



10 DOWNING STREET

THE PRIME MINISTER

12 December 1983

Dear Craxley,

Thank you for your letter of 17 November on behalf of your constituent Miss Christine Maddison of 'Summer Keep', Blackdown Avenue, Pyrford, Woking who wrote to you on the Government's nuclear defence policy.

Miss Maddison is not alone in her concern about the dangers of nuclear weapons. But in an imperfect world political responsibility often means choosing the least of several evils. I cannot accept that it is immoral to retain nuclear weapons to prevent others using them against us. Since 1945 up to 10 million people have been killed in well over 100 wars by so-called conventional weapons. During that time there has been no war in Europe. We believe that nuclear deterrence remains the strategy most likely to prevent the outbreak of war of any kind between East and West. There is therefore a moral duty not to abandon that strategy unless we can find one which makes the risks of war even less.

Your constituent would like us to move towards a declaration that we will never be the first to use nuclear missiles. The first thing to say here is that the NATO Heads of Government made a promise at their meeting in Bonn in June 1982 that no NATO weapons, nuclear or conventional will ever be used, except in response to attack.

/The Government

The Government believe that a declaration of "no first use" of nuclear weapons would not reduce the chance of war but would in fact increase the risk. The reasoning is as follows. NATO is confronted by massive Warsaw Pact conventional forces. In foreseeable circumstances, therefore, there could be a temptation for the Russians to threaten to fight a successful limited war in Europe which, they might gamble, need not provoke the Americans into using intercontinental nuclear weapons. NATO policy is to ensure that the Russians can never be certain that they will be able to fight a limited war in Europe. If we were to make a "no first use" declaration we would risk removing the uncertainty in the Russians' minds and thereby greatly increasing the risk of their being tempted into a conventional attack on Europe. They would also be in a far stronger position to limit our freedom by threatening such an attack. This does not mean that NATO are in any sense committing themselves to any decision in principle to use nuclear weapons first if we found ourselves losing a war fighting with conventional weapons. It simply means that we think it would be wrong, in the interests of preventing war, to volunteer to renounce the option.

Miss Maddison believes that we should allow the British nuclear forces to be included in current arms control negotiations. The Russians tried to insist that they should be included in the INF negotiations (before that is, they walked out of those talks). This made no sense. British weapons are strategic - of a similar type to those Soviet and US submarine launched weapons which are specifically excluded, by agreement between the two sides, from the INF talks. If they have agreed not to discuss in these talks their own weapons of this type why should they discuss ours? On the question of the relationship between British Weapons and the strategic arms control process I might refer your constituent to Sir Geoffrey Howe's statement to the United Nations General Assembly on 29 September;

'As far as the British Government is concerned, we must naturally take into account that our force is a strategic one, and that it represents less than 3 per cent of the strategic nuclear forces available to the United States or to the Soviet Union. It would be absurd as things stand for us to seek to trade reductions with a super power. But we have never said 'never'. On the contrary, we have made it clear that, if Soviet and US strategic arsenals were to be very substantially reduced and if no significant changes had occurred in Soviet defensive capabilities, Britain would want to review her position and to consider how best she could contribute to arms control in the light of the reduced threat. That remains our position.'

Britain plays an active role in the Committee on Disarmament in Geneva in its important work on a comprehensive ban on chemical weapons. We have made proposals designed to take work forward on the crucial problems of verification. We shall be pressing hard for agreement on this at the next round of negotiations beginning in January 1984. The Soviet Union has so far proved reluctant to accept provision for adequate verification measures without which any treaty would be less than useless.

The Government share the widespread desire for measures of arms control in outer space. Existing international agreements already limit military activities in space. This includes the Outer Space Treaty which bans the stationing of nuclear weapons in outer space. The next step is for the Committee on Disarmament to consider whether it is desirable and feasible to supplement these existing agreements. We intend to seek clarification of the recent Soviet proposals in this forum, in particular the provisions relating to verification which appear to be inadequate.

Declamatory statements of good intent are no substitute for the negotiation of balanced and verifiable arms control agreements. It is only around the negotiating table that true commitment to disarmament and arms control can be gauged.

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Rajant

Cranley Onslow Esq MP