

CONSERVATIVE POLITICAL CENTRE - POLITICAL CONTACT PROGRAMME

Summary of reports received from discussion groups on

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MODERNISING BRITAIN'S DEFENCES

Before they answered the questions set in the contact brief, many groups congratulated the Prime Minister and our Armed Forces on the successful outcome of the Falkland Islands war. They felt that this war had once again proved the need for a modern force capable of taking action without relying on support from our allies. They also felt that the Prime Minister's prompt reaction to Argentinian aggression had acted as a strong deterrent to any similar occurrences in the future.

A few groups seemed to be unaware that the brief had been written while the task force was still en route for the Falklands and could not, therefore, take into account losses or occurrences that had not yet occurred.

Question 1: Are you in favour of Britain:

(a) keeping her own nuclear deterrent by replacing Polaris with Trident?

Nearly everyone taking part in the discussions recognised the need for maintaining an independent nuclear deterrent. This belief had been hardened by the attitude of the American government during the Falkland campaign. Their ambivalence and vacillation had proved conclusively to the groups that as allies they were somewhat unreliable and that in any possible future conflicts in areas outside the NATO area like Belize, Gibraltar, Guyana, etc. Britain might once again have to 'go it alone' and could be threatened into submission should the other side possess its own nuclear weapons.

The feelings on whether Polaris should be replaced by Trident, however, were not quite so clear. Of the 407 groups who agreed (by a large majority within each group) to Trident, many were worried, not only by the high cost, but also by the fact that this system, too, could be obsolete within a few years of its introduction. There were also worries that the actual cost could be far higher than present estimates. Some wondered whether four submarines would be enough.

Nine groups felt that Trident should not be introduced on the grounds of cost, a further nine more agreed on a nuclear deterrent as

long as it was not Trident, whilst another twelve felt that we should have a purely British deterrent. They said that millions had already been spent on designing new British nuclear missiles which were equally good and much cheaper than the American system. Four more groups thought we should look for something cheaper, whilst seventeen were divided in their opinions: five did not know and seven said that Trident should not be introduced at all. Worries were expressed that should Britain and the United States disagree on policy during the next few years, the Americans might not deliver and we would be left without our own deterrent.

Many groups which had approved of Trident, emphasised that it must not be introduced at the expense of our conventional forces. The cost of Trident should not come out of the Navy budget, but should have its own separate form of accounting. Many groups applauded the number of jobs Trident would create, whilst others hoped that the nuclear submarines would be built in Britain regardless of any extra cost. Some said that the prestige acquired from being adequately armed was important in diplomatic negotiations in an unsettled world.

One group said that the Chevaline system would be cheaper and as effective whilst a minority in another group would have liked to see a defence system developed from E.S.A. Arian. Some of the groups who wanted the nuclear deterrent to be British - or cheaper - wondered whether Polaris could be adapted to meet with future requirements.

A number of groups said that they were unable to judge the merits of Trident, but were prepared to take the Government's word that it was the best system. They did feel, however, that the arguments put forward by the Government on this issue left a lot to be desired. Whilst there were many good reasons for opting for Trident (more MIRVing, greater accuracy, the increasing cost of Polaris submarine spares, etc.) very little information had reached the electorate, although facts were available in publications such as 'Scientific American' and could not therefore be classified 'top secret'. The public needed to be convinced that Britain should spend £200 for every adult in the country spread over 18 years and the cost should be expressed in this way and not as one enormous lump sum which was beyond the comprehension of most people.

Finally, some groups said that they hoped that despite the fact that one third of Trident would be American, the Americans would have no say in whether the missiles were fired.

(b) allowing American Cruise missiles to be stationed on British soil?

A majority of the groups - 311 of them - said that Britain should allow the Americans to base Cruise missiles on British soil unconditionally; whilst a further six groups agreed reluctantly; two more said that they would not mind provided these missiles were not intended as the United States's first line of defence. Their reasons were that whilst Britain and other NATO countries continued to depend on the USA to play its part in the defence of Western Europe, we must allow them the facilities to back up that responsibility. Many also said that our country would be a Russian target whether or not we had Cruise missiles. Some groups believed we had a duty as members of NATO to allow Cruise missiles to be stationed here whilst others though we would be stupid to turn down the offer of free protection.

