



## Productive Trident conversations

This is a companion guide to the book *The Truth About Trident*. The book examines 20 arguments commonly used to justify Britain's retention of Trident and finds them all wanting. The book provides a lot of detailed information you can use to engage in informed conversations about Trident. Being well informed is important, but not sufficient, for talking about a controversial issue like this.

This booklet provides some tips for how to make those conversations as productive and constructive as possible. There are ways to introduce new facts and arguments that are less likely to put people on the defensive and more likely to make them receptive to what

you have to say. You may not be able to persuade others to accept your point of view, but you can help them to question their own assumptions and to begin a journey to find out for themselves where the truth lies in relation to Trident.

How we conduct these one-to-one conversations can determine the extent to which we influence public opinion. How we conduct the more public conversations is also important. This booklet ends with suggestions for how to turn the traditional 'debating' format into Trident 'trialogues' that are more likely to engage people in real conversation and lead to a deeper understanding of the issues (see last page of this leaflet).

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*The Truth About Trident* is published by Luath Press, in association with Quakers in Britain, and is available for £12.99 from the Quaker Centre Bookshop, Friends House, 173 Euston Road, London NW1 2BJ; phone 020 7663 1030 or email [quakercentre@quaker.org.uk](mailto:quakercentre@quaker.org.uk).

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## Who to engage in a Trident conversation

People rarely come to hold positions on the basis of rational argument or debate. It is well known that the courtrooms, hustings and the floor of parliament where this kind of adversarial debate is held are the least conducive environments for changing someone's mind. Adversarial debate tends instead to polarise people into camps, strengthening and reinforcing the views they already hold, even if they had little or no basis for holding those views.

People generally arrive at their opinions and positions on issues not because they have been convinced by rational argument but because other people in their lives happen to hold those views. Sometimes people come to these views through gut reactions, feelings and associations they get from them. Most of us only rationalise our views to ourselves or to others after we have decided what we think about them, not beforehand.

We read books, we follow debates and discussions in the media, we listen to pundits, we converse with colleagues, all with the

tacit assumption that we are capable of being influenced by what others say. And, of course, to a certain extent we are influenced by what they say, even if rarely to the extent of actually changing a long-held view or position.

If what has the most influence on people is not what is said so much as who says it, that means you yourself can influence people who like and admire you. In fact, those are probably the only people you, or any of us, have any chance of influencing: our friends, our family, our colleagues, our neighbours, our acquaintances...

Even if someone likes and admires you, they are not going to listen long to your arguments about Trident if you do not show some understanding and respect for what they have heard and/or already taken in from others about this subject. Indeed, if you are not careful, you might lose friends rather than change their opinion if they feel threatened or abused by what you say. How we communicate about Trident is therefore just as important, if not more so, than what we communicate about it.

## Ten pointers to a more productive Trident conversation

**1. Prepare** – Step one is about doing your homework before you have a Trident conversation. You need to know the person you are going to talk with, where they are coming from and preferably what they think about some of the issues relating to Trident. You need to know what common arguments are likely to come up and to have some ideas about how to respond to them. The best preparation is to practise the conversation. This can be by attending a training course or by role-playing with someone else different ways the conversation might go. You can learn from your mistakes how to handle a conversation differently and keep on improving.

**2. Open** – Step two is about how to start the conversation. Sometimes having a prop of some kind can help. Bring the book, *The Truth About Trident*, a recent newspaper article or something authoritative you've read with you on your first encounter with someone you are going to talk with. Use it as a prop: ask if they've seen it, tell them you've just read it, remind yourself of sections you want to draw from. You might want a few notes of your own.

**3. Listen** – Step three is to ask your friend what they think about Trident. What have they heard? What's their view? If they have heard, or internalised, any of the arguments in favour of Trident, they will almost certainly come out with one or more of the arguments covered in *The Truth About Trident*. Hear them out, be respectful, show that you are listening and not just waiting for the chance to contradict them.

Only when they feel sufficiently heard should you go to step four: agree with them!

**4. Affirm** – Agreeing with someone about something you profoundly disagree with is no easy task. You are not agreeing with everything they say or everything that may be implicit in what they say, but you are looking for something with which you can agree. Without finding something you agree with, it is very difficult to have a fruitful discussion, even with someone who is very close to you.

Assuming the other person has raised one of the standard arguments about Trident, you should be able to find something to agree with if you have read the relevant chapter of *The Truth About Trident*. Sometimes affirming is not necessarily agreeing with what someone says, but agreeing that they hold a legitimate opinion that you can accept as their opinion even if yours is very different.

