



Under the nuclear wing - removing US air force personnel will shatter the special relationship

Labour Facing Flak

'What is the benefit to Britain of removing these missiles . . .? I can't see any . . . I can see only heavy losses . . .' With these deliberately chosen words on Panorama TV, US Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger launched his preemptive strike against Labour's non-nuclear defence policy. In the same week, his assistant Richard Perle fired his own broadside against Labour's plans to remove cruise missiles and US nuclear bases from British soil. In case this old 'one-two' hadn't sunk in, Mr Price, US ambassador to Britain, swiftly assured the British public that these views were fully representative of the Reagan administration.

Following Washington's green light, it was open season on Labour's defence policy. George Younger broke his anonymity at the Ministry of Defence; top military brass expressed their dismay; and most of the national press vented their spleen. Only David Owen remained unusually quiet, his expressed desire 'to go for Labour's jugular' on defence momen-

tarily tempered by the Liberal Assembly vote for a non-nuclear Europe. In one brief week Labour and the peace movement had got a taste of things to come. With Thatcherism running out of steam but the memory of their 1983 election Exocets on Labour still strong, defence is clearly an issue the Right are eager to seize upon.

How will Labour cope? The omens are more promising than last time. The party is united around its policy. Its commitment to strong, conventional defence makes it less vulnerable to the charge of leaving the country defenceless. And its assertion of the sovereignty of the British electorate to decide the country's defence policy allows it to play a democratic, patriotic card against excessive US interference. The policy has involved compromises by both Right and Left and there is clearly an earnest desire to avoid a repeat of 1983's exercise in self-destruction.

The broader sweep of public opinion is also more receptive to a non-nuclear policy. The catastrophe at Cher-

nobyl brought home to many the realities of radiation; the US raid on Libya carried out by F-111s based in Britain illustrated how we could be drawn into a war not of our own choosing; and the succession of disarmament initiatives from the Gorbachev leadership have lessened cold war images of the Soviet Union. This greater concern for nuclear disarmament has been reflected in a series of opinion polls showing increasing numbers supporting Britain's unilateral nuclear disarmament and solid majorities against cruise, Trident and a Eurobomb. The successful link across Scotland in protest at the arms race attracting 45,000 people clearly touched and gave expression to that groundswell.

Can Labour give coherent voice and shape to this mood? Several doubts remain. Firstly, there is an underestimation of the depth of opposition its non-nuclear policy will provoke. Perhaps the Weinberger episode will have dispelled a few illusions. Secondly, until now, Labour has refrained from campaigning on its defence

policy. This hesitancy has to end. Labour has no place to hide on this issue and it had best be bold and up-front about its policy.

Thirdly, the vast majority of Labour politicians keep the peace movement at arm's length. There are all too few like Ken Livingstone and Joan Ruddock, who appreciate its role in both creating the climate in which Labour's policy can flourish, and sustaining the popular momentum to carry through the policy when Labour gets into government.

Fourthly, and most importantly, the defence policy does not yet hang together with a new foreign policy. The removal of US nuclear weapons will inevitably disrupt Britain's previous relationship with the USA. The bloc system which has tied Britain and Western Europe to the USA for 40 years is under strain. For a British government anxious to end the subordinate 'special relationship' the only strategic option which makes geographical, historical, economic and political sense is to seek a role within an autonomous Western Europe. This option is not for a new militarist, nuclear-armed bloc *à la* David Owen, but as a grouping, de-aligned from the bloc system, and able to develop new relations with the USA, USSR and the Third World.

Yet at Blackpool it was left to Willy Brandt, in his address from the Socialist International, to make the point: There won't be peace without a European system of common security and there won't be a European system of common security without a British government playing a constructive role'.

If the Left can deliver a new strategic vision Labour may yet tap the yearnings of millions seeking a new, disarmament-orientated, internationalism. Such a perspective would also give Labour's defence policy the coherence it will need to withstand the onslaught of what will be a very dirty election dogfight. •

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