

By Tony Purton

After declining to take part in any public debate on the subject, defence secretary Des Browne appeared before the Defence Committee of the House of Commons to give evidence on the government's white paper "The Future of the UK's Strategic Nuclear Deterrent" published at the end of 2006 announcing the government's decision to replace the existing Trident system with another submarine-based system.

Mr Browne made it clear that the white paper was intended to 'inform the public' about the government's decision rather than to invite debate; he said that decisions about the existing nuclear deterrent had not been publicly debated. Provision would be made for discussion of the white paper in the Commons in March.

Britain's nuclear deterrent is not designed to be used tactically alongside conventional weapons. It would only be used in self defence as an alternative to conventional weapons. First use was not ruled out as part of an effective deterrent posture. Britain has only 1% of the world total of nuclear warheads. There is no known intent or capability of a nuclear threat against the UK today, but nobody can be sure how the world will develop over the next 50 years. The Trident replacement system would not be funded at the expense of conventional forces.

At the end of the session, Defence Committee chairman James Arbuthnot MP remarked that Britain's nuclear deterrent was not so much a shield as a sword!

The debate on Trident replacement took place on 14 March resulting in overwhelming Parliamentary support for the government's proposal, despite a significant rebellion among Labour back-benchers.

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