

Beatrix Campbell engages with the defence debate

## Fighting Forces

Alan Clark is minister for defence procurement

**What does Britain need to defend itself against and who should it be defending itself with? What is our position now in the world, given the revolution in Europe?**

When I was co-ordinating resistance within the Conservative Party to the placing of cruise missiles in the United Kingdom, I consistently expressed the view that the Soviet threat had been steadily declining for at least a decade. At that time that was regarded as very heterodox, a view only held by so-called fellow travellers. Yet up until now, to the immense detriment and imbalancing of its own economic structure and the quality of life of its people, the Soviet Union has maintained an enormous inventory of military hardware.

We must pay some regard to that, to the existence anywhere of very large numbers of weapons that are completely outside the control, either of the United Kingdom or of any alliance to which it adheres. But it is generally recognised that the old form of Soviet threat, the Warsaw Pact, the 'snow on their boots' syndrome, is pretty well extinct and this has been confirmed in judgments uttered by the Nato Council no less.

**Given the long trajectory of your position, are you less of a Thatcherite and more akin to politicians like Biffen or Powell, belonging to that axis which is not animated by dread of the Soviet Union?**

I am absolutely Thatcherite to the extent that I believe that Mrs Thatcher has got in the bank, as it were, enough gratitude to see me through. She has done us so much good that I would never wish to separate from her.

**Thinking specifically about Thatcherism and defence...**

That's easy. Although I may have been right in spotting the trend, I think that the Thatcherite position is entirely defensible. The moment you got a realist like Gorbachev the thing was going to fold. But undoubtedly the response to the SS20 and the decision to place intermediate nuclear missiles, cruise and Pershing in Europe, was a factor. I was opposed to it for various reasons. But the SDI initiative was actually what put them over the edge.

However, I am vulnerable to the argument that if you had just followed my advice - saying this is crazy, just get out of Europe because it isn't under threat, save your money - we might not have been able to maintain that unbearable

level of competitive tension that was critical in getting the Soviet Union to pack up.

**The world has tilted on its axis. You're known to be a radical, but is your radicalism sufficient to infuse the government with a radicalism commensurate with the new situation?**

I think it is recognised that I was the first person to put it all into one shape and then a great many serious, well-informed people from the services, from the civil service, from every other angle have all contributed to making it in terms of Whitehall and Westminster certainly more realistic than the original blueprint I set.

**What would free the public debate about strategic changes in defence, defence spending and our alliances?**

Nobody who has been through the hideous experience of an Etonian education could ever again believe naively about the goodness of human nature. You have to defend yourself against the unpredictable. But one of my complaints about our earlier posture was that it was not only hideously expensive but it was - also unbalanced. We were actually equipped to do two things: retaliate very effectively at a strategic nuclear level and fight a heavy armoured war on the central front, which I think we would inevitably have lost and which would have been extremely costly and disagreeable. It would be imprudent to discard the first of those capabilities, but the second is completely obsolete.

**You have argued for streamlined services, specialised, small and very mobile. Is that equivalent to the transition from cavalry to the modern army?**

I don't think it is quite as drastic. But there is a lot of detailed work to be done even if you accept the general principle, and many don't.

**Will you win the argument?**

Well I'm some way towards winning it, but there have been radicals in this department before and they have been thwarted as much by circumstances as personality. It is very easy to put radical solutions, it's much less easy to temper them to the realities of what will be accepted.

**What are your political calculations about Britain both as a power and as a participant in the worldwide debate about what the world has become?**

Most of the turbulence and cruelty and massacre is going to take place outside

the European continent. The European Community is not equipped to 'show the flag' in such sectors, but it will be necessary to 'show the flag' on occasions, to project force, and to balance a monopolistic intervention by the only superpower on the western side, as well as to defend our own interests. The United Kingdom is by far the best suited to make this kind of demonstrative intervention. If Europe must persist in its land-locked obsessions and spend money on armies to fight a central front, that's down to them.

Then you say, what sort of forces should we have. I think in personnel terms they have got to be trained and equipped to fight in deserts, in jungles, in urban environments, as well as in bourgeois semi-built-up, hedgerow-village-type environments. The Royal Marines and the Paratroop Regiment are the exemplars of the sort of forces we need.

