two and a half weeks. It would also be desirable for the UK to be in a position to demonstrate its forward looking posture over nuclear disarmament by decisions which, while sustaining its NATO security assurance role and capabilities, move itself and the alliance down the path of de-emphasising the role of nuclear weapons in the collective defence. Options for this might include reducing the numbers of UK submarines and warheads operationally deployed or in reserve; by operating Continuous at Sea Deterrence (CASD) on an alliance rather than national basis; by internationally verifying the reduction of the number of missiles carried in new submarines; and by refining the existing declaratory statements about the national and alliance role and use of nuclear weapons. It is unclear at this juncture how the France-UK nuclear research co-operation would play into this situation.

By 2015, the scope and size of the predicted global "nuclear renaissance" should be easier to map, both on a national and global level. The UK is in a strategically important situation in this context, as it has abandoned its previously vertically integrated national nuclear power capabilities, and is proposing to procure its future civil systems through internationally structured commercial consortia. It is also committed to operating these reactors on an open cycle, which requires it to move ahead with the planning and construction of a geological used fuel depositary, which could also facilitate the disposal of its stocks of politically embarrassing potentially dual-use legacy materials, such as its large stockpile of separated civil plutonium.

For non-proliferation reasons, it is desirable that those states planning to use nuclear power for the first time should also follow a development path similar to that in which the UK is now engaged. The UK has an opportunity to act as a template for others in this context, as well as enabling it to encourage states to adopt multinational procurement processes through the IAEA and bilateral channels. UK best practice would provide them with transparent methods of procuring power reactors and their necessary low-enriched fuel. It would also provide advice and assistance for disposing with their spent nuclear fuel in a manner which minimises the security, safety and proliferation risks that may be involved in this process.