A Nuclear Refrain

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Democracy in Action

The Right Honourable Roger C. Bezeeneos’ walked back along the corridor towards his office with a smile on his face. This morning’s June committee meeting went well, he thought: the vote for Trident renewal next month was assured. As an elected member

1 Inspired by A Christmas Carol, we adopt Dickens’ writing strategy of placing “thematic concerns into the bodies and utterances of his characters,” and his playful approach and “joyous energy” (Michel Faber, “Spectral Pleasures,” The Guardian, December 24, 2005, https://www.theguardian.com/books/2005/dec/24/featuresreviews.guardianreview22). Roger C. Bezeeneos is an anagram of Ebenezer Scrooge, as we wanted to “ghost” Dickens’ morality tale through this spatial fiction, both in structures of writing and also by having some fun!
of the British House of Commons, serving on the parliamentary Defence Select Committee, Roger favoured a multinational approach to nuclear disarmament, at least in the longer term. Roger was liberal with a small “l” and conservative with a small “c,” valuing personal freedom, political stability, and national security very highly. Indeed, he reflected with some pride, his moderate position and arguments had served to secure the middle ground today in a more heated debate than usual for a Defence Select Committee session. Roger had managed to smooth the concerns of some peers about the cost of replacing the Vanguard fleet of submarines. He’s allayed some of their other worries, too, at least for the moment.

“Yes,” he’d admitted to Derek, a fellow MP always vocal at Committee meetings, “there are tensions between personal freedom, security, and maintaining national and global social orders, but in a democracy one must look to majorities, norms, and so on.

“That’s what my constituents elected me for,” he’d concluded.
So, come July, he would be voting to begin the process of replacing the Trident weapons system. Indeed, he acknowledged to himself, this was very likely to be his position for the duration of his political career. He couldn’t foresee anything that would change his mind on this one. As he’d argued earnestly earlier, this was a terribly difficult decision to make, but he was absolutely convinced that the security of Britain depended upon it. And anyway, he comforted himself, the Trident test due on the 20th June, in a few days’ time, would be fine. Moreover, the resulting good publicity would alleviate public concern and smooth the lingering doubts that some of his fellow MPs might have.\(^2\) The test was strictly hush-hush of course. Roger was one of the few on the Select Committee to know about

such things, which appealed immensely to his political ego. His climb up the old career ladder was going rather well.

Roger smiled more broadly still, acknowledging to himself, just as he had to his wife Marjorie last night, that his decision to vote in favour of Trident replacement was eased by knowing that the popular press presented the replacement as a done deal: no one in their “right mind” would argue against it. And, as Roger often wryly observed at home, no one wanted to be on the losing side in politics.

Geopolitically, he worried what would happen if the UK lost its seat at the “top table” of “legitimate” nuclear weapons states. Derek had made a good point about that this morning, and Roger had concurred:

“The UK must maintain its voice in determining a liberal democratic world order.”

The smile momentarily fell from his face and he shivered despite the sunlight flooding the corridor, as he recalled growing up
fearful of Russia’s military might in the Cold War era; the truly terrifying prospect of a nuclear attack; the four-minute warning; Protect and Survive…

Security. That was the key. It was critical in his youth and remained so now, even as the identity of the enemy had shifted here, there, everywhere and back again over time. Fingers crossed, and barring a complete political debacle across the pond in particular, one always knew who one’s friends were. That was a tricky issue, Derek had raised earlier, though: could we ensure our nuclear state was secure internally?

“Given the military presence and as long as the Scots don’t rock the boat with another vote for independence,” he had told Derek, “the Faslane Trident base should be sound as a pound.”

The last referendum would definitely be the last, at least if Roger and his party has anything to do with it. It had been way too
close for comfort. Even the opposition oiks were wary on the independence score.

“But what about the transport of Trident missiles from the Atomic Weapons Establishment in Berkshire all the way up to Scotland, by lorry?” Derek had pressed.

At which point Roger had dissembled and hedged not inconsiderably, getting away with it by the skin of his teeth, he thought. The risk of transporting missiles and specifically nuclear warheads was something no one wanted to acknowledge, let alone face up to. Fortunately, this aspect of security had largely been kept out of the public eye. Excepting for the odd pensioner-lying-in-road-to-halt-missiles debacle, mainstream media coverage had been garrotted very smartly indeed.³

Roger frowned as he unlocked his office door. As well as the transport thing, there were financial pressures on Trident replacement: “austerity” and more money needed for the NHS, for education, for the police, etcetera. The argument for using funds for social care and public services could be persuasive, Roger acknowledged: the electorate usually went for that. Yet Trident replacement, alongside nuclear power, was an economic opportunity that would create British jobs, and employment was also a real vote winner.

“Tricky biscuit, but there’s not much use in more doctors, teachers, and Bobbies if there are no hospitals, schools, or streets left to patrol, if a defenceless Britain has disappeared beneath a mushroom cloud!”

That’s what a convinced and, if he did say so himself, jolly convincing Roger had pitched to Derek.

Roger sat down at his desk, moved aside the stack of papers he would need to read that afternoon, and started on the unappetising House of Commons canteen luncheon
he’d picked up after his meeting. As he stol-
cally munched his way through an exceed-
ingly bland Wiltshire ham sandwich, Roger’s
thoughts turned to what Marjorie might be
preparing for his dinner later. Friday nights
his wife often made something special: a nice
bit of fish, Dover sole perhaps….

Without warning, Roger’s office was plunged
into instant darkness. Confused, his first
thought was that there’d been a power cut
and the lights had gone off.

“What the deuce…” he began to protest,
then stopped dead mid-sentence. It was June
16th, daytime, and a just moment ago his of-

cice had been lit by bright summer sunshine.
This was no power cut. Roger looked to the
windows to check whether the blinds had
somehow broken and closed themselves. He
could see nothing. Shaking his head to try to
clear his confusion, Roger then rubbed his
eyes in case that would help him penetrate
the darkness. No. Had he gone blind? He
didn’t think so. He checked and could just
make out the luminous figures on the face
of his old-fashioned wristwatch. Then this darkness simply could not be, Roger decided rationally. There must be a logical explanation. Perhaps he’d woken in the evening, having dropped off to sleep mid-sandwich? No, his watch confirmed it was still early afternoon.

As his eyes began to adjust somewhat to the impossible and near impenetrable dark, Roger detected another presence in the room. The hair on the back of his neck stood on end and a shiver went down his spine. A figure was standing still and silent in the corner: a young girl wearing a dark robe of some kind, a kimono. Roger dropped his sandwich. His pulse raced and his mouth was suddenly as dry as dust. He was, he realised, very afraid.