



Trident Dialogues

a short drama
by Jo Alberti

Trident Dialogues

This short drama has been written to promote reflection on the morality and on some of the key issues connected with the possible commissioning of a successor the Trident nuclear weapons system by the UK government. Northern Friends Peace Board (NFPB) seeks to support Quakers and others in taking action for peace 'in all its height and breadth'. With members from Quaker Area Meetings across the North of Britain, we are particularly conscious of the infrastructure that comes with the current nuclear weapons – the bases at Faslane and Coulport in West Scotland and the shipyards (where submarines have been and are expected to be built) in Barrow in Furness in Cumbria.

We hope you find this short text helpful as a stimulus to discussion and action, whether you use it for read-throughs – or even short performances – by groups, or individually.

NFPB May 2016

Cast

PM	First Tempter
Second Tempter	Third Tempter
Fourth Tempter	Fifth Tempter

PM *is on his mobile phone*

Thank you. Yes, it was a great...victory.

Pause

Yes, we all worked very hard for it. It is indeed deserved.

Pause

Well, yes, I am a little surprised. *To himself* Shell shocked to be honest.

Pause

Well, yes, pleasantly so, of course. We will meet tomorrow - not too early.

Pause

And the same to you – sleep well.

Switches off phone Sleep. Will I sleep? Perchance to dream...

First Tempter [FT] *clears his throat* Good evening.

PM What the...? who? Good evening.

FT You don't know who I am.

PM No. No, I don't. Should I?

FT You will recognise me.

PM How?

FT By what I have to say to you.

PM What have you to say to me?

FT You are about to take on great responsibilities. Are you prepared?

PM I am not unprepared.

FT But the outcome was not....totally expected.

PM That is true. But...

FT But you have imagined it? Prepared yourself for the decisions you will need to take?

PM Yes. Of course.

FT One in particular?

PM There will be many. Many of significance.

FT True.

PM So?

FT So I wish to draw your attention to one in particular.

Pause There is a button you need to be prepared to press. As you know.

Pause The signal to release our nuclear warheads.

Pause And there is another part of this process which you cannot put off thinking about. The Prime Minister of the United Kingdom issues letters of last resort, orders written by hand and seen by his or her eyes only, sealed and stored within the safes of each of the four Royal Navy Vanguard class submarines.

PM So I have been told

FT These letters instruct the submarine commander of what action to take in the event of the United Kingdom being attacked with nuclear weapons that destroy Her Majesty's Government in the United Kingdom and/or the chain of command. Don't look so alarmed...

PM I am not alarmed. But the situation you so blandly referred tois truly horrifying.

FT Indeed. You will be briefed by the Chief of the Defence Staff as to what those actions might be. Oh, and he would also be the person to decide whether you were in your right mind should you decide to press the button while you were still alive.

PM I would not be in my right mind if I had given orders to press the button

FT Those letters are for use after you are dead: the orders once carried out, the action taken could be the last official act of Her Majesty's Government.

Pause

The choices include your order that the submarine commander retaliates with nuclear weapons...

PM That would be complete madness ...if the deterrent has not worked, what would be the purpose of killing millions more people?

FT The others are not retaliating with nuclear weapons, the submarine commander uses his own judgement, or the submarine commander places himself under United States or Australian command if possible.

The letters are destroyed unopened whenever a Prime Minister leaves office, so you will have to write new ones. You will probably have to do this tomorrow.

Second Tempter [ST] Take no notice of him. He is trying to stop you from taking the position you fully deserve, the vital tasks that await you.

Besides, you can hardly back down now. And what difference would it make if you did?

PM Someone else might be more willing to...

ST ...press the button? Perhaps. But I doubt it – it's not something...

Do you want to hand over to such a person? You know very well you do not. And most of the party would not want you to.

PM Most, but not all.

ST Don't be so ...so weak-kneed. It's been a struggle to get this far. Don't waste all that effort, all that hope. This is our greatest opportunity.

PM Yes, but....

ST But me no buts. Put aside your fears, your hesitations. Grab this precious moment

Pause

PM I could not press that button. I don't think I am going to be able to write those letters.

ST *sighs* So, what will you do?

PM Persuade the party to come clearly out against the nuclear deterrent. We have managed to fudge the issue so far and I don't feel comfortable with that.

ST That's crazy. This is not the time for such a risky manoeuvre. There are other things which we need to do much more urgently. And you know how difficult it will be to persuade....

Third Tempter[TT] Me!

PM Welcome.

TT Am I? I doubt it.

Your view on this vital question is threat to national security. But, as matters stand, your view is irrelevant. The 'main gate' vote had clear and unstoppable support in parliament. That vote has taken the successor Trident submarine programme past the point of no return whoever is Prime Minister.

PM I do not accept that. The decision can be reversed.

Pause

TT Your views are dangerous. You are openly threatening our country's security. Moreover, you are someone whose policy would be a disaster for Barrow – it would destroy the industries that have made Barrow in Furness great.

