

Defence: the great debate to come

THIS country is living beyond its means. So there is, of course, a case for the Government to cut spending on defence. And there can be no doubt that the decision to replace the Polaris missile by Trident at a cost of between £5 and £6 thousand million must be at the expense of the existing budgets of the three Services. The Government is faced with an awkward choice of either doing away with one or more of our commitments or in engaging in "salary cuts," which is what Mr Mulley as Labour's Defence Secretary did in the late 'seventies.

I believe that the Tories' new Defence Secretary, Mr John Nott, plans to introduce, in July—if he can persuade the Overseas and Defence Committee of the Cabinet to his point of view—the biggest cut in Britain's defences since the Sandys White Paper of 1957. The Ministry of Defence has, after much agony and soul-searching, agreed a package which it is recommending to the committee.

Given the approval of that body, whose members include the Prime Minister, Lord Carrington, Sir Geoffrey Howe, Mr Whitelaw, Mr Nott, Francis Pym and Peter Walker, the cuts will be agreed by the Cabinet as a whole, and a statement made to MPs in the week before the summer recess.

The package agreed by the Ministry of Defence will strengthen the air defence of the United Kingdom but it will cut the British Army of the Rhine by between one third and a half, and reduce even more drastically the Royal Navy, which at present makes up 70 per cent. of the Nato forces in the western Atlantic and Channel.

The contents of such a package would be sensational. While it is true that Britain spends considerably more of her gross domestic product on defence than does France and Germany (e.g. in 1980 Britain spent 5.2 per cent. of a smaller gross domestic product; France spent 4 per cent. and Germany, 3.3 per cent.) it can be argued that, for a middle ranking power in straightened economic circumstances, Britain spends too much of its available resources on defence and cuts have long been foreshadowed. But not on this scale. Were they to be carried out, as the Ministry of Defence now wishes, the effect on the United States, Germany and the Nato Alliance would be little short of catastrophic.

Britain contributes just under 55,000 men to the allied armies in Germany, an obligation entered into when we signed the Brussels Treaty in 1954. We provide 10 per cent. of the forces in the central region at the cost of some 10 per cent. of our defence budget which in April's White Paper is estima-

ted for 1981-82 to be £12.3 thousand million.

A reduction of between a third and a half of Rhine Army would break the spirit, if not the letter, of the Brussels Treaty and would tip the balance of power still further in favour of the Warsaw Pact. Mr Nott will argue that those troops who would remain will be better-equipped with the new Challenger tank and an anti-tank missile, and that the forces withdrawn could be returned to Germany at a moment's notice. But what is important to Nato are "forces in being," ready forces which do not have to be reinforced with great difficulty at a time of international tension, while the new equipment is promised anyway. Mr Nott would attempt to

There are moves afoot to cut defence spending below the point of Nato-worthiness, says

JULIAN CRITCHLEY
MP

place a gloss on his actions but he will not convince any of his allies.

As far as the Navy is concerned, warship orders have trickled away to nothing, while further cuts in the destroyer's frigate fleet of 59 ships would hamstring the Nato anti-submarine effort in the eastern Atlantic. The German Navy could not take our place, its forces are mainly in the Baltic and its ship-building programme is negligible. Nor does it now seem likely that the Navy will receive an additional £80 million which would enable a second submarine building yard to be opened, which means an indefinite delay to the hunter-killer submarine building programme in favour of Trident. The Navy stands to lose even more than does Rhine Army if Nott's new defence review wins Cabinet approval.

Much will depend on Lord Carrington who, as Foreign Secretary, will be acutely aware of the implications abroad. The Reagan Administration is spending huge sums each year in addition to its commitments inherited from President Carter. Mr Hall is keen to see America's allies spend more, not less, on defence. The German defence budget is already under pressure and Chancellor Schmidt would be obliged to make good the lack of numbers in Northern Army

Group with troops of the German army.

Lord Carrington, who is a former Secretary of State for Defence, may well argue against the scale of the proposed cuts in general and Rhine Army in particular; if he does, he will try to enlist Mr Whitelaw on his side. Against them will be ranged the economists, the Chancellor of the Exchequer and Mr Nott himself, who is by reputation in favour of retrenchment. What role will Mrs Thatcher play? On one hand she is the "Iron Lady" who never misses a chance to draw attention to Soviet ambition, on the other she is the First Lord of the Treasury, determined as such to cut Government spending.

Mrs Thatcher will be forced to resolve a particularly acute personal dilemma. What is certain is, were the cuts to be approved in toto, any recommendation of the Overseas Committee would be likely to meet with the approval of the Cabinet as a whole. We no longer enjoy Cabinet government, as was demonstrated when the Chancellor put his Budget proposals earlier this year to a hostile Cabinet—which proved powerless to influence them. It is perfectly possible for a similar exercise to take place later this month when Cabinet members, who know nothing of the complexities of the subject, would in all probability accept the recommendations made.

There would be no debate in Parliament. A statement outlining the conclusions of the Defence Review would be made at the very end of the session just as MPs and Peers were setting off for the beaches of Europe. There would be a half hour of Parliamentary questioning and that would be all. As it is, save for the Overseas Committee of the Cabinet, the Ministry of Defence and the Treasury, there is no debate now. And there should be.

Some will argue that defence should not be exempt from economies in Government spending. Many others will point to the process of Soviet rearmament, a process for which there seems no end in sight. Despite the fact that it has been Labour Governments which have spent more money on defence (the Tories have generally cut defence spending) the Conservative party in the House would, I believe, fiercely resist cuts of a magnitude at present suggested by the Ministry of Defence. If we are to have a second "Sandys White Paper," when conventional forces were sacrificed in favour of nuclear weapons, then at least we should know in good time, and in time to try to do something about it.

Julian Critchley is Conservative MP for Aldershot and former vice-chairman of the party's defence committee.