

# Britain's WMD: Jeremy Corbyn's Chance to Strike a Blow for Nuclear Sanity

By [David Lowry](#)

Global Research, October 13, 2015

[The Ecologist](#) 13 October 2015

Region: [Europe](#)

Theme: [Militarization and WMD](#)

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*The Conservatives' commitment to owning, renewing and using the UK's nuclear weapons was cheered to the rafters at their party conference, writes David Lowry. But it has left them vulnerable to Corbyn at tomorrow's Prime Minister's Questions – should he decide to expose their nuclear hypocrisy.*

Right now Jeremy Corbyn and his strategists are hard at work on a question of immense importance – tomorrow's Prime Minister's Questions.

And it's just possible that they haven't realised that David Cameron's and Michael Fallon's speeches to the Conservative Party conference have left Corbyn facing a gaping open goal.

And yes, it's on a matter on which Corbyn is meant to be on the defensive, not the attack: nuclear weapons. Ever since he was elected as Labour Party Leader, he has come under heavy fire for his principled opposition to nuclear weapons of mass destruction in general, and Trident in particular.

The trouble kicked off with Corbyn's unequivocal pledge last month [never to use nuclear weapons](#). "I don't think we should be spending £100bn on renewing Trident. That is a quarter of our defence budget", Corbyn said in an interview on BBC Radio's Today Programme.

"187 countries don't feel the need to have a nuclear weapon to protect their security, why should those five need it themselves? We are not in the era of the Cold War any more ... I am opposed to the use of nuclear weapons, I am opposed to the holding of nuclear weapons. I want to see a nuclear-free world. I believe it is possible."

Response: widespread media condemnation, and his own MPs and even [Shadow Cabinet members denouncing](#) his position in clear and certain terms, among them Hilary Benn, Angela Eagle and Andy Burnham.

Cue Tory Party conference

Pressing home his apparent advantage, Cameron told Andrew Marr on BBC1's Sunday morning politics programme: "If you ... believe like me that Britain should keep the ultimate insurance policy of an independent nuclear deterrent, you have to accept there are circumstances in which its use would be justified ... If you give any other answer then you are, frankly, undermining our national security, undermining our deterrent."

He went on to wax lyrical on the topic in his [set-piece leader's speech](#) to the Conservative Party conference in Manchester: "My first duty as Prime Minister is to keep people safe. Our

belief in strong defence and sound money ...

“In government, I have a team who keep us safe at home and abroad ... Justine Greening, Michael Fallon, Philip Hammond and Theresa May. And because our independent nuclear deterrent is our ultimate insurance policy, this Government will order four new trident submarines.”

The PM's pro-Trident comments followed the equally [robust backing given to nuclear weapons](#) by defence secretary Michael Fallon, who made a typical red-meat rant to the swivel-eyed Tory faithful 'representatives'. Having played the 'Tories are the true patriots' card, he turned to Labour's equivocation over Trident (Leader against; Party against; most MPs for):

“How did [Labour] respond to their election defeat? By electing a leader who would weaken our national security – who would scrap Trident, leave NATO, and can't think of circumstances in which he would use our Armed Forces. This is no time for Britain to retreat from the world, to let terror triumph, or to put our people in peril.

“The biggest investment decision this Parliament will have to take is to replace the ballistic missile submarines that provide our nuclear deterrent. For 46 years our deterrent has been deployed every hour of every day. Anyone thinking of ending this unbroken patrol has to be absolutely certain that no nuclear threats will emerge in the 2030s, 2040s and 2050s.

“I'm not prepared to take that gamble so we will ask MPs of all parties to put national security first and support building four new ballistic missile submarines. And we won't let any coalition of left-wing Labour MPs and the SNP stop us.”

Foreign Secretary [Philip Hammond maintained the theme](#) in his own speech: “We now have a Labour Party which poses a serious risk to our national security ... while we are renewing Britain's nuclear deterrent, he wants to scrap it ... Standing up to Russia because our security depends on upholding international law and punishing those who breach it.”

Tory sheep in wolves clothing?

The British public would never guess from these apparently diametrically opposite views that Corbyn and Cameron – and his defence and foreign secretaries – actually agree on the importance of nuclear disarmament.

Eight months ago, Mr Hammond foreign office mandarins hosted a two day high-level meeting at its London conference venue, Lancaster House, of senior diplomatic representatives of the other four members of the self-appointed nuclear weapons club on the United Nations Security Council, the so-called Permanent Five (P5).

