

UK government crisis erupts over Trident nuclear missile failure

Paul Mitchell
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The Conservative government's attempt to cover up the potentially catastrophic failure of a Trident ballistic missile has blown up in its face.

The disarmed nuclear missile was launched off the United States coast last June, just one month before the British parliament voted 472-117 to renew the £40 billion Trident nuclear submarine missile system. Knowledge of it would have torpedoed the justifications given by an overwhelming number of Labour MPs for their support for its renewal.

The revelations are an acute embarrassment to Prime Minister Theresa May, in the week that she seeks to benefit from being the first foreign leader to meet US President Donald Trump in Washington, DC on Friday. May has threatened the European Union states with a "hard Brexit," citing Britain's military prowess as a nuclear power while warning of trade war measures unless they agree to favourable terms.

According to the *Sunday Times*, the Conservative government imposed a news blackout after the missile was fired from the newly refurbished nuclear submarine HMS Vengeance from its position off the Florida coast. Instead of heading as planned eastwards out into the Atlantic Ocean, the missile's positioning systems malfunctioned and it went in the opposite direction over the US mainland.

A Royal Navy source told the *Sunday Times* that "something went wrong. ... There was severe panic that this test launch was not successful. Senior figures in military and government were keen that the information was not made public."

"Ultimately, Downing Street decided to cover up the failed test," the source continued. "If the information was made public, they knew how damaging it would be to the credibility of our nuclear deterrent. The upcoming Trident vote made it all the more sensitive."

Following the publication of the *Sunday Times* report,

the prime minister repeatedly refused to say how much she knew about the failure, insisting she had "absolute confidence" in the UK's nuclear missile system.

By Monday morning Julian Lewis, the Conservative MP who chairs the House of Commons Defence Committee, the parliamentary body that is supposed to exert democratic oversight over the defence establishment, was wheeled out to blame former Prime Minister David Cameron for the cover-up.

Lewis declared, "In fairness to the present prime minister one has to accept that she has been dealt a rotten hand because this matter, the decision to cover it up, if there was such a decision, as appears to be the case, was taken in the dying days of the Cameron administrations when spin doctors were the rule in Number 10 Downing Street." Cameron's PR team denied any involvement in the cover-up.

By Monday lunchtime, a Number 10 spokesperson was forced to admit that May had been briefed on a number of nuclear issues, including the Trident malfunction, when she took office.

Soon after, a US Defense Department official confirmed to CNN Monday afternoon that the missile had to be diverted into the ocean and its self-destruct programme activated.

This confirmation visibly deflated UK Defence Secretary Michael Fallon, who was in the midst of a belligerent stone-walling operation in a hastily called and thinly attended session of the House of Commons in which he repeatedly declared that he would not answer any questions about the "details of submarine operations."

Fallon stated that "earlier governments in different situations, in more benevolent times, might have taken a different decision about how much information they would be prepared to reveal about these particular 'demonstrate and shakedown' operations [before

submarines are returned to service] but these are not benevolent times and we have taken the decision not to release any information about the testing involved in the successful return of HMS Vengeance to its operational cycle.”

To every question about who knew what and when, Fallon gave the same answer. The capability and effectiveness of Britain’s nuclear deterrent must not be questioned.

The Trident malfunction has thoroughly exposed the Labour Party and the culpability of its leader Jeremy Corbyn, who retreated from his anti-Trident stance prior to the vote on renewal.

In the name of “party unity” he refused to challenge Labour policy on Trident at the party’s National Conference, allowed a free vote on British military action in Syria that resulted in bombing raids and opposed war crimes charges against former Labour Prime Minister Tony Blair and his accomplices.

Corbyn was only able to muster 47 Labour MPs in opposition to Trident’s renewal, while the majority—140—voted alongside the Conservatives in defence of Britain’s “nuclear deterrent.”

Deputy Leader Tom Watson was gung-ho in his support for Trident renewal as a means of strengthening the NATO build-up against Russia. The nominal Corbyn supporters Shadow Foreign Secretary Emily Thornberry and then Defence Secretary Clive Lewis abstained, claiming the vote was merely a cynical political manoeuvre by the Tories to split the Labour Party.

Ultimately the vote confirmed that a single party of war exists in Britain that works together and cuts across all nominal party lines.

In response to the Trident malfunction revelations, Corbyn blandly said Labour wanted “a serious discussion,” adding, “It’s a pretty catastrophic error when a missile goes in the wrong direction.” Shadow Chancellor John McDonnell was equally anodyne, stating that it was “extremely worrying” that Parliament had not been informed.

To underscore their political cowardice, neither Corbyn nor McDonnell was present in the Commons when Fallon spoke. It was left to Labour MP Kevan Jones, who resigned as Shadow Armed Forces Minister as part of the coup the Blairites mounted against Corbyn, and Shadow Defence Minister Nia Griffiths, appointed by Corbyn despite her commitment to Trident, to question Fallon.

Griffiths complained, “I am sorry it’s taken allegations in a Sunday paper to bring these questions to Parliament.

Let us be clear we are not asking the Secretary of State to disclose anything sensitive. All we want is clarity and transparency. Because the Prime Minister refused four times to say when she became aware. ...We need to hear these facts from the Prime Minister and not have them sprawled across a Sunday newspaper.” Again Fallon refused to answer.

Even the faint whiff of outrage emanating from the Labour benches is a fraud. Labour cannot pretend to have been misled about the threat posed by Trident, whether or not it malfunctioned.

During the July debate on renewal, May made the unprecedented and ominous declaration that she was quite prepared to press the button authorising a nuclear strike killing 100,000 innocent men, women and children. Labour made no denunciation of this threat, when it was directed at Russia or China. Instead Corbyn was heckled by his own MPs when he spoke against renewal.

Nor were concerns vocalised in 2015 when William McNeilly, a former Royal Navy nuclear submariner-turned-whistleblower, warned that Trident was “a disaster waiting to happen.”

He posted a dossier on-line criticising “military deceivers” and naval “spin doctors” for ignoring the 30 defects he had identified on the weapons system. His warning that “It’s only a matter of time before worse information comes out, and everything is proven to be true” has come to fruition.

Despite Labour’s supine performance, the cover-up over Trident may yet do serious damage to May’s government under conditions of escalating divisions over Britain’s post-Brexit foreign and economic policy.

In addition, the issue also comes to prominence as the government announced on Monday plans following Brexit to overturn EU state-aid rules in order to support and deregulate the nuclear industry and four other key sectors.

Corbyn has abandoned his longstanding support for decommissioning Britain’s civil nuclear power industry as a crucial by-election at Sellafield looms, declaring that it could remain “for a long time.”



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