

PRESENTATION TO THE Basic TRIDENT COMMISSION
On behalf of QASTA (Quaker Action St Andrews)

Should the UK remain a nuclear weapon state?

Quakers are committed to peace keeping and see no justification, either morally or for practical security considerations that can warrant the renewal of the Trident nuclear weapons system.

What is the purpose for renewing the Trident nuclear weapons system?

The primary threats to national security today come from economic collapse and climate change. Diverting the cost of renewing Trident to investment in renewable energy schemes, would address both problems at the same time and at once boost the economy significantly. Other direct threats include international terrorists, cyber and organised crime, crimes to which nuclear weapons, either by threat or actual use cannot make a contribution. Only an extremist group is likely to use a nuclear weapon without thought; a nuclear deterrent is futile against such groups who show no sign of self preservation of themselves or civilians. The UK's present military commitments have shown conclusively that the defence of the realm does not rely on possession of nuclear weapons and there is a more than serious doubt that any British Prime Minister would actually sanction use.

Nuclear weapons are a disproportionate response, even in self defence, they are fundamentally indiscriminate, unable to differentiate between military targets and civilians, the consequences of their use lie beyond anything that can be predicted. The fact that other countries possess nuclear weapons does not in itself mean that the UK must have them too.

It would appear that the attachment to renewing Trident is linked to a continuing notion that the UK is a major military contributor on the world stage but without any clear idea of what are our global strategic goals. The possession of nuclear weapons may even be considered a necessary qualification to membership of the UN Security Council. However, other non nuclear European states are not devoid of influence. There is a reluctance by UK governments to rethink and reassess global military commitments and to acknowledge that nuclear weapons cannot and do not contribute to the peaceful settlement of the perceived threats to national security today. The UK can no longer cling to an outdated notion that our influence is the same now as it was when once its position was at the head of the British Empire. The old outdated cold war superpower mentality cannot be transferred to the nuclear threats we face today. We suggest that no nuclear weapons does not mean that continuing strong links with the US and NATO allies would weaken in the area of conventional military and non-military dimensions of deterrence. To what extent is the renewal of Trident measured purely in terms of UK defence requirements? To what extent does supporting the US military/industrial network receive consideration?

Mrs Thatcher, many years ago in an interview with Robin Day, claimed the "the nuclear deterrent is there to deter all war – and it has." Clearly this claim can and should now be dismissed but sadly is still put forward as the main reason for continuing with what is already proved to be a failed policy justification.

What more can and should the UK do to more effectively promote global nuclear disarmament, non-proliferation and nuclear security?

An alternative to nuclear deterrence as the basis of international security is urgently needed and it is a response to this question that the UK should more vigorously engage. There is a clear need to find a mechanism for a collective response that is effective against any future covert nuclear proliferation. We suggest that reform of the UN Security Council should be given greater priority to take account of realities today instead of the same 5 permanent seats. There is a need for a collective security based on shared human values that takes account of the interests of all nations equally. This cannot be achieved by the proliferation of nuclear weapons of which the renewal of the Trident weapons system will be a contribution. More energy should be directed towards limiting the spread of nuclear weapons technology. Dr Mohamed El Barabei of IAEA (International Atomic Energy Agency, retired 2009) has stated “The relative ease with which a multinational illicit network could be set up and operated demonstrates the inadequacy of the present export control system... points to the shortcomings of national systems for oversight of sensitive equipment and technology.” And this in turn questions the effectiveness of international co-operation on export controls.

The Non-Proliferation Treaty is the only treaty to present a commitment by nuclear weapon states to disarm. Renewing Trident would undermine the NPT and would contradict any professed aim towards non-proliferation. UK governments may claim that renewing Tridents is not breaking the NPT, but to make this claim it appears necessary to resort to legal manipulations of dubious justification rather than recognise and accept the stated intent within the NPT to disarm and prevent further proliferation. Breaking the NPT can appear to happen with impunity and interpretation becomes merely a matter of convenience.

Peace keeping, humanitarian and development are seen as secondary options to big defence projects. Our defence priorities are confused and in danger of over extension, a position some would claim is already the case. The defence of this realm will gain little, if anything, by the renewal of the Trident nuclear weapons system and as a price to sit on the UN Security Council simply cannot be justified. Nuclear security should not mean the possession of nuclear weapons but rather a willingness to seriously look at peaceful alternatives through co-operation and a recognition that the interests of all nations warrant equality.

Finally, misplaced spending becomes a threat to the British way of life, our principles that reach back centuries, to our liberties, democratic processes that include the right to protest peacefully and to care for our citizens. If these principles are threatened, and in many instances this already seems to be evident, then the UK's professed enemies, or not, as the case may be, have already succeeded where no direct action has taken place. Renewing Trident cannot defend these valued liberties and principles and is too high a price to pay for misplaced political prestige.

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