

This is the witness statement of Sir Nick Harvey

Qualifications and experience

I was born in 1961 and worked as a communications and marketing executive and consultant until 1991. In 1992 I was elected as member of parliament for North Devon on behalf of the Liberal Democrat Party, and held the seat until 2015.

Over the period 1999 – 2003 I was the Liberal Democrat front bench spokesperson firstly on Health, and then on Culture, Media and Sport. I was also a member of the House of Commons Home Affairs Select Committee and the Standards and Privileges Committee.

In May 2010 I was appointed Minister for the Armed Forces in the Ministry of Defence in the Conservative - Liberal Democrat Coalition Government, and remained in this role until 2012 when I was knighted as a Knight Bachelor. Within the Ministry of Defence I was responsible for overseeing the Trident Alternatives Review, which investigated whether other postures or weapons systems than the current Trident nuclear weapons system might deliver a credible alternative nuclear deterrent for the UK.

Since leaving Parliament in 2015 I have been chair of the trustees of the Joseph Rowntree Reform Trust and from November 2017 until the end of 2019 I have been Chief Executive of the Liberal Democrat Party.

Defence Nuclear Safety Regulator Annual Report

During my spell as Armed Forces Minister the Ministry of Defence (MoD) published two 'annual assurance reports' on defence nuclear safety. These were the Defence Nuclear Environment and Safety Board Annual Report 2010 and the Defence Nuclear Safety Regulator 2011 Annual Report. The published reports contained no information of national security significance (a small quantity of information was redacted from the 2010 report before publication) and the documents did not warrant a government security classification. I do not recall being briefed that any of the content of either of the published documents might be considered particularly sensitive.

My understanding is that the practice of publishing annual assurance reports on the safety of the MoD's nuclear programmes was began by the previous Labour government. The Coalition government was happy to continue the practice of publishing these documents as they represented, as far as I am aware, the only government report in the public domain which assesses defence nuclear safety. They therefore have significant value in demonstrating the UK government's openness and transparency on military nuclear safety; enabling public and Parliamentary scrutiny of the MoD's nuclear programme; and providing the public with information on safety issues which they have a right to know. As the documents have a consistent format, they are helpful in allowing those with an interest in nuclear safety to see whether MoD is succeeding in addressing any safety concerns which may have arisen.

Publication of these documents also shows in a very concrete way that MoD takes the regulation of nuclear safety seriously. It demonstrates that the Defence Nuclear Safety Regulator is willing to take action where necessary to tackle problems and shows how the MoD's nuclear operators are dealing with problems which, inevitably, will occur from time to time. This is important in maintaining public confidence in the MoD's nuclear operations, including the Trident programme. The UK's nuclear weapons programme remains politically controversial, and one of the issues which is regularly presented as a concern is the safety of the programme and the risk of accidents. By publishing independent regulatory reports, MoD is making information available which helps the experts, media, and the public draw their own conclusions on the adequacy of safety standards.

Such information is far more convincing than political statements, aimed to reassure but lacking in evidence, made by Ministers.

Importantly, publication of annual assurance reports on MoD nuclear safety shows other nations which may be critical of our nuclear weapons programme that we take safety seriously and can be trusted as a responsible nuclear operator. In being transparent in this way, we are setting standards that we would wish, and can then press for, other nuclear armed states to adopt.

Opinion

I understand that the Conservative government has ceased routine publication of the annual assurance report of the Defence Nuclear Safety Regulator. No public statement or explanation appears to have been given about this, save for extremely brief acknowledgements, lacking in any detail, made in response to Parliamentary Questions from opposition MPs.

I also understand that the MoD is refusing to release a copy of the report for 2015-16, which has been requested by Mr Burt, in response to a request under the Freedom of Information Act, and that the Information Tribunal is considering this case

I consider failure to publish and release this safety report to be a backwards step which is ultimately contrary to the UK's defence, security, and diplomatic interests, and I would urge the Information Tribunal to rule in favour of releasing the document.

Signed



Date

7 October 2019