

‘Cabinets and the Bomb’

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Lord Speaker, Lady Quinlan and the Quinlan family, my Lords, Ladies and Gentlemen, it is a pleasure and an honour to deliver this lecture this evening in memory of Sir Michael Quinlan. It is a task also tinged with sadness because Michael was a friend, a mentor and, as for so many of us here, an exemplary public servant and a fine, a very fine man. He showed great kindness to me and, sometimes, when he was still a civil servant and I was still a journalist, he exhibited a forbearance way beyond the call of duty. I miss that ‘Big Q’ friendship and wisdom greatly. ‘Big Q’, by the way, was the nickname coined for Michael by his young acolytes in the Ministry of Defence – though he never knew this until the evening in 2002, nine years after he had retired from MOD, when he launched my volume on Whitehall and the Cold War, *The Secret State*.

Michael was a connoisseur of my subject this evening. In his last book, *Thinking About Nuclear Weapons*, he has left us a primer that will be of use not merely as long as the UK remains a nuclear-tipped state, but as long as any power in the world retains these terrible weapons. He was also a formidable Whitehall player in terms of nuclear weapons policy not just because of the jobs he held but also because he was, I think, the leading in-house defence intellectual MOD has possessed since World War II. As for the theme of ‘Cabinets and the Bomb’, Michael has left us a very precise Quinlanesque template against which to judge events when the question of the UK’s continuing to be a nuclear weapons state goes on heat as it has in a special way since last May.

Why special? Because the future of the Bomb has never before in peacetime figured as a question of coalition politics. During the World War II Coalition (which involved three parties; not just two) Winston Churchill kept nuclear policy well away from the War Cabinet and its committees. And he alone decided on 1 July 1945, under the terms of the 1943 Quebec Agreement he had made with President Roosevelt, to concur in the United States using the weapons against Japan – the first and, I fervently hope, the last British Prime Minister to take the most awesome decision conceivable.

Nearly three years ago, Michael Quinlan prepared his template for a seminar on ‘Cabinets and the Bomb’ sponsored by the British Academy in association with the National Archives and Queen Mary’s Mile End Group. The chronology waiting on your seats this evening is an extended version of the one produced for that occasion (and I am very grateful to Dr. Catherine Haddon, James Jinks and James Rivington for their help with this).

That evening at the British Academy, surrounded by former Cabinet ministers, fellow defence officials, serving and retired, plus scientists and scholars of Cabinet government and politico-military history, Michael opened the proceedings by identifying eight themes which emerged from what he called the ‘treasure chest’ of declassified records we had before us ranging from the early 1940s to the mid 1970s, published later that year by the British Academy as a non-partisan contribution to the current debate about Trident replacement.

It followed the Blair Cabinet’s decision so to do on the morning of 4 December 2006, ‘without any dissenting voices’ (as the Prime Minister’s Press Secretary briefed the lobby

correspondents shortly afterwards). A White Paper, *The Future of the United Kingdom's Nuclear Deterrent*, was presented to Parliament that afternoon.

Here are the Quinlan octet of factors that, in various flurries, go – or have gone in cold war days – into the making of the politico-nuclear weather when the Brits face a big decision:

1: Rationale. Michael picked out what he called discernible strands: prestige; seat at top table; influence with the United States ; contribution to overall western deterrence.

2: Challenge. Within governments and Whitehall and without. Michael said: 'I find myself wondering just why challenges to nuclear-weapon status were more frequently recurrent, and went deeper, in Britain than in any of the other four Treaty-recognised possessors [USA, USSR/Russia, France and China]'.

