

NEWS

Blair under fire over Trident 'secrecy'

Leading weapons experts and security think-tanks have accused the British government of withholding information needed for proper evaluation of a multibillion-pound proposal to renew the country's fleet of nuclear submarines.

Crucial data on whether the life of the fleet can be extended have not been made public in the run-up to next month's expected parliamentary debate, say the critics. Not releasing the information, they add, fuels fears that the decision will be driven by party politics and industry lobbying rather than by security needs.

Britain's four nuclear submarines, each of which carries up to 16 ballistic Trident missiles and 48 nuclear warheads, will reach the end of their design life in the early 2020s. In a report released last December, the government argued that it would not be prudent to extend the vessels' lives — and that

work on replacements should start this year, at a probable cost of between £15 billion and £20 billion (US\$30 billion to \$40 billion). Some critics say that the decision is being rushed so that Prime Minister Tony Blair can secure the replacement of the submarines before he steps down this summer.

But the decision to renew the fleet rests on broad engineering arguments, such as references to past submarine programmes, rather than on a detailed cost analysis. The Ministry of Defence says that releasing the specifics of its plan would amount to telling the world how its submarines work. Others say that this is an exaggeration and that withholding the information prevents a fair comparison with the

main alternative: renovating the fleet to extend its life by 10 to 20 years.

"There is absolutely not enough information out there to make a decision", says Richard Garwin, a physicist and senior adviser on nuclear weapons and other security questions to the US government. Garwin was one of several witnesses who gave evidence on proposed replacements for the submarines to the House of Commons Defence Committee on 23 January.

But attempts to gather such information have been rebuffed. A London-based think-tank, the British American Security Information Council (BASIC), says that it has submitted around eight questions under freedom of information legislation to the Ministry of Defence. Answers to all technical questions, such as whether the submarine hull or the reactor would need to be renovated first, were declared classified. The environmental

group Greenpeace has had similar requests and subsequent appeals turned down.

"They are not going to let people discuss the technical details, even if the information is not particularly sensitive," says Paul Ingram, a senior analyst at BASIC. The ministry says that it answered many of the questions submitted, but that it has to balance public debate with the need to avoid helping nations that might want to undermine Britain's defences. A ministry spokesman said that no state currently had the capability and intent to do so, but that such a threat could potentially arise in coming decades.

Attempts by Britain's top scientific organizations to join the debate have also been rejected.

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The Royal Society wrote to Roy Anderson, the Ministry of Defence's chief scientific adviser, last April and offered to suggest experts who could assist in the ministry's deliberations. The society was told a month later that the ministry had the matter covered. "We've been running the submarines safely for 40 years," explains Matthew Willey, a ministry spokesman. "There's a huge wealth of expertise here."

But that attitude, says Garwin, contrasts starkly with that in the United States, where outside specialists are often granted the security clearance needed to assess scientific and engineering aspects of military decisions.

California institute woos NIH stem-cell chief

The California Institute for Regenerative Medicine (CIRM) is courting the top stem-cell official at the US National Institutes of Health (NIH) to take over as its president.

James Battey, who since 2002 has coordinated stem-cell research at the NIH as chair of its Stem Cell Task Force, was approached by a member of the CIRM's governing committee in December after its current

president, Zach Hall, announced his resignation (see *Nature* 444, 803; 2006).

Since then, Battey has been excused from all stem-cell-related work at the NIH, agency spokeswoman Marin Allen has confirmed. He remains in his position as director of the National Institute on Deafness and Other Communication Disorders in Bethesda, Maryland. "NIH is grateful for

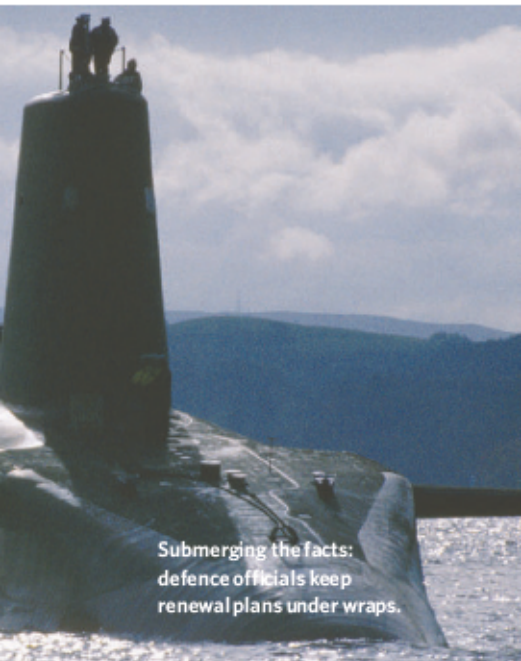
the leadership he has provided and is honouring his privacy," Allen wrote in an e-mail.

