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The end of the Strangelove era?

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Tom Griffin (London, [OK](#) [0]): London's [Somerset House](#) [1] marked the 63rd anniversary of the Hiroshima bombing on Wednesday with a screening of Stanley Kubrick's classic film *Dr Strangelove*.

At a lively panel discussion beforehand, there was general agreement that the satire's picture of the cold war nuclear stand-off was all too close to the truth. Peter Sellers' portrayal of the title character accurately reflected an era when the fate of the world hung on the insane logic of Mutually Assured Destruction (M.A.D.).



Thankfully, the debate provided reason to hope that today's intellectual climate is moving in a very different direction. The best evidence for this was a line-up that brought CND chair [Kate Hudson](#) [2] and journalist John Pilger together with former Foreign Secretary Lord Owen, for decades a leading supporter of Britain's nuclear deterrent.

Recently, however, Owen was one of a number of distinguished ex-ministers who signed a [letter to the The Times](#) [3] in support of the [Nuclear Security Project](#) [4] launched by a group of their American counterparts. The prospect of established figures like Owen, not to speak of [Henry Kissinger](#) [5], advocating a nuclear-free world has come as a surprise to many.

"It will be very difficult to achieve, but I believe it is a noble objective that over the next 20 to 40 years you might move to a non-nuclear world", he said last night. "It will not happen easily or quickly but at least it ought to be put on the agenda."

Remember, the concept of a non-nuclear world was championed by Ronald Reagan at Reykjavik much to Margaret Thatcher's fury and also by George Schultz, who was then Secretary of State, and who is now espousing this policy, along with former Senator Nunn, in the United States.

So the idea of a non-nuclear world, which would be ruled out in a political debate against CND in the 50s, 60s, 70s and 80s, is now in the early part of the 21st century a respectable issue to be discussed.

Kate Hudson suggested that the drive for a nuclear weapons-free world was the 'new conventional wisdom.'

"We feel very optimistic precisely because the demand for nuclear disarmament is now coming from across the entire political spectrum. There are people in the United States, like Kissinger, who many people in the peace movement might consider to be war criminals, who are now very actively campaigning for nuclear disarmament, not just issuing a statement but actually going out there, arguing for it, working to bring people on board."

There were limits to the meeting of minds. Owen argued that an Iranian bomb was a genuine threat, while John Pilger was more concerned about threats of a nuclear attack on Iran [6] itself.

Hudson's timescale for a nuclear-free world was also significantly shorter than that of Owen, who made it clear he had not experienced a Damascene conversion to unilateral disarmament.

I make no apology whatever for supporting nuclear weapons in Britain in 1946 and throughout the cold war. I would not give them up unless there was a negotiated arrangement. Britain might need to give them up before some of the others, but that would have to be after having a demonstration that the missiles of Russia and America were controlled and China was part of the process as well.

There are practical measures that could be taken. As Foreign Secretary I did argue that we should not replace Trident with a ballistic missile system, that we should go for a cruise missile system, that we should stop having our belief that we had to target Moscow, and that we should move to a different strategy of minimum deterrence.

If we were to make that step, we could still remain a nuclear weapons state. It would have been open for the Blair Government, two years ago, to open up the debate as to whether we needed to have ballistic weapon systems that could penetrate ABM defences and whether we needed to threaten Moscow or Beijing. Now these are big issues. If you start to win that argument, you take it down a notch. Then its easier to take the next step.

Defending this pragmatic approach, Owen added:

The choice in democratic politics is never an absolute one. You choose people who you think are better on balance. They are all after votes around the centre. That coalescence has grown deeper over recent years, and there are now, in my view, not enough genuine differences of opinion.

It is remarkable that such a quintessentially Atlanticist and centrist figure should find himself criticising a Labour Government from the left, and on nuclear weapons of all issues.

Whether Labour is open to such ideas may be a significant test of its capacity for renewal, not least in Scotland, where there is broad opposition to Trident [7].

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Dr_Strangelove.jpg [8]	8.07 KB

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[1] <http://www.somersethouse.org.uk/film/703.asp>

[2] http://www.cnduk.org/index.php?option=com_myblog&Itemid=122&lang=en&show=The-return-of-Dr-Strangelove.html

[3] http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/comment/columnists/guest_contributors/article4237387.ece?openComment=true

[4] http://www.nuclearsecurityproject.org/site/c.mjJXJbMMIoE/b.3483737/k.4057/Nuclear_Security_Project_Home.htm

[5] <http://www.nuclearsecurityproject.org/atf/cf/>

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[6] http://www.nytimes.com/2008/07/18/opinion/18morris.html?_r=1&oref=slogin

[7] http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/scotland/glasgow_and_west/6752089.stm

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