3: Cost. '...a continued worry', wrote Michael. And indeed it is today as it was in the Cabinet committee discussions presided over by Clement Attlee in 1945-47 which led to the decision in January 1947 to make a British bomb (which was not divulged to Parliament until May 1948). It's interesting to note, when examining the swathe of decision-taking from that version of austerity Britain (and, in the late 1940s, it really was austerity-on-stilts) to our own, just how often a decision to carry on as a nuclear weapons power or upgrade our delivery capability has coincided with economic crisis. This was true of the Polaris system in the mid-Sixties rolling economic crisis of the first Wilson governments; it was true when the decision was taken to improve the penetrability of Polaris with the 'Chevaline' improvement in the final days of the Heath government and the decision of the last Wilson administration and the Callaghan government to carry on with 'Chevaline'. It was true, too, in the fiscally stretched and recession hit early-1980s when the first Thatcher government decided to replace Polaris with Trident. It was true last summer and autumn as the new National Security Committee, created by David Cameron sought to reconcile the diverging views of the Coalition partners on a successor system to Trident (of which more in a moment).

4: Attitude of the United States. Put simply, and this is me not Michael, if a US President decided to pull the plug on the 1958 Agreement for Cooperation on the Uses of Atomic Energy for Mutual Defence Purposes, the UK would very quickly be out of the nuclear weapons business. According to the late Sir Hermann Bondi, Chief Scientific Adviser to the Ministry of Defence in the early 1970s, 'If the Americans tell us at one stage, "We will go on for another twelve years but not a day longer", we can adapt. If the Americans say tomorrow, "All we do now for you will stop", then it won't be many months before we don't have a weapon'.

5: France. A powerful factor in British thinking since General de Gaulle finally achieved nuclear status for his country with the atomic test in the Algerian Sahara in February 1960. And it's linked to the question of American attitudes. So far, neither the leaderships of the USA or the UK has wanted France to be the sole nuclear weapons power in Europe.

6: Ethics. This covers a wide area from those who believe the possession, let alone the contemplation of use in any circumstances is inherently immoral to questions of both the circumstances of use and associated targeting for those involved in the formulation of policy.

7: Institutional pressures. Which armed service possessed the deterrent duty? The cost of remaining a nuclear weapons power to other budgets both within the deterrent-duty

service, its impact upon the armed forces generally and the overall configuration of the defence budget.

8: Secrecy. This factor is much diminished. The ending of the cold war helped naturally. But even before it had, Michael Quinlan's evidence on Polaris replacement to the House of Commons Defence Select Committee in 1980 was a breakthrough in relative openness as was, in the same year, the so-called Defence Open Government Document 80/23, which set out in public more fully than before the UK's deterrent rationale and which, though anonymous, bore all the hallmarks of Michael's distinctive pen. And it is to the credit of post-cold war administrations of all parties that we now have vastly more information in the public domain including the size of the nuclear inventory. As Lord Carrington, a veteran of nuclear policy decision taking, talking of cold war days, said at the British Academy seminar in March 2007: 'Unless you were quite senior in the government, you knew nothing about those things at all. You talk about Parliament being ignorant...We were all ignorant about it'.

Because of the special secrecy that attached to UK nuclear weapons policy-making, certainly over its first three to four decades, the release of the files under the 30-year rule represent a classic and important example of catch-up history – delayed freedom of information, if you like, or, perhaps, more vividly, the retrospective bugging of the Cabinet Room, the Chiefs of Staff suite, the Joint Intelligence Committee and other of Whitehall's more sensitive locations. A great deal of money has been sunk into the making and sustenance of Britain as a nuclear weapons power, and a dash of retrospective accountability through the release of such documents is no more than the taxpayers' deserts.

But the documentary trail, indispensable as it is, only takes you so far. The files, essentially, are frozen history. You warm them up a bit until their limbs twitch into life; next they begin to breathe and then you can talk to them; interrogate them. But this kind of retrospective eavesdropping doesn't capture personality, the more vivid interventions or turns of phrase in No.10 or at Chequers, or round the Cabinet Table. It cannot because the Cabinet Secretariat or the No.10 Private Office staff are trained to be sparse and restrained in their note-taking which is designed to record what is needed of discussions for the purposes of action to be taken not to meet the needs of historical reconstruction or telling anecdote.