As these missiles would have to be deployed in European countries due to the limits of their range, most groups hoped that the other NATO countries would follow our example by allowing them to be sited wherever

strategically necessary. They were considered to be an essential counter to Russian SS20 missiles and failure to provide this counter would be regarded by the Russians as a sign of weakness and by the Americans as a signal to once again become isolationist.

88 groups, however, maintained that the provision of Cruise missile sites should only be granted if Britain either participated in the decision making or had an absolute veto on when these weapons could be fired. Another fifteen groups said that control should rest with NATO. Sixteen groups were more or less equally divided on the question, whilst eleven did not want Cruise missiles on British soil. Some of these groups said it would increase the danger that this country would become a nuclear target while others did not think that the Americans were reliable allies.

Some groups expressed surprise that there should be an issue on this matter as the Americans had been siting nuclear missiles on British soil for many years.

A lot of groups thought that Cruise missiles would provide a useful bargaining point between Mr Rowley and Mr Karpov during their talks in Geneva and would increase the possibility of cancelling both cruise and Pershing missile programmes. After all, multilateral disarmament was desired by most people and a position of weakness would not encourage the Russians to remove the 700 Soviet SS20s from Latvia. Cruise missiles, with their single warheads, represented a greater deterrent than a limited number of multi-warheaded weapons carried in even fewer nuclear powered submarines.

Some of the groups hoped that at some time in the future Britain would be able to purchase (or make) its own Cruise missiles, thereby becoming independent of the Americans.

Question 2: Do you think we should increase our defence expenditure still further? If so, how should the extra money be raised, and in which ways should it be spent?

There was little doubt in the minds of most groups that the Fleet had been extremely lucky not to lose more ships (in particular an aircraft carrier) during the Falklands conflict due to inadequate defence capabilities. They were also lucky that the war had occurred before the Invincible had left for Australia and before the naval dockyards at Portsmouth had been run down. Many were amazed that the lessons which were thought to have been learnt during World War II concerning the inflammability of aluminium had not been put into practice, thus saving many lives. The recent war had reaffirmed their belief in the importance of maintaining thoroughly modern, conventional forces. It was no good, they said, having highly trained, courageous fighting men, if these men were ill-equipped to deal with modern warfare.

A majority of the groups, therefore, were of the opinion that defence expenditure should be increased and that most of this increase should be spent on modernising equipment. Top priority ought to be given to the Royal Navy, which must have a capability beyond that required by NATO. Losses must be made good and repairs and new building (to modern requirements) carried out in British yards - thus providing work to help offset the cost. Fighting ships should be equipped with the latest anti-missile defences and there should be a greater emphasis on early warning systems. A number of groups said that there was a need for three aircraft carriers equipped with AWACS, more frigates and more nuclear hunter killer submarines. It was hoped that merchant ships would continue to be available to the Navy in times of crisis, manned by British seamen, and not flying under flags of convenience. If this meant that some subsidies should be made available to British lines,

the cost would be worth it. The dockyards of Portsmouth, Chatham and Gibraltar should remain viable.

A minority of groups, however, thought that it would be inexpedient to raise defence expenditure at the present time. Most of these did not disagree with the majority about where money should be spent, but felt that there were sizable economies that could be made within defence spending, particularly on administration costs. The Defence Procurement Committee was severely criticised, with its 40,000 Civil Servants who cost £162 million on administration alone. The length of time procurement could take from the birth of an idea through to its operational stage was far too long. Money could also be saved if equipment was standardised - and this should be carried through for the whole of the NATO forces.

The feeling of quite a lot of groups was that rather than Britain having to raise her defence commitments, other NATO countries should be encouraged to raise their spending in line with ours. France should be requested to rejoin NATO, thus increasing the combined force.

