

**CHURCH OF ENGLAND  
MISSION AND PUBLIC AFFAIRS COUNCIL**

**SUBMISSION TO THE HOUSE OF COMMONS' DEFENCE COMMITTEE'S  
INQUIRY INTO THE GOVERNMENT'S WHITE PAPER ON "THE FUTURE  
OF THE UK'S NUCLEAR DETERRENT"**

1. The Church of England welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Defence Committee's inquiry on the Government's White Paper on "The Future of the UK's Nuclear Deterrent". The Mission and Public Affairs Council of the Church of England is the body responsible for overseeing research and comment on social and political issues on behalf of the Church. The Council comprises a representative group of bishops, clergy and lay people with interest and expertise in the relevant areas, and reports to the General Synod through the Archbishops' Council.

**Executive Summary**

2. We agree that it is a fundamental responsibility of any Government to provide for the security of the UK and its citizens now and for the future, against both real and potential threats, including nuclear aggression and blackmail. Security is the good that makes possible all other goods and the defence of the United Kingdom remains the first duty of the Government. Yet, since nuclear weapons belong by virtue of their terrifying power in a different category to any other weapons' system it is important to ask what kind of security they offer us and in what circumstances, if any, their use or threat of use can be ethically justified.
3. There is much in the White Paper that is to be welcomed. The White Paper is in our view right to seek to confine its arguments for the retention of a nuclear capability solely to the case for deterring nuclear threats and to resist the temptation to broaden its use to counter lesser threats such as chemical and biological weapons. We welcome the proposed reductions in the stockpile of the UK's nuclear arsenal. These, and a readiness to reduce the number of submarines necessary to maintain this deterrent capability underline the UK's track record in progressively reducing its capability in line with its international obligations under the Non Proliferation Treaty. We also agree that the question of what constitutes a reasonable insurance policy in a dangerous and uncertain world is important and difficult. It is right that Governments should err on the side of caution.
4. The White Paper does not adequately address the ethical concerns that many Christians and people of other faiths and none have around the manufacture and use of nuclear weapons. These concerns are no less grave now than in the days of the Cold War. There are three issues here. First, it is essential in our view that ethical issues concerning the manufacture and use of nuclear weapons are fully considered in the debate which the Government has invited on its proposals. Second, in addition to the issue of the moral legitimacy of a nuclear deterrent, it is also necessary that the public debate address the White paper's deliberate ambiguity as to what might constitute a minimum nuclear

deterrence. That deliberate ambiguity may be justified, but it must not be allowed to foreclose the debate. Third, in the debate the Government also needs, in our view, to demonstrate more convincingly than in the White Paper how the proposed deterrent would add to the security of the UK and to the UK's ability to act effectively in the service of peace, justice and prosperity in the wider world. These concerns and questions must be examined vigorously over the coming months. The Government has a solemn obligation to ensure that all the facts necessary for an informed debate are made available.

## **Nuclear Deterrence in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

5. The White Paper accepts that the security environment has changed significantly since the end of the Cold War, but it argues that while it is not possible accurately to predict the global security environment over the next 20 to 50 years there are worrying trends in international security that legitimate the retention of a minimum nuclear deterrence, namely nuclear proliferation and state-sponsored terrorists armed with nuclear weapons. This raises three key questions. The key question, even for those who accept the legitimacy of nuclear deterrence, is whether this is meant to imply that given the inherent unpredictability of international relations the UK will continue to require a nuclear deterrent *in perpetuity*.
6. Other than para 2.12, the White Paper provides inadequate evidence as to whether the Government can envisage a situation where Britain does give up its nuclear deterrent. Does the Government believe that the possession of an independent nuclear deterrent is a temporary or a permanent feature of Britain's strategic capabilities? If it is temporary, then what are the conditions under which such a capability would be surrendered? If it is permanent, then the case needs to be made, particularly given Britain's Treaty obligations under international law.
7. The second key question is whether, post Cold War, deterrence will work: can those states and non-state actors that threaten UK security actually be deterred from undertaking acts of aggression by either existing or new approaches to nuclear deterrence? This needs to be much more fully argued than in the current White Paper. Beyond the acknowledgement that nuclear weapons pose "a uniquely terrible threat" and should only be used in "extreme circumstances", and only then in a way "consistent with the application of the general rules of international law", the White Paper offers only the pronouncement in para 3.4 that: "We deliberately maintain ambiguity about precisely when, how, and at what scale we would contemplate use of our nuclear deterrent. We will not simplify the calculations of a potential aggressor by defining more precisely the circumstances in which we might consider the use of nuclear capabilities. Hence we will not rule in or out the first use of nuclear weapons."
8. This deliberate ambiguity at the heart of the Government's thinking is further spelled out in para 3.11 when the White Paper notes: "Any state that we can hold responsible for assisting a nuclear attack on our vital interests can expect that this would lead to a proportionate attack."

9. We acknowledge that there is merit in keeping potential enemies guessing. Nevertheless, given the grave ethical issues involved with any use or threat of use of nuclear weapons, it is legitimate to ask in a democracy, bearing in mind our obligations under international law, in what sorts of circumstances their use might be justified and proportionate in the terms of the just war doctrine. The White Paper gives inadequate treatment of that legitimate question which must be asked if the public debate is to be meaningful.
10. In our view the fear that making any further information about this publicly available would reduce the credibility of the UK's deterrent is overstated. Such reticence might have been excusable at the height of the Cold War when the UK faced the massive Soviet nuclear arsenal, but is it acceptable in today's circumstances? This position is not necessarily shared by other comparably sized nuclear powers, as evidenced by the readiness of President Chirac openly to discuss these issues. The modernisation and adaptation of the French nuclear arsenal to strike at a potential aggressor's political, economic and military power centres in a comparatively discriminate way marks a significant departure from the 'anti-cities' strategy of the Cold War. It is disappointing that a similar shift in strategy and a move towards greater public transparency is not reflected in the UK's White Paper.
11. The third question left unasked and unanswered by the White Paper concerns the targeting strategy for these weapons. Can we be assured that the war plan for Trident, and any successor, will be based only and wholly on an explicit counter combatant targeting strategy, holding at risk military and related assets, and keeping non-combatant casualties to a proportionate minimum? This is a crucial question in the context of the ethical arguments against nuclear weapons which are strikingly omitted from the interesting essay BOX 3.1 setting out the government's response to various counter-arguments. Since this is probably the most widely held objection to nuclear deterrence the omission is very curious.
12. The Government may wish to argue that the ethical challenge can be ignored on the grounds that deterrence has worked and will work, and so we do not need to enquire how. But that misses the key point. For deterrence to work there must be at least a possibility that the weapons might be used: that possibility, however remote, underpins the effectiveness of deterrence. If there were no circumstances in which the use of nuclear weapons would be morally permissible then there can be *no* ethically acceptable deterrence. To assess the validity of the deterrence argument, therefore, there must be some indication of the circumstances in which the weapons *might* be used.
13. Addressing this ethical concern would not require the Government to disclose details of targeting plans or precise details of the envisaged circumstances of use. All it would require is for the Government to indicate what is its overall strategy, including the parameters for the weapons' use and any limits within which any targeting policy would be set. That would enable the Government to explain how their use would be consistent with the UK's obligations in international law, as well as with ethical principles, in particular the just war

requirements that any use of weapons should be proportionate to the objective to be achieved and discriminate in order to minimise non-combatant casualties.

14. In our view it would be extremely difficult – many in the Church would say impossible – to reconcile with just war requirements of *jus in bello* an ‘anti-city’ strategy of the kind that was fashionable at the height of the Cold War. Now other more discriminate targeting options are in theory available and technically feasible in a way they were not in the early days of deterrence. Are they part of the Government’s thinking? It is crucial to know, if the debate on Britain’s nuclear deterrent policy is to be meaningful.
15. If the Government is not willing to engage in such discussions it leaves itself vulnerable to the charge from those opposed to nuclear deterrence that the use or very possession of nuclear weapons is immoral and somehow coarsens the moral fabric of the nation. If it is unwilling to say anything further about the terms under which it might use its deterrent, then how are Parliament and the wider public meant to evaluate the efficacy and utility of such an instrument, even assuming that they are prepared to accept the principle of nuclear deterrence? The Government therefore should set out the parameters for the use of the weapons and explain how they meet the UK’s obligations in international law and the ethical principles that underpin them. It is important to remember that the credibility of the national deterrence strategy depends to a significant extent on public backing since an assessment of that will itself play into the calculations of potential aggressors.

### **Ensuring Effective Deterrence**

16. The White Paper signals a redefinition of what the Government believes constitutes an acceptable minimum deterrence. The envisaged reduction in the numbers of operationally available warheads from fewer than 200 to fewer than 160 and a corresponding reduction in the size of the UK’s overall stockpile is to be welcomed as is the option of reducing from four to three the number of submarines. These developments underline the UK’s good track record – better than that of the other existing nuclear powers – in progressively reducing its capability in line with its NPT obligations.
17. However, the White Paper gives no explanation as to how this further 20% reduction in the UK’s warhead stockpile was reached. The figure appears to have been plucked out of the air with no indication given as to the criteria used and calculations involved. Would further cuts say of 25%, 35% or even 50% be possible without undermining the credibility of the UK’s deterrence?
18. What is missing from the White Paper is any definition of what constitutes an acceptable minimum deterrence and any explanation as to how this definition was reached. The Government needs to take advantage of the opportunity provided by the debate on the White Paper to explain the proposed reduction and to explore whether further cuts are possible. Are the 20% cuts at the upper or bottom end of the spectrum of what constitutes a minimum nuclear

deterrent? Is it possible to retain a minimum deterrence with a cut of 50%?  
What criteria did the Government use to reach the proposed 20% reduction?

### **Deterrent Options, Solutions and Costs**

19. We fear that the White Paper paints an unduly optimistic picture of the potential procurement costs for replacing Trident and the impact that this might have on either the annual defence budget or the UK's conventional military capability.
20. In Section 5 of the White Paper it is estimated that the procurement costs for replacing Trident will be in the region of £15-20 billion (at 2006 prices) for four submarines and the associated equipment and infrastructure. It calculates that the procurement costs are likely on average to be the equivalent of around 3% of the current defence budget. How much confidence can be placed in these estimates? Evidence from the past is not encouraging: since Trident became operational in 1994, annual expenditure for capital and operating costs, including the costs for the Atomic Weapons Establishment, ranged between 3 and 5.5% of the annual defence budget.
21. The White Paper correctly points out in para 5.12 that it is not possible to be sure what the size of the defence budget will be over the timescale involved. However, most defence analysts believe the long term reduction in the defence budget is very unlikely to be reversed, and many believe that defence spending could well fall further, probably to about 1.7% of GDP by 2020. If they are correct, then the procurement costs for replacing Trident seem bound to consume a larger proportion of the defence budget than predicted by the White Paper with the consequent knock on effect on the UK's capacity to undertake other operations, including peace-keeping and stabilisation.
22. Any decision on the long-term future of Britain's nuclear deterrence needs to take into account both the possible threats to our security and the capability of the British armed forces to respond effectively to those threats. The publication of the White Paper has occurred at a time when British armed forces appear increasingly stretched and over-committed in various peacekeeping operations. Public confidence has been shaken by media coverage that makes much of the perceived lack of basic equipment issued to those members of the UK's armed services currently deployed overseas. Recent stories have also drawn attention to the inadequate quality of much military accommodation. All this has raised the question whether, rather than committing resources to replacing Trident to meet an uncertain future threat, the Government would do better strengthening and renewing Britain's conventional armed forces for the threats and challenges that they are already facing.
23. Against this volatile background it is not sufficient for the White Paper merely to assert as it does in para 5.15 that: "The investment required to maintain our deterrent will not come at the expense of the conventional capabilities our armed forces need". The Government needs to provide more substantial argument and evidence that a decision to renew Trident will not put at risk the

capability and capacity of Britain's armed forces to undertake demanding military responsibilities outside its immediate neighbourhood, both now and in the future. At the very least, it should consider whether the initial costs of replacing Britain's minimum nuclear deterrent could be met from a separately identified vote rather than from the current defence budget.

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January 2007