The most famous example of this is the meeting of Attlee's Cabinet Committee on Atomic Energy, GEN 75, in the Cabinet Office classification, on the afternoon of Friday 25 October 1946. This was the moment when the UK might have decided not to become a nuclear power before it had really started because the expense and the diversion of scarce scientific and engineering resources were too great for a recovering postwar Britain once the United States Congress had cut off nuclear collaboration with the McMahon Act of that year. Ernest Bevin, the great Foreign Secretary and dominant force in the Attlee Cabinet, was late for the meeting. He had been lunching well.

By the time he wheezed in, the economic ministers, Hugh Dalton from the Treasury and Stafford Cripps from the Board of Trade, were well on the way to talking out the bomb project on the aforementioned grounds of opportunity cost arguing that the country could not afford to build the gaseous diffusion plant whose construction was the subject of the meeting. Bevin, we know from the testimony of Sir Michael Perrin, one of the Ministry of Supply team at the meeting (Supply was the bomb department after the war), engaged in one of his great and, in this case, historically significantly eruptions. He was having none of it and he roared out in his strong, West Country accent: 'That won't do at all...we've

got to have this...I don't mind for myself, but I don't want any other Foreign Secretary of this country to be talked to or at by a Secretary of State in the United States as I have just had in my discussions with Mr Byrnes'. And here comes the passage that has resonated down the years: 'We've got to have this thing over here whatever it costs...We've got to have the bloody Union Jack on top of it'.

On the way back to the Ministry of Supply from No.10, Lord Portal, the World War II Chief of the Air Staff and now Controller of Production of Atomic Energy, turned to Perrin and said: 'You know, if Bevin hadn't come in then, we wouldn't have had that bomb, Michael'. Here's how Denis Rickett's Cabinet Secretariat minutes capture this crucial, crunch moment: 'In discussion it was urged that we must consider seriously whether we could afford to divert from civilian consumption and the restoration of our balance of payments, the economic resources required for a project on this scale. Unless present trends were reversed we might find ourselves faced with an extremely serious economic and financial situation in two or three years time.

On the other hand it was argued that we could not afford to be left behind in a field which was of such revolutionary importance from an industrial, no less than from a military point of view. Our prestige in the world, as well as our chances of securing American co-operation would both suffer if we did not exploit to the full a discovery in which we had played a leading part at the outset'. The official note conveys the essentials; it eschews the atmospherics and Bevin's force majeure.

The great power impulse, Ernie's motive power that autumn afternoon in No.10, was at work again when the Churchill Cabinet (and this time it was the full Cabinet, not a Cabinet committee that took the decision) authorised the great leap in terms of destructive power from fission to fusion, from the atomic bomb to the hydrogen bomb, in 1954. The atmospheric, as opposed to the desiccated account this time, was provided by Lord Plowden, first chairman of the Atomic Energy, recalling in conversation with me in 1988 for the BBC Radio 4 historical documentary, *A Bloody Union Jack on Top of It*, his receiving 'a minute from the Prime Minister, from Churchill, saying to let him know what it would cost, what effort would be necessary to develop and manufacture hydrogen bombs. And under the direction of Bill Penney, and the collaboration of Hinton and Cockcroft [the so-called 'Atomic Knights' who pioneered Britain's bomb project], I was given the answer to his question, and I went to see Churchill in his room in the House of Commons after lunch, and when I explained what the effort necessary would be, he paused for a time, and nodded his head, and said in that well-known voice of his, "We must do it. It's the price we pay to sit at the top table". And having said that, he got up and tied a little black ribbon round his eyes, and lay down on his bed in his room, and went to sleep'.