PM That is not true...

TT The only possible response to this mess must be for politicians of all parties to work together in Barrow to champion our unique mix of skills and fight against this dangerous and retrograde Labour ideology. And we will not be alone: there are about 50 sites around the UK whose livelihoods depend on defence contracts, and we're going to ask those people what they think about the new Government effectively shutting down their jobs.

PM I have no intention of shutting down jobs. There are alternatives...

TT They are pie in the sky: we cannot build windmills – we build ships.

Fourth Tempter [FoT] He is persuasive, is he not, our Trade Union friend?

PM He has forceful arguments to make.

FoT Based on the real needs of ordinary people

PM Yes.

FoT But you do not see it that way.

PM I see that it will not be easy to... change swords into ploughshares.

FoT And you will need the support of ordinary people to get your important economic plan through Parliament. You do not have a massive majority. It is only thanks to that convenient split in the Tory party that we are here. And the SNP are snapping at your heels.

PM We cannot allow a third party to dictate to us. We are the party of Government.

FoT Don't be so pompous. It does not become you.

PM I don't understand your argument. What is it you are trying to persuade me to do – or not to do?

FoT *Laughs* I am not trying to persuade you into any course of action. I am trying to help you through your dilemma.

He Yes. I am faced with a dilemma.

Pause

FoT Of course, politicians are often hypocritical.

He Certainly we have to make compromises. That is something I have learned.

FoT There is a difference.

Compromise would involve agreement within the party as to the stance you will take. For you, that would probably involve a willing relaxation of your principles. Hypocrisy would be the absence of discussion and agreement on a compromise. Meanwhile you would act as if there was such an agreement, allowing the decision on the future of Trident to sink below the surface like the submarines which bear it, as has been the case for many years.

PM Because we – I – do not wish to think about it.

FoT Yes! No government has dared look squarely at our nuclear capability without niggling doubts about “our place at the table” since Ernest Bevin grunted “We’ve got to have that thing over here whatever it costs, we’ve got to have the bloody Union Jack on it.”

PM I am no Ernest Bevin... and besides, today we do not need to assert ourselves against the US, on the contrary.

FoT No, now we are afraid to disturb the Atlantic alliance, as we have been for over 50 years. The Labour Party knew in 1964 that buying missiles from the US would add nothing to the deterrent strength of the West, we knew we should not waste the country’s resources on useless duplication of strategic nuclear weapons. Yet when Labour won the election nothing changed.

PM This time it can be different...

FoT Then in 1974 Labour promised that when Polaris expired in the early 1990, it would not be replaced with a new generation of nuclear weapons, yet....

And it is not just Labour Governments who have been too frightened to grasp this nettle. In 1981 two thirds of the Tory Party and two thirds of the cabinet opposed the purchase of Trident, even the Chiefs of the defence Staff were then, as now, divided on Trident. Yet in

1982 those 4 submarines were sanctioned to patrol the seas, prepared to launch all its 14 missiles and 48 nuclear warhead targeted at command centres in and around Moscow.

PM It must be the case that there are Conservatives who are, deep down, opposed to Trident renewal.

FoT But the international situation is different: in 1991 the Soviet Union voted itself out of existence; Tridents guiding systems were altered so that they no longer routinely held targeting information.

PM That seems, somehow, to be symbolic of where we are now. We no longer know what our target is.

FoT That does not seem to matter. The fear is there.

PM Have we ever been fully committed to using our weapons to hit human targets.

Long pause

PM I do know you.

Fifth Tempter [FiT] You sound relieved to see me.

PM At least I know that you and I will not agree.

FiT Is that so? I think there is one thing we can agree on. That this is not to do with jobs, nor party political struggles, but goes deeper. This is about deterrence. And you must know that a Prime Minister who announced that he would never use nuclear weapons would completely undermine deterrence.

PM It's a bluff. Probably no one would use it. I could not.

FiT Yes, but the enemy don't know that you probably wouldn't.

PM They probably would know.

FiT Yes, they probably would know that you probably wouldn't. But they would not certainly know.

He They probably certainly would know that I probably wouldn't.

Fit Yes, but even though they probably would certainly know that you probably wouldn't, they would not certainly know that, although you probably wouldn't, there is no probability that you certainly would.

PM So we are both old enough to quote "Yes, Minister. "

Ultimately, what matters is belief. The navy could fill the sharp end of a Trident missile with straw, but if the straw could be kept a perfect secret and the world went on believing that instead of straw there were warheads capable of destroying 266 cities, each the size of Hiroshima, then Trident would be doing its job. If it had to be used, then the world, or what was left of it, would of course discover the truth. But if it had to be used, it wouldn't have worked (and there would be few of us left to care).

I am not sure we have ever been fully committed to using our weapons to hit human targets.

To the audience Which brings me back to where I started. Do I agree to take part in what I see as an apocalyptic farce? Do I write those letters of last resort?

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