


Labour Shores Up Its Defence

The Tories have staged a powerful recovery in the opinion polls and defence has been the pivotal issue. As in 1983, Labour remains vulnerable on defence. Jon Bloomfield asks whether Labour can make its non-nuclear policy stick with the millions of people it needs at the next election

 On December 10, the Labour Party published its official defence policy. Its declared intention 'to cancel Trident, decommission Polaris and remove all American nuclear weapons in this country' marks a sharp break from the cross-party consensus of the postwar decades. It is already a focus of much public debate and will continue to be so.

In contrast to the last general election Labour has begun to get its act together. It now has a leader who argues the non-nuclear case with competence as well as conviction and Kinnock leads a party which has broadly united around its policy. The charge of 'defenceless' so effectively exploited by the Tories in 1983 has been countered by a hefty, if ill-considered, commitment to extensive conventional defence spending. Thus Labour enters the election period less exposed and vulnerable than before.

However there are no grounds for complacency. The last half of 1986 saw a marked revival in the electoral fortunes of the Thatcher government. A set of factors were involved here and some may prove temporary. Yet there seems no doubt that the defence issue was very prominent amongst them. The main surge followed the Liberal conference rejection of the Alliance's 'Euro-bomb' proposal. The accumulation of support continued more slowly through the autumn as the Tories and national press savaged Labour's non-nuclear defence policy, officially confirmed at its Blackpool conference. Apart from one December Gallup poll this assault has not significantly eroded Labour's recorded level of support, which remains stuck in the upper 30% range. However, all the indicators suggest that potential Labour voters have considerable doubts about this policy. These are the citizens whose support is necessary to secure a majority Labour government.

In the run-up to an election this situation is a cause of grave concern for the Labour Party, the Left and the peace movement. The extent to which it is overcome will not only improve Labour's prospects of being elected but also its ability to implement the non-nuclear policy when in office. The scale of domestic and international resistance to the policy means that its full implementation will require a political and not merely a parliamentary majority. The fact that every survey of opinion bar one has shown a sizeable majority opposed to unilateral nuclear disarmament indicates the scale of the problem.

The nuclear disarmament issue presents a contradictory picture. Public concern over nuclear weapons is widespread. The 1980s have seen enormous social movements spring up in many parts of Western Europe giving voice to this concern. In Britain on particular issues, most notably Cruise and Trident, there has been very strong and at

times majority opposition to the government. Deep alarm was aroused last April by the air raid on Libya launched by US F1-11s based in Britain. Mrs Thatcher's authorisation of this action left her relatively isolated, with even sections of her own cabinet opposed.

Despite this when the issue moves into the *political* arena the support for non-nuclear policies falters. This problem cannot be satisfactorily explained by emphasising Labour's disunity and incompetence at the last general election or by its present shortcomings. There is something deeper here and it is a European phenomenon. In Belgium, Holland and West Germany powerful peace movements have failed to sway the majority of their electorates. In Spain, last year's referendum gave support to the pro-Nato stance of the Gonzales government. In Britain, with its long imperial history, it is even harder to shift public opinion in this area.

Anxieties about an accelerating arms race and the actions of the Reagan administration coexist with other concerns and fears in the minds of many citizens. Conservative politicians understand this well. They transform the issue from the specific weapons systems into the question of deterrence, and 'defending the country'. This strikes a deep chord in the emotions and psychology of millions of people, partly arising from the historical experience of the start of the second world war and partly because on defence more than most issues, if a government gets it wrong the consequences can be catastrophic. On defence, the whole adds up to a lot more than the sum of the parts. The bulk of the Left and the peace movement fail to acknowledge these sentiments or appreciate their tenacious roots.

To raise these problems is not to suggest that Labour should duck the issue. A U-turn on its policy now would undermine Neil Kinnock's credibility and make Labour a laughing stock with the electorate. But there is a more substantial case for pressing ahead. The accelerating arms race is the most dangerous feature of international relations. Superpower negotiations are the central but not the sole means of halting and reversing this situation. In an increasingly multi-polar world Western Europe has its own autonomous contribution to make. As a nuclear-armed power Britain has a specific responsibility. Initiatives taken by a progressive British government - some unilateral, others bilateral or jointly with our European partners - can help to unblock the log-jam and develop an impetus for disarmament. This is not to exaggerate the role of any potential British government, merely to affirm that there is room for action.

