

The clock is ticking at the Labour Party Conference in Brighton. Maybe - or maybe not - for Gordon Brown's government. But certainly for the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament.

As at lunch time today £5,565,257.17 was what it was indicating as the running costs of the current Trident deterrent since the start of the conference. That's the equivalent of £3,700 per minute (excluding AWE Aldermaston, once described by ex Defence Secretary Des Browne as a world class "decommissioning laboratory").

Trident overshadowed the first full day. Could the sacrifice of it (or more likely its replacement) bridge the nation's debt chasm ?

Minister for the Armed Forces Bill Rammell rather thinks not. At the second of the series of Defence Matters meetings, he said defence cuts were not a "get out of jail free" card for the nation's economic ills. He refuted a Greenpeace claim that the through life cost of the Trident replacement would be £100 bn, and, of the new Carriers, £33 bn. He conceded that, after real increases in spending of 10% over Labour's reign, it was "time to think long and hard about how we configure defence".

It's not just a Whitehall exercise, he said. He's looking for plenty of C's after the Green Paper is published in the New Year. He didn't mention the conditionality of Labour's re-election, but Consensus, Consistency, Coherence. Capabilities too. And Challenges. And an advisory Council.

And possibly Crowds. He's looking to engage with the academic community; more or less promised public meetings; and maybe even involving the Armed Forces. Now there's a radical thought. Involving the Armed Forces in a Defence Review.

What he was clear about was that there are no easy options. He stressed repeatedly that the case must be made to the British public to gain their support for the strategic role of the UK, based on the security case. From this could flow good things, like high-tech jobs, R & D spinoff, exports.

He did point out that analysts weren't good at predicting the future, and that "state on state challenges" were likely still to be there. This was reflected in the Q&As, and the chatter amongst the delegates afterwards. There was the certainty of the nuclear abolitionists, to the exclusion of all other defence issues, versus the pleas of the defence industry - tell us what you us to do, so we can invest in the R&T and the skills to enable you to achieve it while retaining the nation's operational sovereignty.

The interesting number soundbites came from Alex Dorrian, president of the newly amalgamated Aerospace Defence and Security trade group. Every job in defence sustains 1.6 elsewhere in the economy; for every £1 spent on new kit, £3 was needed to support it, and £10 to operate it through its life.

But, as the urgent requirements for Iraq and Afghanistan have shown, the UK must control the intellectual property and there needs to be a strong defence industrial base ready to swing into action. And willing to go close to the front - around 6,500 civilians currently being deployed outside the UK in support of the kit. The investment in R&D today results in the battle-winning technology in ten years' time.

A podcast of the session can be found on the ePolitix website shortly. The Defence Matters debate will be carried on at the Conservative Party Conference in Manchester next week. Defence Viewpoints will be there!