

NUKES ON THE ROAD TO NOWHERE



There must, by now, be several generations of children with no knowledge of the Keystone Cops. For me, the Keystone Cops remain etched into my childhood memories of television. No dialogue was needed. The plot was always simple. Villains and the police always got things wrong. Mayhem ensued. The fun of it all was in the farce.

I was reminded of this on reading a recent report from Nukewatch about routine exercises that move Trident nuclear missiles around British roads, towns and cities. Nukewatch is a UK network of Citizens Weapons Inspectors who track all the Ministry of Defence manoeuvres and let us know what they are up to. My interest in the latest exercise came partly from the stop the convoy made near my own home in Nottingham, and partly because it descended into farce when the convoy got lost and separated. I was relieved they didn't call in for a

cuppa. It all happened in the early hours of 10th May 2007. The convoy was moving Trident warheads from the Atomic Weapons Establishment at Burghfield, outside London, to the naval base at Coulport in Scotland. They were trying out a new route up the M1 and had reached junction 25 by 5.00 am.

It had been a good two hours since the convoy's last 'comfort break' stop at MOD Bicester and the guys were clearly looking forward to stopping off at the Chetwynd barracks in Chilwell Nottingham. This was when confusion set in. The lead driver came off the motorway onto the A52 and, by mistake, turned towards Derby. The rest of the convoy – nukes included – followed suit. They proceeded to go back and forth along the A52, to the point where chaos took over.

As Tony Jillings, the Nukewatch monitor that night, reported later-

"...the drivers gave the appearance of being lost because, as I followed the support convoy on the dual carriageway, we met the Load Carriers coming the other way!"

At one point the convoy came off the A52, but at the large roundabout the breakdown truck, coach and large mobile emergency unit took a wrong turn of their own. There followed an unscheduled tour of a residential area that the Keystone Cops would have been proud of. The three point turn of a Trident missile system using your driveway must be a sight to wake up to. It took about 10 minutes of less than impressive manoeuvres around side streets for the last convoy vehicles to make it back to the roundabout... and they were still miles from the MOD base. There was a palpable sense of relief when they all finally made it to the Chilwell base in Nottingham.

The slapstick nature of this episode, however, raises an abundance of more serious issues. Each of the 'Load Carrier' trucks in the convoy can carry two fully armed Trident nuclear warheads; the equivalent of 16 Hiroshima bombs. This is something more than a couple of kids with an air rifle wandering the streets in the dead of night. Last year, after repeated requests under the Freedom of Information Act, the MOD conceded that the warheads could explode if they were involved in a "pile up" accident. No

need to rely on al Qaida, then, to create chaos. One run of traffic cones and road works and we create the chaos ourselves.

We should remember that all these manoeuvres are designed to keep the enemy guessing. After this lark, they will be trying to guess what the drivers were inhaling for much of the journey.

More than anything, however, it brings me back to the bizarre notion of 'security' that underpins these exercises, and the case for renewing Trident itself. The MOD still cannot identify a single country likely to attack Britain... with or without nuclear weapons. They cannot identify a single context in which we are likely to use them ourselves. And they cannot point to a single practical way in which we are safer for having them.

Trident Manoeuvres make no difference to the ability of our troops in Basra to go out of their barracks without the permanent fear of ambush or a road bomb. They make no difference to the safety of troops in Afghanistan. In fact, there isn't a single conflict situation that the international community has had to address, where Britain's possessions of nuclear weapons has been remotely relevant to either the negotiations or to the outcome.

The real significance of this little piece of convoy confusion is to be seen, not in the back streets of a suburban estate, but in the direction of travel Tony Blair leaves as his legacy. His own insecurity clings on to the nuclear delusions as a passport to world stage democracy. This ignores the immense work (and success) of non-nuclear states in brokering non-military solutions to some of today's most complex situations.

In failing to break the nuclear link, Blair parades his weakness rather than his strength. Hide as he may in the wings of debate, it is a judgement that applies to Gordon Brown too. A new generation of nuclear weapons will come at a cost of under equipping our conventional forces, underpaying our pensioners or under nourishing our kids.

To fuel the nuclear folly Blair/Brown will favour nuclear power, to guarantee the plutonium that the folly requires. To make nuclear power look viable they will feed subsidies into it via carbon credits (defining nuclear as 'clean' energy despite the massive costs of managing its waste for the next 10,000 years). And all of this for a global influence that will also get lost somewhere between Nottingham and Derby.

It was fitting that the Trident nuclear convoy should get lost at the same time that Labour faces the same predicament. Obsessed with similar insecurities and delusions, Brown's trucks will be as lost as Blair's. It is a matter of judgement not navigation. The nukes themselves are the road to nowhere. Better to take them off our streets than send them chasing delusions in the dead of night.