Yet for this process to start Labour has to win the election. To do so it must overcome the doubts of many voters. That requires a comprehensive de-



Who rules the waves: British ex-servicemen protest at a CND demo in October 1985

fence and disarmament policy, which Labour is finding hard to construct. This partly arises because the very movement which has forced the issue into the public arena is unable to conceive of the strategy which can win a political majority. In seeking to do this Labour and the broader Left have to challenge the shortcomings found within the peace movement.

Labour has moved on the area where it found itself most vulnerable at the last election - that of defence itself. Both the recent policy document, *The Power to Defend Our Country* and Denis Davies, the shadow defence minister, have made it clear that all the savings from the cancellation of Trident will go on strengthening conventional forces. For the first few years in office Labour has indicated that there will be no reduction in the current record defence expenditure. Their policy has a simple, direct logic to it, namely that Britain has to make a choice between conventional or nuclear weaponry for it can't afford both. This is one answer to the structural crisis facing Britain's defence expenditure which, as Labour correctly points out, the Tories refuse to confront. Whether this will protect Labour's achilles heel with the electorate is hard to judge but it would be unwise to underestimate its potential appeal.

Military matters are alien territory to the British Left and the peace movement. Unlike in West Germany where the SPD have discussed defence and military policy extensively and a former general, Gerd Bastian, is a prominent Green, in Britain there has been little apart from the work of the Alternative Defence Commission. By culture and temperament most of the Left including this writer are either indifferent or often antagonistic to these issues. The semi-pacifist trend in the peace movement reinforces these sentiments, which also find an echo in the labour movement. Thus it is not surprising there have been few substantial alternatives presented on conventional defence policy.

Many on the Left recognise that it is politically unrealistic to think that the transfer to a non-nuclear policy can be simultaneously accompanied by sharp cuts in defence spending. Yet there is much unease arising from the style, presentation and content of the policy. Simply stated, Labour has gone over the top on conventional defence. The attack on Mrs Thatcher for being weak on defence is crass and the promises on military spending are foolhardy. The pressures on any incoming Labour chancellor and the imminent general defence review are grounds for caution. Further, the policy is silent on the prospects of serious negotiations with the USSR for conventional force reductions in Europe, which would create favourable conditions for significant cuts in arms spending. This perspec-

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Labour's defence policy: a hefty commitment to conventional defence

tive is lacking in Labour's proposals. In consequence the distinction between an effective military policy for national defence and a militarist policy is not clearly drawn.

Previously, a major drawback in the mass appeal of a unilateralist policy has been its insularity. The charge of 'Little Englandism' stuck to the policy. This was reinforced from two quarters: one, the Left's traditional antipathy to Europe; the other, the elevation of unilateralism, by many in the peace movement, from a tactic to a principle.

The weakness of this isolationism has become more apparent with the developments of the last two decades. Since the early 1960s Britain's world role has altered and its power and status qualitatively diminished. The huge growth in the nuclear stockpiles of the two major powers has reduced the global significance of the British bomb. The old unilateralist policies have to be adapted to the new circumstances where the East-West relationship is the key to reversing the arms race. In consequence the potential impact of British unilateral nuclear disarmament is lessened and a broader disarmament policy assumes greater importance, one which addresses the East-West conflict and the European dimension within it.

Both the Labour Party and the peace movement have been slow to change in response to these developments. Within the peace movement, END has tried to give a broader perspective with mixed results. The false dichotomy with multilateralism persists and the radical proposals of the Gorbachev leadership have been met with suspicion, often because of their multilateralist character. Aware of the political importance of international support for its policy, Labour however has made more progress. Apart from Kinnock's US trip, he has cultivated Labour's contacts with the Socialist International and reached

some limited agreements with the German SPD.

However, this is painfully inadequate. In the medium-term Labour needs to come to terms fully with Europe. More immediately it should do two things to broaden its policy. Firstly, it should give more prominence to the central issues of the East-West conflict and the bilateral and multilateral initiatives required to start a process of disarmament. This could be done quite easily. On Star Wars, nuclear testing, the 'Freeze' and the Reykjavik summit, Labour's voice is muted. It is frequently outshone by the Alliance. The historical legacy of the unilateral/multilateral divide is hampering Labour's capacity to present a comprehensive disarmament policy. It requires both the Left and the peace movement to bury the hatchet and say that on many issues this cleavage is anachronistic. Bilateral and multilateral negotiations are essential to reverse the arms race and Labour must make it clear that it will encourage and contribute to that process.

