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SECRETARY OF STATE

Our ref: D/S of S/BA MC02318/2009  
Your ref: 01091783

15<sup>th</sup> June 2009

*New Jessica*

Thank you for your letter of 21 May referring to the concerns of some of your constituents about the future of the UK's minimum nuclear deterrent capability.

As you will be aware, the Government published a White Paper: "The Future of the UK's Nuclear Deterrent" (Cm 6994) [available at <http://www.official-documents.gov.uk/document/cm69/6994/6994.asp>] in December 2006, setting out the steps necessary to maintain the UK's minimum strategic nuclear deterrent beyond the life of the existing system. Whilst the three former senior officers whose letter was published in The Times on 16 January are entitled to their views, on 14 March 2007 the House of Commons debated the issue during a lengthy and full discussion, in which many Members spoke. The House voted by a large majority to support the Government's decisions. The House also endorsed the decision to take further steps towards meeting the UK's disarmament responsibilities under Article VI of the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT).

We have consulted widely on this programme. We set out our decisions and the reasons for them in detail and in advance of commencing the design and concept stage. We engaged in a wide ranging debate both within and outside of Parliament. We submitted the decision in principle to maintain our existing nuclear deterrent capability to a vote in the House of Commons. We have also acknowledged that additional important decisions will need to be taken over the coming years and that Parliament will wish to take a close interest in them.

We have committed to do everything we can to keep the House fully informed on progress with this programme. As we have said before, it is our expectation that decisions will be taken on the Initial Gate for the programme to develop a new class of submarine to replace the current Vanguard class in Autumn 2009. Initial Gate is about seeking down selection to one submarine design option to allow for detailed design work to be carried out. It is not a policy related

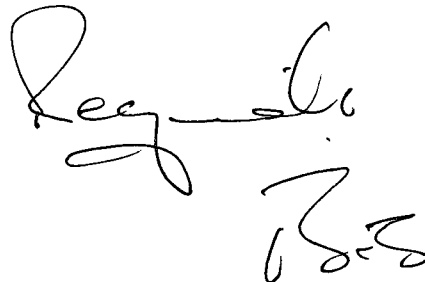
The Rt Hon Tessa Jowell MP  
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decision point, rather it is about evaluating the relative technical merits of potential designs. It is not normal for Parliament to be involved in Initial Gate decisions for procurement projects but we do propose to update Parliament on progress after Initial Gate. The main investment decision point for this programme is still several years away.

It is important to set the financial sums involved in the programme to maintain the nuclear deterrent in context. As stated in the 2006 White Paper, 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, mainly spread over the period 2012-27. For more than 50 years our independent nuclear deterrent has provided the ultimate assurance of our national security. In terms of their destructive power, nuclear weapons pose a uniquely terrible threat and consequently have a capability to deter acts of aggression that is of a completely different scale to any other form of deterrence. The UK would only consider using nuclear weapons in self-defence, including the defence of our NATO allies, and even then only in extreme circumstances. The Government believes that the investment in a capability of such vital importance to our national security is one that as a nation we can and should afford, whilst also continuing to invest in other priorities, such as measures to tackle poverty, climate change, health, housing and law and order, including the fight against terrorism.

The Government's position on the nuclear deterrent is clear. We believe that an independent nuclear deterrent is an essential part of our insurance against the uncertainties and risks of the future.

I hope this is helpful.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Bob Ainsworth', with a stylized flourish below it.

The Rt Hon Bob Ainsworth MP