**What qualifies Britain for that role? We don't have an imperial or imperialist presence all over the world any longer.**

I think it is natural. So many countries speak English and have institutions founded on English patterns and with a very large English presence in their trade. British investments overseas are larger than that of any other country. We are at parity with Japan, but larger than the rest of the European Community put together. With these interests go, broadly, a certain cordiality and prestige.

**Doesn't that imply an economic repertoire associated with empire?**

It is a matter of common prudence that there should be another power able to dilute the monopoly of one superpower. Otherwise you have nothing between a United Nations intervention force, which is extremely slow, very cumbersome and usually ineffective, and a kind of single-nation, heavy-metal type.

**You are for a refinement of Britain's historic role - with greater autonomy - rather than repositioning Britain?**

It is also contemporary because we are the largest overseas investor in the world. But I must emphasise that this is a personal attitude that has informed my own approach to defence. I am fully conscious that such an attitude has to be touched, if not governed, by a whole range of diplomatic and geopolitical considerations which are properly within the judgment of the prime minister and the cabinet. It is all very well to say Nato's existing role is extinct, therefore there is no need for it. It is as easy to say that as it is to say we must restructure it.

# EYE TO EYE



**Tell us where you want to get to with the peace dividend. What do you feel about the imperatives guiding defence cuts at the moment?**

It is no secret that I take a more generous attitude to what is possible than some. But politically it could cause industrial disruption. There is all this talk about arms conversion - complete hogwash, what does it mean?

**Reinvestment in...**

It must mean a fund. Where does it come from? Central revenue? A levy on the arms trade? And who guarantees anyone is going to buy the things that they convert to? All of a sudden we are told the government can sail in after 15 years of standing back and decide that there is a need for a few things and so we will pay money for industry to make them.

**What is wrong with that?**

First, who decides what there is a need for, and why should their judgment be set above the corporate judgment of the market? Secondly, if there is such a need for it industry will see that need and will make it themselves.

So, against quite radical cuts to produce an instant dividend, you have to balance industrial disruption, people being put out of work suddenly, heavy lobbying by directors and boards concerned, and also considerable resentment within the services themselves - their own career structures imperilled. That feeds across politically into the Conservative associations.

There are many ex-service people, often of quite senior rank, holding positions in Conservative associations. And you have to measure a general disharmony in alliance structures which follows unilateral action. If the downside is greater than the financial benefits then that has to be a political judgment.