**5. Clarify** – Being a good listener involves not only listening but also reflecting back what you hear. This is to check that you have heard it correctly and to let the speaker know when you have heard what they are saying. Sometimes we are not as eloquent as we would like to be at saying what we want to say. In those cases, a listener can actually help the speaker to get across their message. Clarifying and paraphrasing what we hear is especially important when the issue is complex and contentious. We need to be sure we understand what someone is saying and not assume we are hearing the same thing we have heard many times before. Be on the lookout for nuance and shades of grey that you can pick up on later in the conversation.

**6. Question** – Step six is not about refuting what they've said, only raising a question mark about it. For instance:

- 'How can you be sure that nuclear weapons have kept the peace since 1945?'
- 'How would we know whether nuclear weapons had actually deterred another country from attacking us?'
- 'So what does multilateral disarmament look like?'
- 'When did the UK get a seat on the UN Security Council and when did it get its first nuclear weapon?'
- 'How do you imagine Trident would protect us from another Hitler, exactly?'

Once again, it is important not just to ask a question but also to listen to the response and show that you have listened. You are now getting into a conversation, as opposed to a debate, and it is possible at this stage to start raising more questions but also to throw in some ideas and evidence from *The Truth About Trident* to challenge the myths that are being presented.

**7. Follow-through** – Assuming you get past the questioning stage, which may be as far as you get, the gentlest way to get people thinking about their own assumptions and beliefs is to help them follow through their own arguments to their logical conclusions. What must also be true if what they are saying is true? We have often not thought things through to that extent, so by teasing out some of the implications of what we think, we raise further questions in people's minds about whether what they currently think is right or not.

**8. Feed** – No one likes to admit they are wrong about something. Feeding new information to people rather than challenging the information they already have allows us to re-think our existing views without being pushed into the corner of being 'wrong'. What new information can you feed them? This is where *The Truth About Trident* may come in handy. Unless the other person is already an expert on Trident, there must be new pieces of information you can share with them.

**9. Explore** – Step nine is where your creativity can run wild. Come at the issue from a different direction, explore alternative ways of looking at it, try out a ‘counter-factual’ approach, which is used often in *The Truth About Trident*. Exploring suits some people better than trying to talk only about facts and figures, especially when the other person is fixated on these and can’t see past them. Make sure you are exploring together. This is where it needs to be a two-way conversation, not a monologue. A real conversation will involve mixing and matching these steps in no particular order as you work your way around the topic. Focusing on one aspect at a time can help but is not always possible.

**10. Summarise** – Ending a conversation about Trident can be as difficult as starting one, especially if you still strongly disagree with each other. Is there anything you can now agree on beyond what you may have identified in the ‘affirming’ stage (step 2)? If not, you can at least go back to what you affirmed then and leave it at that. A productive conversation is not about ‘convincing’ somebody else to come around to your point of view. It’s about thrashing out an issue thoroughly and respectfully so that people can go away and think more about it for themselves. If people go away with new information they did not know before, or a possibility they had not considered, or a doubt about a previously held assumption, then you have had a productive conversation!

### Public meetings and Trident ‘trialogues’

A ‘dialogue’ is different from a ‘debate’ in the sense that the former is about having an open and honest discussion while the latter is about scoring points and trying to ‘win’ an argument. In the case of a dialogue, two people are on the same ‘side’, looking at an issue or a problem together, while in the case of a debate, each person is on opposing sides in relation to the issue or the problem. Only one side can be ‘right’ in a debate, and even when people are naturally drawn to arguments or points raised by the other side, the tendency is to push these away in order not to be seen to ‘lose’ the argument.

It is possible for learning to take place in a debate, even for people to change their views. But it is not the norm. Instead, debate tends to polarise and consolidate people’s existing opinions. People listen out for, and applaud, the things they already agree with. And they block out, ridicule or dismiss the things they already disagree with.

Debates are also generally between two people, or two camps. You are ‘for’ or ‘against’ the motion. But the most important people in any room are those in the ‘don’t know’ camp. These are the people who are genuinely undecided, who come to learn, to find out, to ask questions, and then to make up their own minds on the basis of what they have found out.

That’s where the third party comes in. A Trident ‘trialogue’ is a meeting that takes place in the spirit of dialogue rather than of debate. It is an open and honest sharing of information and exploring together the issues that are raised by Trident, in order that people may genuinely listen to and learn from each other. It is primarily for, and driven by, the undecided voices in the room.

Those who have genuinely not made up their minds on Trident and who have questions and concerns of their own should have an equal part to play in the discussion. It cannot just be between those in favour and those against. That is the idea of the Trident ‘trialogue’.

For more information about Trident ‘trialogues’, having Trident conversations, training workshops available and other resources, go to [www.TheTruthAboutTrident.com](http://www.TheTruthAboutTrident.com).