The Chiefs of Staff, in fact, rather overdid the great power aspect in the run-up to the 1954 H-bomb decision. They pressed for it as a means of strengthening 'our position and influence as a world power' claiming that '[o]ur scientific skill and technological capacity to produce the hydrogen weapon puts within our grasp the ability to be on terms with the United States and Russia'. There was no way in the mid-to-late 1950s that the UK could hope to come anywhere near matching the growing nuclear arsenals of the United States and the Soviet Union. This was a prime example of what Stryker McGuire, *Newsweek's* former man in London, calls the Brits' 'pocket superpower' impulse.

Perhaps the most bizarre ministerial intervention uncaptured by the official papers is that of George Brown's in the Cabinet discussions when Harold Wilson, having given a contrary impression during the 1964 general election, had taken the decision, with a tiny

Cabinet committee of three (the smallest ever) to carry on with the Polaris programme to sustain the British bomb once the V-bombers stepped down from the deterrent role. The reasoning in Wilson's tiny MISC 16 group (just him and Patrick Gordon Walker, Foreign Secretary, and Denis Healey, Defence Secretary) was interesting when they met on Armistice Day 1964. Three Polaris-laden Royal Navy submarines 'would represent the minimum force which would be acceptable to us in the event of the dissolution of the NATO alliance'. There it is – the 'standing alone' contingency, the memory of summer-autumn 1940 which Sir Frank Cooper, another long time MOD nuclear insider, reckoned always played powerfully on Prime Ministers' minds as we shall see shortly.

The mercurial, occasionally liquid-fuelled, and, therefore, unpredictable George Brown weighed in during a subsequent discussion in a full Cabinet on 26 November 1964 which, among other things, had to consider the question of three or four submarines. Denis Healey took up the story when interviewed for *A Bloody Union Jack on Top of It*, 'Jim [Callaghan, Chancellor of the Exchequer] wanted it down to three, just to save money, of course. But George Brown wanted it down to three on the grounds that with three boats we couldn't be sure of always having one on patrol, and therefore it couldn't be regarded as capable of being used independently'.

This, I suspect, was not a line of argument that had been anticipated – remaining a nuclear power for some of the time, but not all of the time, thereby, perhaps losing part of what some might see as the moral stigma of being a nuclear power. An unlikely figure, the Secretary of State for Education, the quiet and conciliatory Michael Stewart, saw off the Brown argument in a very British non-conformist fashion. Denis Healey again: 'I remember Michael Stewart saying at the time that it reminded him very much of when he was on the committee of the Fulham Co-op in the 1930s and they were discussing, being good Methodists all, whether, for the first time, they should stock wine. And they finally decided they would stock wine, but only very poor wine'.

A little dash of Methody plus the spirit of the co-operative movement apparently took care of that argument at least for the time being. It has surfaced again in our two post-cold war decades in the shape of the contention that, even if the UK retains a nuclear force, we no longer need continuous at-sea deterrence (known in the business as CASD [Cazz-D]) – that is a submarine on patrol at all times, and, therefore, three boats rather than four are perfectly adequate.

CASD or no CASD is but one of the factors that has illustrated the fact that the UK, in the words of another former MOD Permanent Secretary, Sir Kevin Tebbit, has 'always been a reluctant nuclear power'. Though, as Sir Kevin added at a Royal United Services Institute seminar in September 2009, the bomb has, so far, been treated by those involved in its provision and sustenance as 'the ultimate backbone...Governments know there is a point beyond which they cannot be intimidated'. This, too, was very much the late Hermann Bondi's view. He told Michael Quinlan that, in Michaels' words, 'a nuclear state is a state that no one can afford to make desperate'.

This was very much the line Tony Blair took in his 'Foreword' to the White Paper, *The Future of the United Kingdom's Nuclear Deterrent*, published in December 2006 after the Cabinet had that morning endorsed his view that Britain should stay nuclear-tipped up to the 2050s: 'We cannot', Mr Blair wrote, 'predict the way the world will look in 30 or 50 years time...we cannot be sure that a major threat to our vital interests will not emerge over the longer term...I believe it is crucial that, for the foreseeable future, British Prime Ministers have the necessary assurance that no aggressor can escalate a crisis beyond UK control'.