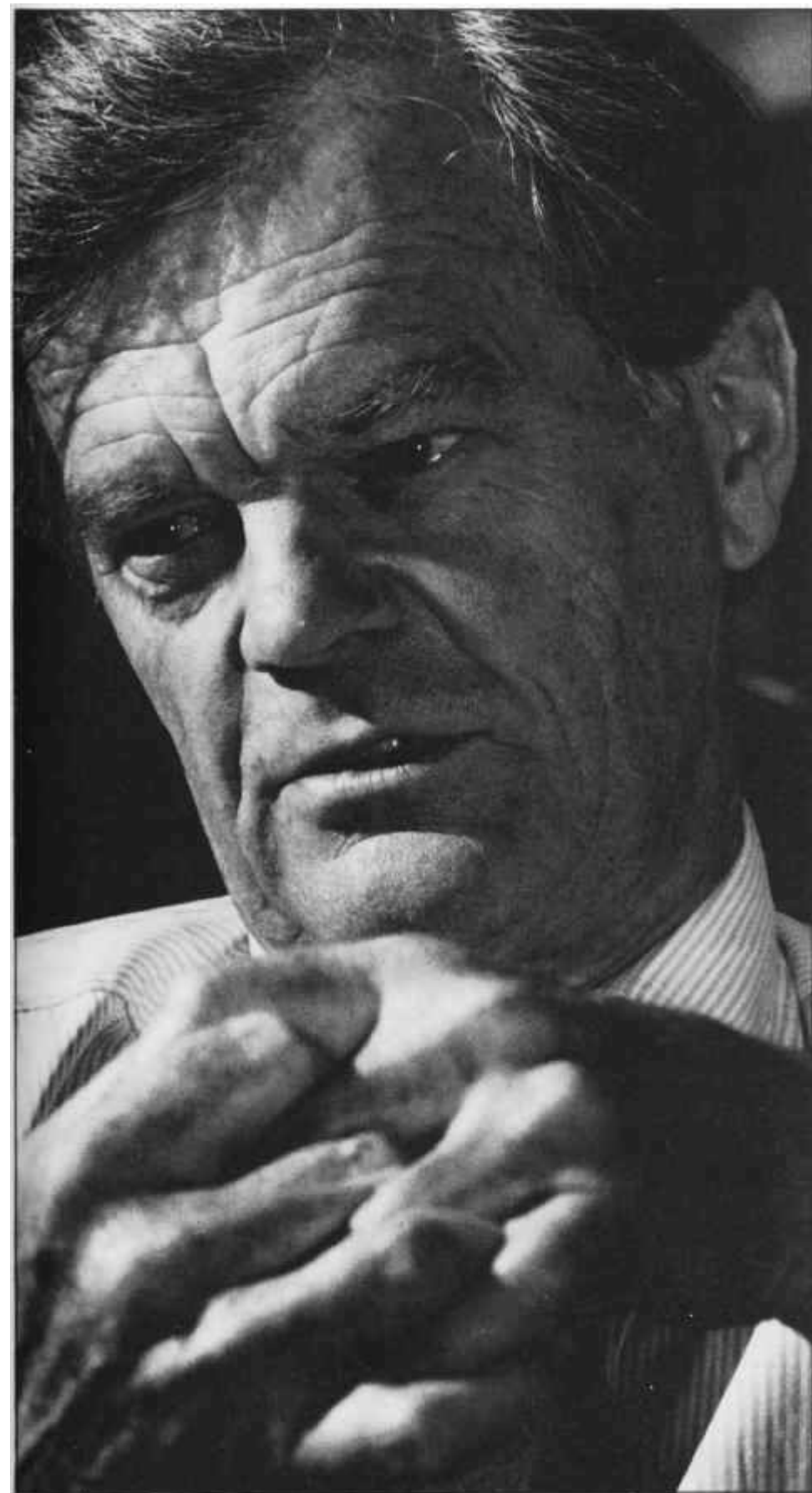
**What do you feel about nuclear deterrence, and to be more specific, tactical air-to-surface missiles (TASMs)?**

Nuclear deterrence is quintessential, you can't do without it.

**How central are TASMs?**

Nuclear weapons are going to proliferate, you can't prevent that any more than you can prevent people having sexual intercourse or exceeding the speed limit when they are driving a car. You will be faced with nuclear blackmail by enemies against whom it would be excessive and extravagant to deploy a Trident salvo, as well as being immensely damaging to the world ecology.

You want to be able to deter something



at roughly the equivalent level, and a tactical air-to-surface missile is that very weapon. It may not be essential at this moment, but by the time it is developed and in service it will be. Otherwise you will be faced with the problem of having to back off a military confrontation, quite possibly by popular demand, if you are faced with a nuclear response by an irresponsible power that has recently acquired that capability. The Russians are immensely cautious and responsible. We always knew where we were in terms of nuclear response with the Russians. But you can't tell with some of these other possible acquirers.

**Is there anything that the nuclear nations might do politically that might pre-empt this and guard the world against the consequences of possession of nuclear weapons outside the predictable political systems?**  
No. Because there is no means of verification. The kind of exemplary disarmament they often argue for from the Labour benches is utterly unreal.

**What is your feeling about the impact on security of factors outside the military: the economic and environmental?**  
I am very concerned by the consistently poor economic performance of the United Kingdom. Our manufacturing industry is very defective.

**As a market man how can you solve that problem?**  
Well, you see one is vulnerable to the inherent flaws - as I fear they are - in one's ideology. As a market man, I have to reply, the market has to solve that problem.

**Doesn't that grieve you? Is that the full-stop? Is there no more to be said?**  
Well it would mean trespassing right outside my role as minister of this department.

**Some more personal questions. You jested earlier about the horror of an Etonian schooling.**  
Well, it was very beneficial at an early age to be...

**Brutalised?**  
Brutalisation can take two forms, both of which I have undergone. One is the Etonian education where there is the intellectual kind: it's not so much a brutalisation as a very cruel and long-drawn-out initiation ceremony to a fraternity. And then there is the much rougher brutalisation which takes place at the Guards Brigade Squad Camp, which every guards officer has to undergo. Quite

rightly it is worse than that to which the ranks are subjected.