Various suggestions were put forward for raising extra revenue. Most groups said that it should come from increased taxation, either a penny in the Pound on direct taxation (which they thought the public would accept) or through indirect taxation. Ideas for indirect taxes ranged from increased levies on gambling to a road tax on caravans to higher duty on cigarettes and alcohol. Others felt that savings could be made by cutting down on inessential education and social services, by spending less on subsidies to 'sacred cows' such as British Leyland, British Steel and British Rail. A few groups suggested that either a national defence lottery or defence bonds would raise considerable sums of money. Others said that were inflation proof pensions to cease there would be plenty of money available to spend on defence.

Finally, it was thought that the Defence Chiefs should have a far greater say in where economies could be made without endangering the safety of the nation. It was not thought that politicians were necessarily the best people to make such judgements.

Question 3: How active are CND and other 'peace' organisations in your area? What is being done locally to marshal public opinion in favour of nuclear defence and multilateral (as opposed to unilateral) disarmament?

It was clear from the reports that only in the most rural parts of the country were there few, if any, signs of unilateralist activity. In Conservative strongholds there were pockets of CND, whilst in areas controlled by Labour councils activity was very strong indeed. Many groups reported that membership of CND now included professionals, teachers and church activists as well as the more usual 'long haired brigade' who had been characteristic of the movement in the past. As a result their arguments were a great deal more persuasive and therefore more dangerous.

The most disturbing factor to arise from the reports was the degree of infiltration by the CND and other groups into schools, colleges and universities. In many cases CND literature had been distributed to all schools in an area, teachers had been giving out badges to the children and discussions had been held on the subject during class. In some schools the 'brainwashing' was so effective that when debates had been arranged, difficulty had been found in getting children to speak on behalf of multilateral disarmament. Libraries, too, had been mounting CND displays, sometimes even in Conservative held

areas where local councillors had not realised that there were any political implications. A few Education Authorities have actually forbidden CND activity and meetings in their schools, but in Devon where a firm stand has been taken the North Devon Peace Movement are strongly pressing for this decision to be reversed.

The other, almost equally dangerous factor, is the strength of the 'peace' movement within churches of all denominations. Reports from all over the country commented on the involvement of the local clergy in CND activities.

It was, however, encouraging that quite a number of groups, having learnt from individual group members that there was CND activity taking place - leaflet drops, letter writing, rallies, debates, etc. - had decided to start a campaign to counter this activity in their own constituencies. Letter writing groups were being formed locally and it was decided that in future all CND functions would be attended by members of the CPC discussion groups in order to put multilateralist arguments forward.

Many groups, however, said that they were ill-informed on the subject. They complained about a lack of leaflets to distribute and felt that Central Office should provide these free of charge. Some also said that they were unaware of any multilateralist meetings or rallies and asked that all Conservative Agents be kept fully briefed in future. Where multilateralist movements like the Coalition for Peace through Security and the North Atlantic Committee were functioning organised opposition was becoming very effective and many groups praised the work that was being done by them. Quite a number of MPs were also taking an active part in debates and writing letters or articles in local press. Groups felt those who were not yet participating actively should be encouraged to do so.

A number of constituencies, however, had decided that the CND was making little, if any, headway: hence they believed that organised opposition would be counter-productive as it would give CND unwarranted publicity.

A lot of groups were worried because they did not feel that the organisations for multilateral disarmament were receiving sufficient publicity or backing from the Conservative Party. Because of this, the Labour Party - and particularly its left-wing - were becoming accepted as the only party which stood for peace. The Liberals and Social Democrats, too, were trying to make political capital out of this issue. As a result, every party was trying to brand the Conservatives as warmongers. The message that multilateralists also wanted disarmament was just not getting home.

Many groups wanted to know where CND got its funds from, and were suspicious that financial help was being supplied by those whose interest was to prevent Britain from having nuclear weapons on its soil.

A detailed survey showing the results from each constituency has been sent to Mr Winston Churchill MP, the Chairman of the Party and the Director of Organisation at Conservative Central Office.

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