

**British Pugwash Group:
Activities Preceding the
Trident Submarine Replacement Vote**

The UK as an auspicious place to start eliminating nuclear weapons

No nation acquires nuclear weapons lightly. A number have started along the nuclear road but turned back – e.g. South Africa, Argentina, Brazil, Sweden, Yugoslavia and others to varying degrees. So far as is known, these countries do not possess nuclear weapons. With the demise of the USSR, Belarus, Ukraine and Kazakhstan discarded their nuclear weapons. Those who possess them do so largely because of fear: in USA and USSR (Russia) it has been fear of each other; China of the USA; India of China; Pakistan of India; Israel of the Arab states. More recently North Korea fears the USA and Iran fears primarily Israel. Less important is the delusion of status that comes with the possession of nuclear weapons. We believe that the example of one of the original nuclear weapon states discarding its nuclear weapons could break the logjam of nuclear paranoia.

The UK has no one to fear, a nuclear armoury small by comparison with those of other nuclear powers, and a population that is ambivalent about nuclear weapons. We believe that it should be possible, in a few years if not immediately, to convince both the public and the government that nuclear weapons are useless, dangerous, immoral, illegal and expensive, for it is impossible to imagine a situation in which they could be used in either a strategic or sub-strategic role. If it abandoned its nuclear weapons the UK would be seen as strengthening the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. Furthermore one of the original nuclear states would be seen to consider that any benefits of possessing nuclear weapons are out-weighed by the costs: other nuclear states might move towards meeting their NPT obligations and any state considering acquiring nuclear weapons would think again.

Recently the UK Government published a proposal to renew the country's nuclear-armed submarines. Although the Government won the Parliamentary vote, they only did this by using the government whip and with the aid of the Opposition. 95 Labour Members of Parliament rebelled against the party line: the largest Parliamentary rebellion for many years. This was largely due to the British Pugwash Group.

Technical Analysis Questions Government's Claims on Submarine Lifespan

The UK Government claimed that a decision on whether to replace the Trident Nuclear Weapons System was urgently needed because the lifetime of the present submarine fleet is 30 years: on this view they would be going out of service before new ones could be built if renewal were not started immediately. At a Pugwash meeting in Germany, BPG Treasurer John Finney discussed with Frank von Hippel the bases of this decision. Von Hippel returned to the United States and together with scientific experts Richard Garwin, Theodore Postol, and Philip Coyle, drafted evidence for the Defence Select Committee which stated that, based upon the US submarine experience, UK submarines could be operated safely for 40-45 years. This analysis, presented in oral evidence to the Committee by Garwin, who had chaired the US Antisubmarine Warfare Panel and the Naval Warfare Panel for many years, opened up the debate and drew into question the UK Government's timing. The WMD Awareness Programme, an alliance of 14 UK NGOs led by the British Pugwash Group and launched by Joseph Rotblat and Mikhail Gorbachev, promoted this analysis in the media and used it to educate MPs and other researchers (stories appeared in the BBC, the *Financial Times* and many other media outlets). Many MPs raised questions, and an Early Day Motion was tabled requesting the government to look into the assertions. The government was hard-hit by this

evidence, and Defence Secretary Des Browne repeatedly mentioned Garwin personally, in an effort to dismiss the claims. A significant effort to postpone the decision gathered a damaging number of Labour backbenchers. On the day of the debate, Garwin et. al. were vindicated by a piece written by Lord Chalfont, who ran Vickers when the submarines were being built, who said “there is no reason why the Vanguard submarine should not have a life expectancy of 45 years.”

Building Upon the *Wall Street Journal* Pieces

In tandem with this work, the British Pugwash Group sought to build upon the very positive opinion pieces that had appeared in the *Wall Street Journal* earlier in the year, calling for action and leadership towards a nuclear-weapons-free world. One of these pieces was co-authored by Sam Nunn, Henry Kissinger, George Shultz and William Perry. Another was written by Mikhail Gorbachev. On 19 February, the chair of the British Pugwash Group, Robert Hinde, had a very prominent piece in the *Independent*, with the bold headline: “Leaders must find the courage to imagine a nuclear-free world.” In this piece, Hinde drew upon the various strands of the Garwin evidence, and the *Wall Street Journal* pieces.

Mikhail Gorbachev’s Letter to the *Times*

Our request that Mikhail Gorbachev write a piece for one of the British papers also had a profound effect. Gorbachev wrote in a letter to the *Times* on March 8, 2007 that “the UK Government’s rush to deploy nuclear missiles whose service life would extend until 2050 is, to say the least, astonishing.” He wrote, “A responsible course of action for the Government would be to postpone the decision on the future of the UK nuclear arsenal at least until the next review conference of the Non Proliferation Treaty in 2010.” Gorbachev’s strong intervention in the days just prior to the vote reinvigorated the public debate. The Secretary of State Margaret Beckett attempted to rebut Gorbachev’s piece in a letter to the *Times* on March 10th and a letter from Sandra Ionno Butcher of British Pugwash was printed alongside Beckett’s reply. Butcher wrote, “As MPs place their vote on Wednesday, they should imagine having to look Mikhail Gorbachev and all the remaining survivors of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in the eye as, through their vote, they tell the world where Britain stands on nuclear weapons.” Former Foreign Secretary Malcolm Rifkind felt the need to rebut Gorbachev’s perspective in a regional paper, *The Yorkshire Post*. President Gorbachev’s plea to UK decision makers was mentioned internationally, ranging from the BBC to the *International Herald Tribune* (France) to the *West Australian*.

Other Recent Trident Work

The above activities are only a part of the broader work of BPG. We submitted our own written evidence to the Ministry of Defence, have had several letters published in British Papers (including one Robert Hinde co-authored with the chair of the French Pugwash Group), we co-sponsored a very high-level conference at Chatham House last July which involved over 60 MPs, Lords, civil servants, journalists, and senior researchers and we held a public discussion meeting on the Scottish implications of the Trident vote.

BPG Future Activities on Trident

We turn now toward the future, and plan to draw upon the lessons learned for our future work on upcoming British decisions on nuclear missiles and warheads. In particular, we will focus on the warheads vote that is likely to occur in the next Parliament. This vote will be historic—at no prior time in the history of the UK nuclear weapons programme have members of Parliament been allowed a direct vote on nuclear weapons. The current debate on replacing the Trident Vanguard-class submarines and decisions on life

extension of the D5 missiles and possible successor missile systems are of a qualitatively different nature. A warhead vote is unavoidably a vote for a nuclear weapon.

The purpose of this BPG project is to ensure that a) a vote does occur, and b) when that vote occurs, the groundwork will be prepared for a truly informed decision. The first 'track' of this project involves collecting and presenting scientific and political expertise challenging the government's reasoning for new warheads. The simultaneous second 'track' will focus on capacity building: forging better alliances among different constituencies that oppose warhead replacement, and increasing their ability to draw the results of the substantive studies and political analyses to the attention of key players in Parliament, the government and the media.

In addition, many of the UK NGOs are taking up Mikhail Gorbachev's call for a major focus on the 2010 NPT Review Conference, and will use these data to urge the government to promote a more positive non-proliferation agenda.