Secondly, Labour could give impetus and substance to its bilateral commitment by arranging a visit to Moscow in the near future. The Gorbachev leadership has made a significant impact on Western public opinion, bringing the hope of improved East-West relations. Labour should key into this mood and indicate that it is the party which can 'do business' with Gorbachev. Two years ago Kinnock and Healey reached a bilateral disarmament agreement with Chernenko. With careful planning and prior consultation this could be revised and extended. For example, since Mrs Thatcher quickly scotched Reagan's backing for the 'zero-zero' option outlined at the Reykjavik summit, Labour has scope for some diplomatic freelancing on its own account. In return for the removal of Cruise, it could ask the USSR to

dismantle the equivalent proportion of SS-20s. Here is the opening for Denis Healey to use his extensive expertise and skills to secure an agreement prior to an election. This would be a practical expression of Labour's bilateralism and would illustrate both Labour's determination for disarmament and its hard-headedness in pursuit of it.

Labour's third task is to indicate the process and timing of the non-nuclear policy it proposes. This it has begun to do. Yet to convince the electorate and because the obstacles it will face as a government are so formidable, it needs a clear sense of its tactics and strategy.

The policy has three distinctive elements: the end of Britain's own nuclear weaponry; the removal of the most recent addition to Nato's nuclear arsenal, Cruise missiles; and an end to the long-standing nuclear elements of Nato's capability in Britain, the US nuclear bases and bombers.

Britain's own bomb should be top of the agenda. Here the key policy decision, to cancel Trident, has Alliance as well as Labour support and some sections of the military too. The international ramifications of cancellation would be slight, an important factor since a Labour government will certainly be facing balance of payments difficulties and be in need of financial assistance from other governments.

Stronger opposition would confront the decommissioning of Polaris. The entire SDP and the parliamentary Liberal Party would side with the Tories, while public support for the policy is weaker than on Trident.

Labour was exposed on Polaris at the last election and some analysts, relying on opinion poll data, believe they will be again. However, events have moved on since 1983. Powerful trends are running Labour's way. Militarily, Polaris is seen as a rusting asset. Economically, the country's precipitate decline makes a mockery of its pretensions to nuclear status. Politically, the reality of Britain's decline has sunk in. Hanging on to the bomb is increasingly seen as a delusion of grandeur. Labour can make the running here and it should. Ironically, Britain's decline has given greater public credibility to unilateral action on Britain's bomb.

Second on the agenda should be the cancellation of the next batch of Cruise missiles due at Molesworth in 1988 and the removal of those stationed at Greenham Common. Politically, this is Labour's strongest ground on which to move against American nuclear weapons. Cruise missiles have been the subject of sustained political debate and support for Labour's policy extends well beyond its current electoral base. At Reykjavik the American government indicated its willingness to negotiate them away, thereby spotlighting their dispensability. Their removal will reverse a decision of the last government, not breach a postwar bi-partisan consensus.

However, this policy will encounter fierce resistance, both domestically and internationally. Notwithstanding Reykjavik, the US government will stoutly challenge any unilateral removal of Cruise. It will also be firmly resisted by the four other deployment countries, Belgium, Holland, Italy and West Germany, whose governments not least will fear the power of example. Furthermore, they will want to avoid a military as well as political domino effect, for missiles removed from Britain could be relocated by Nato on their soil. If Labour had concluded a bilateral arrangement with the USSR whereby they would remove an equivalent proportion of SS-20s, this concern could be eased. Such an arrangement would also help to sway undecided domestic opinion.

By far the greatest difficulties come with the third stage of the policy, shifting the US/Nato bases and bombers out of Britain. Britain's decline makes getting rid of our own bomb easier while simultaneously making unilateral actions within the Nato alliance much harder. This is all the more true when the policy challenges a long-established feature of political and military life initiated by the Attlee government.

The harsh reality of Britain's geopolitical position makes the unravelling of our nuclear connections all the more hazardous. The 135 American bases and installations in Britain are central to Nato's military strategy. Even the removal of the handful of nuclear-equipped bases is enormously significant, for it would cause major logistical and operational problems, disrupting central features of Nato's strategy and planning. This explains the vociferous hostility which this aspect of the policy has encountered from the US above all others, and it would be mistaken to presume that a Democratic president would view the policy in a more positive light. If the policy were carried out, heavy pressure would be exerted on other European Nato countries to take the displaced US facilities. This adds a military dimension to the already existing political hostility which the policy encounters among West European governments.