Yet, in one of the more fascinating passages in his memoirs, Tony Blair gives a classic illustration of what I would call the paradox of the double reluctance – reluctance to pay the cost; but even more reluctant to bring the boats, the missiles and the warheads home forever lest the highly unlikely but utterly desperate contingency of a direct nuclear threat to these islands should manifest itself sometime in the future, perhaps suddenly, almost out-of- the-blue, and an unforgiving country would remember on whose prime ministerial watch the British bomb was given up. For once given up, it would, I think, be impossible to restore – certainly without a great deal of time and a pile of public expenditure. Sir Frank Cooper, as we have seen, used to say that this factor would play powerfully as long as 1940 was remembered – when only a small amount of the latest technology (the Spitfires and the Hurricanes) crewed by a small number of immensely highly trained young men was all that stood between us and there not being a recognisable UK in 1941.

Here's the section from Tony Blair's *A Journey* published last September: 'We agreed the renewal of the independent nuclear deterrent. You might think I would have been certain of that decision, but I hesitated over it. I could see clearly the force of the commonsense and practical arguments against Trident, yet in the final analysis I thought giving it up too big a downgrading of our status as a nation, and in an uncertain world, too big a risk for our defence. I did not think this was a "tough on defence" versus "weak or pacifist" issue at all.

'On simple, pragmatic grounds, there was a case either way. The expense is huge, and the utility in a post-cold war world is less in terms of deterrence, and non-existent in terms of military use. Spend the money on more helicopters, aircraft and anti-terror equipment? Not a daft notion.

'In the situations in which British forces would be likely to be called upon to fight, it was pretty clear what mattered most. It is true that it is frankly inconceivable we would use our nuclear deterrent alone, without the US –and let us hope a situation in which the US is even threatening use never arises – but it's a big step to put that beyond your capacity as a country.

'So, after some genuine consideration and reconsideration, I opted to renew it. But the contrary decision would have not have been stupid. I had a perfectly good and sensible discussion about it with Gordon [Brown], who was similarly torn. In the end, we both agreed, as I said to him: Imagine standing up in the House of Commons and saying I've decided to scrap it. We're not going to say that, are we? In this instance, caution, costly as it was, won the day'.

Gordon Brown's version of being 'torn' and his expression of the paradox of reluctance became apparent in September 2009 when, to the surprise of many during a non-proliferation session of the UN Security Council, he said that 'the United Kingdom will retain only the absolute minimum credible and continuing nuclear deterrent capability'. He went on to say that 'subject to technical analysis and progress in multilateral negotiations, my aim is that when the next class of submarines enters service in the mid-2020s, our fleet should be reduced from four boats to three'. Neither the full Cabinet nor his own nuclear sub-committee of his National Security International Relations and Development Cabinet Committee were consulted. And rumour has it that only at the last minute did Whitehall doubters persuade Mr Brown to add the words 'credible and continuing' to his text after they had been informed of what he intended to say.

Where are we now, post-general election and with coalitionism touching the bomb for the first time? The Coalition Agreement declared: 'We will maintain Britain's nuclear deterrent,

and have agreed that the renewal of Trident should be scrutinised to ensure value for money. Liberal Democrats will continue to make the case for alternatives’.

Continuous At Sea Deterrence has been maintained and will be sustained under the Coalition. The value for money study was completed in the run up to the Coalition’s wider Strategic Defence and Security Review. The Trident upgrade question sculled through the National Security Council’s nuclear policy sub-committee, NSC(N), and, in terms of the political deal required by coalitionism, in meetings outside the committee between the Prime Minister, David Cameron, and the Deputy Prime Minister, Nick Clegg.