Battey was considered as a candidate last time the CIRM was looking for a president, in early 2005 when the \$3-billion institute was newly minted. It ended up hiring Hall.

The 14-member search committee charged with finding the institute's next president was scheduled to hold its first

meeting by teleconference on 31 January. Two days earlier, CIRM spokesman Dale Carlson called any discussion of Battey's candidacy premature. "The search committee hasn't met. They've not retained an [executive search] firm. They haven't posted a job description," he said.

The search committee hasn't discussed a shortlist "with any real seriousness", member Joan



Submerging the facts: defence officials keep renewal plans under wraps.

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Bodies such as the National Academy of Sciences are also commissioned by the federal government to report on security issues.

Critics assert that the British approach skews decision making. John Finney, a physicist at University College London and a member of Pugwash, which campaigns to reduce armed conflict, says: "Without the technical information and costings of the different options, the agenda can be driven by industrial interests rather than those of national security."

Jim Giles

See Editorial, page 459.

Samuelson, founder of the Parkinson's Action Network, told *Nature* on 29 January. "We need to think about what talents and what skill set we need in the new president. And we should be clear about that before we write a job description," she said.

The search committee's agenda for this week's meeting includes considering the president's job summary, application criteria and a 'potential timetable' for hiring.

Batthey is highly respected within the NIH as an able

administrator who rarely makes trouble, but who will speak frankly when necessary. During the controversy over tightened

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conflict-of-interest rules at the agency, Batthey said bluntly that if it adopted the stringent set of rules that was first proposed, he would resign (see *Nature* 435, 397; 2005). The rules were loosened

before they were finalized.

Batthey's absence from his NIH stem-cell duties became publicly apparent at a 19 January Senate committee hearing on human embryonic stem-cell research. There, Story Landis, director of the National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke, testified on behalf of the agency. She is now acting chair of the Stem Cell Task Force. It has also emerged that Batthey will not be attending a meeting of stem-cell funding agencies being held in Singapore this week.

The CIRM was created by California voters in a November 2004 ballot initiative as a state agency dedicated to making grants and loans for human embryonic stem-cell research and facilities. But its work has so far been held up by litigation challenging the ballot. With an end to that litigation now on the horizon, "it's a crucial moment in our history", says Samuelson. "The choice of a president can have a lot to do with how much we move ahead and how fast." ■ **Meredith Wadman**

Bush splashes out on ocean research

A group of the United States' top ocean specialists this week issued a 'report card' on how the government is treating the sea. And if President George W. Bush had brought home in his school days the grades he received from that exercise, his mother would not have been impressed. The worst grade of all — an F for 'fail' — was for new funding of ocean programmes.

But just before the report was released on 30 January, Bush officials declared that the president will request \$143 million more for the oceans in his 2008 budget than in 2007. Of this, \$80 million will be for research, with focuses on an ocean monitoring network, comparative analysis of marine ecosystems, and research on the water circulation in the Atlantic.

The Bush administration's announcement also listed some legislative goals for the year. These included acceding to the United Nations Law of the Sea and passing specific authorizing legislation for the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), the main ocean-research agency, to increase its political heft.

Carlos Gutierrez, head of

the commerce department of which NOAA is part, says the plan will "sharpen our focus and expand our knowledge of our oceans, which is incredibly important for everything we do in the future".

But most years, NOAA gets far more money from Congress than the president requests. So critics of Bush were quick to dismiss the announcement's significance.

"The president's 2007 request provided \$300 million less for ocean, coastal and Great Lakes programmes in research and resource management at NOAA than Congress gave the agency in 2006," says Bart Gordon (Democrat, Tennessee), chair of the House Committee on Science and Technology. "While this year's budget request is an improvement, I suspect this is still disappointing news to

those who want to see more attention paid to ocean and coastal issues."

James Watkins, chair of the congressionally mandated Commission on Ocean Policy, which in 2004 recommended a far-reaching effort to bolster US ocean research, is also unconvinced. "I have been around this town for 50 years and I have always been a bit leery of rhetoric versus reality when it comes to the budget," he says of Bush's plan for ocean research. "We need \$750 million to get this kick-started — that's one day in Iraq."

Gerald Leape, vice-president for marine conservation at the National Environmental Trust in Washington DC, says he is "sceptical" about the Bush plan, but is generally hopeful about the budgetary outlook for ocean research this year. ■ **Emma Marris**



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JAMSTEC



Commerce secretary Carlos Gutierrez introduces Bush's plan to investigate the deep.

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