

By a special correspondent at the UK's governing Labour Party Conference

I've seen the future of the Labour Party and defence. It looks and smells like the Labour Party and defence in the nineties. In other words, its not a pretty sight for those of a sensible disposition!

Walking around the conference exhibition, the last of the defence industry exhibitors from years gone by, BAE Systems, has gone. Their only outwardly visible appearance was at an 8am Monday breakfast meeting on which we reported yesterday.

There were representatives from half a dozen defence companies around, but they seemed to be mainly confined to the Radisson, the principal conference hotel within the Colditz-like security cordon.

The floor has been ceded to the peaceniks. CND and its personable chairman (I refuse to call her an object I sit upon, sexism regardless) Kate Hudson was to the fore. CND also held a fringe meeting with the "usual suspects" like Tony Benn, plus two MPs. A young activist told me they were holding their fire on Trident replacement until Initial Gate (his words, showing a thorough understanding of the UK defence procurement process.) CND is concentrating its current campaigning on US anti missile defence in Europe – something about which Kate Hudson has been invited to write for Defence Viewpoints.

Labour action for peace and World Disarmament Campaign had their booth too. The redoubtable Tony, a veteran of many a past Labour conference, expounded on Russian thermobaric weapons as an alternative to nukes – a slightly bizarre conversation.

The only stand that came close to industry was the eternal Keep our future afloat campaign, representing Barrow in Furness where subs and surface ships are built. Defence hacks being the ultimate cynics, one wondered how far this was essential activity and how far it was funding for the Party. It was extremely noticeable that there was a preponderance of taxpayer or Trade Union funded organisations on show and not many from the sharp end of the commercial world.

Prime Minister Gordon Brown has been putting himself about a bit. He was on stage for the speech of Foreign Secretary David Miliband, and led the standing ovation. His speech had been intense but not compelling to this observer, with watered down Blairisms that he didn't quite bring off.

Defence as a topic has been parked in a "Labour in the world" slot for some years, and after pleas for women trade unionists imprisoned in Columbia, and linking exports to human rights the stage managed debate went off into the realms of an "emergency motion" on Zimbabwe – another country far away, about which we can do nothing, with a number of speakers who

weren't born here waxing lyrical.

Obviously to meet the Prime Ministerial diary, this worthy but irrelevant topic was broken off to shoehorn in a set piece contribution for Secretary of State for Defence Des Browne, for which a returned GB also sat on the platform. Browne is far more comfortable with "pay and rations" issues than kit and tactics. As nearly half the audience had departed after the wunderkind had done his thing, applause at six or eight points was muted, brief, and no standing ovation. There was scant effort to sell the "Britain a force for good", or fighting abroad so we don't have to fight at home, arguments to a sceptical audience.

But there was one announcement which we welcome, and which we used as a headline for the full text of the Browne speech we posted yesterday - "special service demands special treatment". The devil will of course lie in the detail, and talking in the bars afterwards there was some debate about whether the package would or should include University, as the US GI scheme allows.

The speech had started with praise for the Help for Heroes campaign, whose 50,000 strong rally at Twickenham and £12 million fundraising were lavishly praised by the Secretary of State. Fair enough Minister, but why is it necessary – the State should take care of its wounded and dependants fully - and somehow the Government isn't tapping into that sort of expression of support to extract proper funding from a recalcitrant Treasury for defence and the armed forces that the State commands to do its bidding.

In his Leader speech, Prime Minister Gordon Brown praise what he called "the best armed forces in any part of the world." But it's not what you say, it's what you do Prime Minister!

The former Shadow Secretary of State for Defence, now U K Defence Forum patron Lord Clark of Windermere, was tasked by Tony Blair before he came to power to ensure that defense was a score-draw for Labour. But it now seems to be turning its back again on defence as an important issue, leaving the field to the Conservative Opposition (on whose conference we'll report next week).

The next iteration of the public expenditure plans will again be crucial for defence. We shall see. Maybe we will then have to go even further back in the Cromwellian past to see the future – you have achieved so little for all the time you have sat here, in the name of God, go!