The deal was caught in a paper which went to the full National Security Council on 12 October 2010 before being announced as part of the SDSR document, Securing Britain in an Age of Uncertainty. It is:

- Defer decisions on a replacement to the current warhead.
- Reduce the cost of the replacement submarine missile compartment.
- Extend the life of the current Vanguard class submarines and re-profile the programme to build replacement submarines.
- Consequently, take the second investment decision (the so-called ‘Main Gate’ decision) finalising the detailed acquisition plans, design and number of submarines around 2016 (i.e. after the next general election).
- Reduce the number of warheads on board each submarine from 48 to 40.
- Reduce the requirement for operationally available warheads from fewer than 160 to no more than 120.
- Reduce the number of operational missiles on each submarine.

A dash of supporting detail:

- The value for money review will save £3.2 billion.
- However, the delay in bringing into service the new submarines and running on the Vanguard boats to the late 2020s and early 2030s (between six and eight years longer than the Polaris-carrying Resolution class submarines were at sea) will add £1.2 billion to the eventual bill.
- The new boats will have eight operational tubes rather than the 16 on the current Vanguard submarines.

The Treasury and the Ministry of Defence are about to sign off the so-called ‘Initial Gate’ decision covering the configuration of the ‘successor’ boats missile compartments and propulsion which will be a new Rolls Royce pressurised water reactor system, PWR3.

The question of Britain and the Bomb, I reckon, will remain live throughout the current Parliament. And 2015, if the Coalition endures that long, will be a nuclear election like 1964 and 1983 when Michael Foot took on Margaret Thatcher. What might be the outcome? So far, though the demise of the British bomb has occasionally seemed possible, no Prime Minister has wanted to risk history’s verdict as the premier-who-gave-it-away (though I think Michael Foot would have stopped it had he become Prime Minister with a sufficient majority in the 1980s). So far, as Michael Quinlan put it during a seminar to coincide with the ‘Secret State’ exhibition at the National Archives in May 2004, each set of decision-makers faced with the question of upgrading or carrying on has produced ‘a set of rationales to clothe that gut decision’. And carrying on, in my judgement, has been exactly that kind of ‘gut decision’ rather than an evidence-based one for all the paperwork and cost-benefit analysis that precedes the moment of final choice.

But maybe the next election will produce a different behaviour pattern. Certainly there are no Ernie Bevins left to press the case for ‘a Union Jack on top of it’ whatever the cost.

But if public spending is still tight and growth spluttering, a construction bill of £20bn and a through life cost over 50 years of £80-100bn might appear unmanageable. Then a number of possibilities flicker.

Cripps and Dalton might have their belated way. A decision might be reached that the economy can't bear the load. The Vanguard boats could be run on until they are no longer serviceable and that's it. Or they may swiftly be brought home to Faslane and decommissioned to save running costs.

It may be the hour of George Brown and Michael Stewart's interwar Fulham Co-operative Society; no more continuous at-sea deterrence with a replacement system cheaper and less top-of-the-range than Trident-carrying 'Successor' class submarines.

Or, if the Conservatives win an overall majority and govern solo, a more slimly configured version of the status quo with fewer missiles and warheads but four boats sustaining continuous at-sea deterrence and a 'Bloody Union Jack on Top of It' through to the 2050s which will give Britain 100 years of an operational bomb (the first one having been delivered to RAF Wittering in December 1953).

Who knows? The question is – and will remain for sometime – on heat, and the Quinlan criteria will retain their salience. My guess, and it's only that, is that in some form or another, the UK will remain a nuclear weapon state. If we decided to finish, it would be a considerable moment, the rupturing of a long history that goes back to the pioneering days 70 plus years ago during the Second World War and the repudiation of a sizeable 'gut instinct'. And, as that connoisseur of we Brits, Jean Monnet, remarked of the British people in the late 1970s – another time of financial stress, nuclear weapons debate and anxiety about our place in the world – 'they have not suddenly stepped aside from history'. That, I think, still applies to us – nuclear weapons and all – and, in my judgement, it's set to continue. My guess is that in the 2050s there will be a 'bloody Union Jack' on top of a British Bomb aboard a Royal Navy submarine somewhere in the North Atlantic.