This brought to London Wang Qun, Director General, Department of Arms Control and Disarmament for China; Hélène Duchêne, Director for Strategic Affairs for France; Rose Gottemoeller, Under Secretary for Arms Control and International Security for the United States; and Grigory Berdennikov, Ambassador-at-Large for Russia, to meet with the FCO's top disarmament diplomat, Peter Jones, Director for Defence and International Security.

Foreign Office minister Tobias Ellwood told MPs at the time: “The London P5 Conference

covered a wide range of issues relevant to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, encompassing disarmament, non-proliferation and the peaceful uses of nuclear energy.”

After their meeting on 6 February the P5 diplomats [issued a joint statement](#) through the Foreign Office stressing, in a very interesting passage co-signed by Russia:

“At their 2015 Conference the P5 restated their belief that the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty remains the essential cornerstone for the nuclear non-proliferation regime and the foundation for the pursuit of nuclear disarmament, and is an essential contribution to international security and stability ...

“The P5 reaffirmed that a step-by-step approach to nuclear disarmament that promotes international stability, peace and undiminished and increased security for all remains the only realistic and practical route to achieving a world without nuclear weapons.”

Barely weeks before, Mr Fallon had told MPs in a [Parliamentary debate on Trident](#): “we also share the vision of a world that is without nuclear weapons, achieved through multilateral disarmament.” (Hansard, 20 January 2015, column 105)

You would scarcely believe it from the red-blooded rants at the Tory conference last week. You would not believe either from the British mainstream media’s jingoistic tub-thumping pro-bomb reportage that opposition to nuclear weapons is the norm outside our narrow, myopic politics.

So here is the trap that Corbyn can set for Cameron in tomorrow’s PMQs: challenge him to agree with the earlier statements on the necessity of nuclear disarmament made by his own ministers and agreed by the P5.

If Cameron agrees, victory for Corbyn. If he dissents, the deadly follow-up question: “Is the Prime Minister aware that these statements with which he so vehemently disagrees are those of his own ministers?”

But the real point has to be, not to score points in PMQs, but to bring about a much needed restoration of nuclear sanity in British politics.

The broad movement against nuclear weapons

There is in fact nothing ‘extreme’ or ‘unpatriotic’ in the idea that the world should get rid of nuclear weapons.

For example, peaking at the Hay literary festival in 2013 the hugely respected international statesman and former UN weapons inspector [Hans Blix pointedly asked if Trident](#) was “required to protect UK independence or UK pride?” He went on to insist that it is time for Britain to halt its Trident nuclear programme.

Harold Wilson led the Labour Party to victory in the 1964 General Election – at the height of the Cold War and only two years after the Cuban Missile crisis – backed by an anti-nuclear election manifesto that stated:

“We are not prepared any longer to waste the country’s resources on endless duplication of strategic nuclear weapons. We shall propose the renegotiation of the Nassau agreement” to buy Polaris, the predecessor of Trident.

“Our stress will be on the strengthening of our conventional regular forces so that we can contribute our share to Nato defence and also fulfil our peacekeeping commitments to the Commonwealth and the UN. We are against the development of national nuclear deterrents.”

Last month on 29th September, the Senate of Jordan held a special session on nuclear abolition which was attended by all 75 members. Abdur-Rauf Rawabdeh, [President of the Senate](#), stated: “Israel’s insistence on possessing nuclear weapons and its refusal to join the Non-Proliferation Treaty will most likely lead to a nuclear arms race in the region.”

For this reason, Mr Rawabdeh added, “it is vital to increase political will for a Middle East Zone Free of Nuclear Weapons”, and to “support the Iran deal as an important step towards the achievement of such a zone.” Countries must, he continued, “activate the United Nations Charter that bans war and stipulates that conflicts should be resolved through negotiations and international law.”

Jordan’s position is a modern day reflection of the [very first resolution of the First Committee of the United Nations General Assembly](#), held in London in January 1946, which included the bold call for “the elimination from national armaments of atomic weapons and all other major weapons adaptable to mass destruction.”

That was followed, in 1955, by the [Mainau Declaration](#) against nuclear weapons, signed by Albert Einstein – perhaps the greatest scientific genius of the last century – and over 50 other Nobel laureates.

We must welcome the fact that Jeremy Corbyn has brought the spirit of the UN’s admirable first resolution and the Mainau Declaration home to British politics. We can only hope that his sanity is contagious – both within his party, and across the spectrum of British politics.

*Dr David Lowry is Senior research fellow, Institute for Resource and Security Studies, Cambridge, MA, USA.*

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