



Defending and Disarming

The publication of the report of the Joint Commission on Defence and Disarmament has provoked a fierce argument within the Alliance. The dispute has centred around the future of Polaris and whether, or not, Britain should remain a nuclear weapon state. The position ultimately adopted by the Alliance on defence will have important consequences for the future of defence policy, including that of a Labour government. Below, Paddy Ashdown, Liberal MP and member of the Joint Commission on Defence and Disarmament, and Neville Pressley, a member of the Council for Social Democracy and CND executive, outline their views.

PADDY ASHDOWN **A view from the Liberals**

It may be useful to locate the Joint Commission on Defence and Disarmament within the policy-making processes of the Alliance parties and to say something about its political importance.

The joint commission is not the authoritative decision-making body that some commentators have made it out to be. The resolution of the joint programme for government will rest with the democratically accountable policy committees and then ultimately with the annual assemblies of both parties. The commission's influence depends entirely upon the extent to which it convinces; its job was not to negotiate away differences but to produce a sensible policy for debate within the two parties. As a starting point it represents a considerable achievement, secured with the help of a number of distinguished advisers.

Democratic parties will inevitably experience difficulties as and when they enter into alliances with others and seek to agree common policy positions; positions which, in our case, have to be distilled into an electoral programme. A delicate balance needs to be arrived at between effective policy-management at the top and our natural and instinctive desire to see the

maximum participation of party activists in decision-making. I do not need to tell the Left of the potential problem here. On the whole it has resolved it by opting for the former. We are now in the process of effecting that balance.

The report's major contribution to the defence debate lies in the fact that it provides a defence and disarmament policy which is cohesive, unlike the Tories where the Trident obsession undermines their capacity to fulfil commitments to conventional forces; or Labour, where the promise to remove US bases destroys their declared support for NATO.

It's political importance rests with its ability to take us out of the old divide between 'uni' and 'multi' - lateralism - a split which represents little of meaning in policy terms and which has distorted the debate on disarmament. It recognises that there is a complex interdependence between common and collective security; that peace needs to be achieved within stable relationships; that defence policy needs to be fitted into a wider view of Britain's position in the world and into an analysis of relationships within NATO as well as with other states around the world.

A progressive policy will identify steps towards disarmament within a framework that secures their chances of success. We argue that there is no single golden key to the nuclear conundrum; that disarmament is a process, not a state of affairs; in a world where the first steps to reversing the arms race have proved so difficult to achieve, a programme which identifies a means of making real progress is worth hanging onto.

It is worth detailing some of those steps to disarmament. The report proposes that NATO should adopt a no first-use policy for nuclear weapons. ('We will instruct the commanders of NATO to plan on the basis that nuclear weapons will not be used and should not be required.') It proposes an immediate moratorium on deployment of cruise missiles (no Molesworth). It stands firmly against the manufacturing or stockpiling of chemical weapons. It unequivocally condemns SDL. It supports further confidence-building measures such as the comprehensive test ban treaty and im-

provements to the ABM treaty. For the first time in British politics, it emphasises disengagement of US and Soviet troops as an article of disarmament policy.

It is unfortunate that attention has focused so dramatically upon the issue of Polaris. The argument is really minimal in content. Liberal party policy, decided at Bournemouth in 1984, is to include Polaris within the arms control negotiations. There is no real conflict between that position and going on to say that we are willing to contemplate the possibility of a replacement according to an open and clear set of criteria, which are themselves subject to debate.

The contrast with the secretive way in which previous governments (both Labour and Tory) have approached this issue could not be more obvious. Couple that position with an unbreachable commitment to cancel Trident and we have another positive proposal for disarmament.

It is not often that political parties openly debate their analysis of world developments and the way in which policy positions relate to it. Our anxiety about the US-European relationship and our concern to strengthen the European role in NATO have been noticed. So too, has our view that American troops and bases are here in a NATO capacity and not as part of a unilateral force. This may not turn out to be an ultimate policy. But it is unquestionably a positive contribution to the disarmament debate.

NEVILLE PRESSLEY **A View From the SDP**

David Owen's insistence that Britain should remain a nuclear weapon state will dominate the discussions on the Joint Commission report. This will provide a smokescreen to hide other substantial differences that must inevitably exist between parties with such different approaches to defence policy. The Liberal party was never in favour of a British bomb and for this reason became a welcome haven to disarmers disillusioned with Labour poli-

cy. The SDP's creation owed much, conversely, to the opposition within the Labour party to Britain remaining a nuclear weapon state. It has hardly been surprising that there are major policy differences on Cruise missiles, modernisation of battlefield nuclear weapons and no first-use as well as on the independent nuclear deterrent.

The Alliance provided a perfect opportunity for David Steel to make Liberal policy more 'suitable for government'. Compromise has followed compromise as, under the cold eyes of Owen, any taint of unilateralism has been removed. In 'Uniting for Peace', adopted at the 1984 conference, cruise was going to be removed but Polaris would be included in arms control negotiations. Paddy Ashdown announced the compromise on Cruise. The doctor was pleased with the progress and told his party that more compromises would follow.

The Liberal members of the joint commission, swallowing hard, allowed the report to admit the possibility of a replacement for Polaris. The SDP members, aware of the importance of an agreed policy which would allow the Liberals to at least retain their opposition to Polaris,

were prepared to accept an honest fudge.

But not the doctor. He had never encouraged a compromise. Compromises do not go with the conviction politics that he admires. Owen wants Britain to remain a nuclear weapon state. A policy of possibly replacing Polaris means that Britain might not remain one. He will stick to his view. He is not interested in the compromises needed for the two parties to merge. He simply does not like the Liberals' defence policy and compromises on it won't make him like it anymore.

All the debate is centred on the Polaris issue but there is another part of Owen's argument that deserves more serious attention as it exposes the weakness in the Liberal policy that Britain can be non-nuclear whilst sheltering under the American nuclear umbrella. This was a sound enough position in the 50s but as Europe became filled up with nuclear weapons it became less so and once cruise was deployed, it was untenable. Nor is such a position consistent with a positively pro-European policy. The Liberals have been slow to understand, as Owen does, that a long-term policy cannot be based on the American nuclear umbrella.

The most optimistic scenario for Euro-

pean security is that all nuclear weapons will be withdrawn from Europe and that as troop levels are reduced, there is an American withdrawal. In this scenario it would be far preferable for there to be a European retaliatory nuclear capability. Owen, looking forward to the time that Europe will be responsible for its own defence, realises this and argues that Britain should retain its nuclear capability for this time.

There is logic here especially as no policy can be planned on total nuclear disarmament. But the argument for a European nuclear deterrent is a long-term one and Owen links it with his views that Britain should remain a nuclear weapon state, and thus a great power, and that the present system of nuclear deterrence is acceptable. To propose one now sets danger bells ringing. Cruise and Pershing being transferred to European control, Germany becoming a nuclear power, more weapons rather than less. A European nuclear deterrent can only be justified if nuclear weapons have been removed from European soil, the Americans have withdrawn from Europe and the present complex system of deterrence dismantled. If the Alliance parties were wise, this is what they should centre their debate on.

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