So when you see all those 'chinless wonders' strutting about in their posh uniforms, you will know that for eight weeks they have had an absolutely appalling time, probably worse than you will get anywhere outside a Victorian prison.

**So what kind of people does that produce: these people who run our armies and indeed run your party?**  
They don't run the party. They used to. And I am not sure - and I tread on very dangerous ground - if the party is better run now.

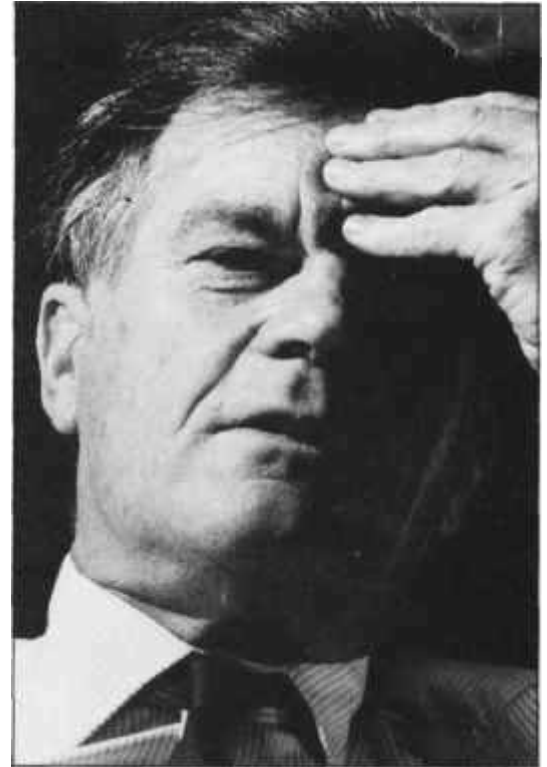
We have this incredible phenomenon of a prime minister, who is a person with boundless energy, great sureness of instinct, deep patriotism and immense courage, as well as a very engaging personal style at close quarters. Those are ingredients which, in politics, are bound to get you to the top. But she is completely unique, *sui generis*. Her success hasn't made the slightest difference to the status of women in politics, for example.

Yet many of the other figures in the Conservative Party are separate from the old prototypes of whom I suppose I am an example, and I am looked upon by them with considerable suspicion.

**Apart from elan, what for you are the elements that are inherent in Thatcherism? Is it an ideology which is internally coherent? Or has it been a very effective gathering, if you like a coalition of different interests within the Conservative Party, very effectively put together but not necessarily historically durable?**

I think that is an extremely interesting question. I think the PM's attitude has been consistent and I think she is informed throughout by an absolutely pure patriotism. But the Conservative Party is very shameless in this regard - it will always back anyone if it thinks they are going to win. So that is how you get a coalition in the Conservative Party. Of course the moment it looks as if she is not going to win she is in jeopardy. This is what was at the bottom of all that ridiculous seizure that got hold of people for about five weeks last spring when many claimed that another person was more likely to win. 'Another person' wouldn't have lasted five weeks - he just hasn't got it.

**I suppose part of the problem is that if you are on the left you search for a kind of ideological coherence. The Right seems to be more comfortable with the idea that Thatcherism is successful because it has**



**elan and it is a winner, and the Right is less interested in its ideology.**

The Left are always trying to pin labels on people in the Tory Party. They get very muddled because you can be on the right economically, and on the left socially - that is to say pro-abortion, against capital punishment.

One of my advantages is that, even in the party, I am regarded as being on the right. So if you argue for things which fall more naturally to the left - not just to the left of the party, to the left in politics generally - they will excuse you by saying, 'Oh well, he's eccentric, he's a bit batty but basically he's alright'. But if my case for defence cuts had been written by one of the Wets (and there are plenty of them) the boys would have cut out his entrails by now. I'm sure it's true of the Labour Party too. I don't know much about the Labour Party, but Neil Kinnock couldn't have done it without good credentials. David Owen could never have done it.

**He had to have come from the Left to, as it were, deal with what was perceived as the problem of the Left?**

If you are going to change things inside a party, I wouldn't say you could only do it from within the camp of those whose tranquility you are going to disturb, but it is very much easier. That is as true on the left as it is on the right.

This interview was recorded the day before the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait.