24 February 2010

Thank you for contacting me in relation to the replacement of Trident and expressing your views on the issue. This is a controversial and often polarising question which people on both sides of the debate have strong feelings about and I wanted to write to you to outline my position on it and what the Government is doing.

The UK has been at the vanguard of moves to reduce the number of nuclear weapons in the world. The Government have already taken a number of unilateral steps to ensure we retain only the absolute minimum capability required to provide effective deterrence. Indeed the UK is widely seen as the most forward leaning of the recognised nuclear weapon states on the disarmament agenda. For instance, the UK has cut the explosive power of our nuclear arsenal by 75 per cent since the end of the Cold War and we now have fewer than 160 operationally available nuclear warheads. As and when discussions between the US and Russia have progressed to the level at which our involvement would prove useful, we stand willing to include our system in broader multilateral arms reduction negotiations. In addition, the Prime Minister told the United Nations last September, that he asked our National Security Committee to investigate the technical feasibility of reducing the number of our nuclear submarines from four to three. This work is ongoing but highlights the Government’s commitment to lead fellow nuclear nations towards nuclear disarmament.

The UK has also demonstrated its commitment to multilateral nuclear disarmament and counter proliferation in a number of other ways too. The UK was among the first to ratify the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty. We have called regularly on all states, which have not yet done so, to do the same (particularly those whose ratification is required before the Treaty can enter into force). The UK has also been at the forefront of efforts for over a decade in getting the Conference on Disarmament in Geneva to start negotiations on a Fissile Material Cut-Off Treaty. In September 2009 the Government hosted a conference of the recognised nuclear weapon states to discuss confidence building measures towards nuclear disarmament.

However, this does not mean that the time is right for the UK to unilaterally disarm. Prior to the Parliamentary vote in March 2007, which approved the development of a replacement for Trident, the Ministry of Defence carefully analysed the current and likely international security environment. This work was published in a White Paper titled “The
Future of the UK’s Nuclear Deterrent” in December 2006. The White Paper concluded that there were still risks to UK security from emerging nuclear weapons states and through state sponsored terrorism, and that the UK’s security was best guaranteed through the continued operation of a nuclear deterrent. Thus the Government will remain committed to having one nuclear armed submarine on patrol at all times, which is called Continuous At Sea Deterrence.

In regards to the financial implications of maintaining our nuclear deterrent; one must put the large financial sums involved in the Trident programme in context. As stated in the 2006 White Paper, mentioned above, the Government estimates that procurement costs of the new submarines and associated equipment and infrastructure will be in the region of £15-20 billion (at 2006-07 prices): for a four boat fleet (£11-14bn for a class of four submarines, £2-3bn for support infrastructure and £2-3bn for the replacement of the warhead should that prove necessary). Furthermore, the years of maximum expenditure are expected to be principally 2012-27 and In-service through-life costs are expected to be approximately 5-6% of the overall defence budget.

To provide you with even more context when looking at these large financial sums; the Government estimates that Trident will cost around £1.5bn a year, which is about 0.1% of GDP. Whilst this amount has been spent on Trident in the last ten years we have seen record increases in spending on health and education and the budget for international development has increased to four times its original size. Equally, housing and climate change are key priorities for Government spending which have seen significant rises this year to reflect this, so it is not the case that maintaining an independent nuclear deterrent will stop the Government investing in other important areas. Compare the £1.5bn a year cost of Trident to the £137.7bn spent by the Department of Work and Pensions in 2007/08, and it would appear not as ostentatious an amount as at first glance.

Therefore, I believe that maintaining Britain’s nuclear deterrence by replacing Trident is not only affordable, but also necessary in protecting all British citizens and protecting UK national interests.

I am grateful to you for contacting me and letting me know your views on this issue. I will pass these on to the Government and if there are any further matters you wish to raise with me, please do not hesitate to get in touch.

Yours sincerely,

John Robertson
Member of Parliament for Glasgow North West