Not only will international opposition be at its fiercest: domestic support will be at its weakest. The flurry of action at US bases after the Libyan raid should not obscure the fact that there has been negligible campaigning against US bases in England for more than two decades. Here it is important to distinguish between a vague anti-Americanism which is quite widespread and a firm opposition to the bases of which there is little sign.

In view of all this, it is not surprising that Labour's opponents have seized on this issue as the weakest link in the policy. How can this be countered, remembering that Labour has still to convince a large slice of the electorate

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Defence Policy And Public Opinion

The poll data given below are based on four surveys, all conducted by Gallup. The four are October 1, 1985; August 25, 1986 (commissioned by CND); November 15, 1986 (commissioned by Policy Research Associates, a right wing political group); and November 25, 1986:

'Do you agree or disagree that Britain should get rid of its nuclear weapons whatever other countries do?'

Agree 44%
Disagree 46%
Don't know 10%

(Gallup, Aug 25, 1986)

'Do you think that Britain should or should not complete its current programme of building four Trident missile submarines to replace the Polaris submarines when they become obsolete in the 1990s?'

Should 49%
Should not 36%
Don't know 15%

(Gallup, Nov 15, 1986)

'Cancel the Trident submarine missile programme.'

Approve 40%
Disapprove 41%
Don't know 19%

(Gallup, Oct 1, 1985)

'Do you think that having our own independent nuclear missiles makes Britain a safer or less safe place to live?'

Safer 52%
Less Safe 29%
No difference 13%
Don't know 6%

(Gallup, Nov 25, 1986)

'Do you think the siting of American nuclear missiles in Britain makes Britain a safer or less safe place to live?'

Safer 37%
Less safe 44%
No difference 11%
Don't know 7%

(Gallup, Nov 25, 1986)

'Do you think that Britain should or should not remove Cruise nuclear weapons from this country, whether or not the Soviet Union dismantles its SS20 nuclear missiles?'

Should 39%
Should not 48%
Don't know 13%

(Gallup, Nov 15, 1986)

'Should we send Cruise missiles back to the US?'

Should 52%
Should not 39%
Don't know 9%

(Gallup, Oct 1, 1985)

and needs to reduce or neutralise the extent of international opposition?

It could say the following. As we are members of an alliance and our policy is for this to continue, in government we shall talk to our partners about this policy and what consequences it would have for them. Within the Nato umbrella there are a wide range of separate conditions and agreements which individual countries have negotiated. In the 1986 referendum the Spanish government supported its membership of NATO on the basis of a series of non-nuclear conditions and Lord Carrington, Nato's secretary general, acknowledged its right to do so. In line with this diversity and in recognition of national sovereignty, a Labour government intends to renegotiate the conditions by which American nuclear bombers and bases are kept at certain British bases. This is a particularly appropriate course since, apart from a special lease agreement at Holy Loch, the bases are British and the conditions by which these weapons are stationed here have never been clarified or made public. We intend to enter negotiations with the US government on this matter which shall be concluded within the life time of a parliament.

The approach and adjustments suggested in this article would give Labour a more coherent and comprehensive strategy, more able to engage with the doubts and reservations lodged in the minds of millions of voters. Labour also needs to be prepared for a surprise outcome to Mrs Thatcher's visit to Moscow before Easter. Despite her cold war rhetoric, this trip is being meticulously prepared in consultation with the French and West German governments. Thus, Mrs Thatcher may, in some respects, be presenting a common West European viewpoint. It is certainly unlikely to be just a ceremonial or commercial occasion. Some confidence-building measures, a statement on chemical weapons and an offer on battlefield nuclear weapons are among the possibilities which cannot be ruled out.

Yet while West European governments recognise the sea-change occurring in Moscow there is little sign that presently they have the desire or will to seek far-reaching agreements. Certainly Chancellor Kohl seems to have ruled these out. Thus even more hinges on the outcome of the British election.

The outcome of the defence debate is still open. The Tories have their own weak spots including Trident, slavishness to President Reagan and an abysmal multilateralist record in office. Perhaps, above all, it is an area where Mrs Thatcher speaks to the past - to the days when Stalin ran the Kremlin and Britain had a world empire. She has an atavistic appeal which is powerful but possibly on the wane. Yet it will need to be a comprehensive defence and disarmament policy clearly put and convincingly argued to defeat her. •