

Leading articles



Start to Finish

Obama has shown skill in promoting his nuclear agenda. His commitment to limiting weaponry has revived public interest in a safer world

Neither Iran nor North Korea were invited to the Washington summit, meeting to propose tougher measures to stop the theft or diversion of nuclear material into weapons programmes. But Iran was the unannounced focus; and even China, in private talks with President Obama, made clear that it is ready to help step up the pressure on Tehran.

The summit may end today with more than platitudes. It may spur real commitments to combating nuclear terrorism — largely because of the example set last week by America and Russia. Their signature in Prague of a New Start agreement, cutting their nuclear arsenals by a third, sent a strong signal that a world without nuclear weapons is not just a pious dream. That message was underlined by Mr Obama's earlier announcement ruling out the use of nuclear weapons against non-nuclear powers (excluding Iran and North Korea). Despite the opposition of US conservatives, he has astutely revived efforts to end the threat of nuclear war as a central focus of Western policy.

For much of the Cold War, arms control was the yardstick of East-West relations. To a world that had looked into the nuclear abyss in 1962, the

talks since 1970 to limit and then cut US and Soviet warheads, launchers and permissible weapons was not only reassuring; they gave tangible hope that the world was not hurtling towards mutually assured destruction. More importantly, they showed that despite the Cold War, the breakdown of detente and the collapse of communism, East and West were able to build trust in negotiations and test each other's good faith with effective verification. Other issues — terrorism, Iraq, Afghanistan — have since stalled the momentum.

But the danger did not disappear along with the Soviet Union. Nuclear confrontation between India and Pakistan came alarmingly close to nuclear war in 2002. In the Middle East, it is not only Iran that is racing to develop nuclear weapons: its example is provoking a dangerous interest in going nuclear among putative Arab enemies (a pity, therefore, that Binyamin Netanyahu cancelled his attendance at yesterday's summit). And North Korea's reckless development of a nuclear bomb and provocative test-firing of rockets has shaken Japan's determination to remain non-nuclear.

The New Start agreement still leaves Russia

and America able to destroy the world many times over. It does not come into force until the protocols and annexes have been ratified. But it does send a message that what matters now is the threat of proliferation. Unless Russia and the US had signed a new treaty to replace the expired 1991 Start pact, it would have been hard to get today's summit to focus on practical steps — more inspections, controls to block smuggling — to halt a drift to proliferation by countries with civilian nuclear power.

Shoring up the now threadbare Non-Proliferation Treaty, arguably the most successful curb on nuclear weapons ever negotiated, will be the task of the five-year review that begins in New York next month. Without a sense of urgency, driven by the commitment of a US president on a roll and renewed public interest, such a review could be frittered away in minutiae, point-scoring and tedious arguments of insidious intent. The challenge facing the NPT is negotiating for proliferation in an age that no longer has the obvious dividing lines of the Cold War. The challenge is not one of negotiating with your friends, but with your enemies.

Pick and Mix

As an argument for a fourth term, Labour's manifesto is not entirely clear

The Labour Party manifesto was presented yesterday as a Blairite document. In one sense, at least, it was: it was delivered with Tony Blair's trademark use of spin. The party has, in large parts of this manifesto, repackaged and reheated a host of old policies and badged them as Blairite. In this, the manifesto management has not been a vision of the future, but a reminder of the past.

The most interesting and encouraging parts of Labour's plan are its proposals to use the private sector and individual choice as sticks with which to beat public services into shape. To allow underperforming schools and hospitals to be taken over, to end the concept of a life on benefits, to let NHS patients go private if they have waited too long, and to give voters a say in firing police chiefs are all policies that offer the hope of raising standards. This eleventh-hour Blairism is greatly to be welcomed. Yet these ideas come across less forcefully than perhaps they should, for two reasons.

First, it is hard for Gordon Brown, an arch centraliser, to be a convincing messenger that Labour will push power from the State to the people. Choice and personalisation are potentially powerful. But they have long been rhetorical themes that have not always been matched in reality by this Government and by a man who has opposed some

of the most radical reforms. Second, this credibility gap is exacerbated because so much of the rest of the manifesto is deeply interventionist. Labour intervened to good effect in the banking crisis. But this experience seems to have altered its view of intervention. The manifesto repeatedly delivers the message that government has the answers, whether through toddler tax credits, longer paternity leave, a people's bank, or an expanded Sure Start.

This hands-off/hands-on contradiction is writ large in Labour's industrial strategy. After Kraft's acquisition of Cadbury, Labour is now promising to do more to restrict foreign takeovers of UK companies. Labour insists that it has learnt from past mistakes, but it seems to be flirting with a return to failed industrial policies by picking winners, or winning sectors, such as renewables and high-tech. But businesses need clarity about tax and simpler regulation, not differential fiddling with tax reliefs.

By Labour standards, it is responsible to have resisted the temptation to spray money around so close to an election. The Government has acted prudently in freezing public sector pay and is right to try to restrict the number of officials earning more than £150,000. But it is easy to see with hindsight that, unfortunately, this Labour manifesto is

more prudent than the last 13 Labour budgets. Let us not forget that this country has been plunged into debt — and not first by the banking crisis. Labour has proved that it is prone to ever increasing spending and susceptible to institutional capture. The party has missed the opportunity presented by the deficit to take tougher decisions about the shape of the State. A bigger State puts economic burdens on business. It threatens civil liberties. It creates welfare dependency. This was the moment to think much bigger about the limits to state provision.

Mr Blair was often at his best when he was working against the grain of his party. In that sense, yesterday's document was by no means Blairite. It contains intriguing examples of free-market, consumer-orientated reform, but it also advocates economic interventionism of a kind wholly antithetical to what new Labour originally stood for. Indeed, Blairite reform of public services may be the leitmotif, but the recurrent theme of Labour's manifesto is Mr Brown's faith in the State. By trying to appease so many internal constituencies, Labour has made it hard to decipher what its Britain would look like in 2015. If you do not have a philosophy, you end up with at least two. That could prove to be an apt verdict on the new old Labour.

First-Aid Mémoire

A campaign by St John Ambulance hopes to provide vital education about life-saving

Up to 150,000 deaths could be easily avoided every year. And yet the solution does not require trailblazing research or complex medication: just basic first aid. Only 7 per cent of the British population has essential first aid skills, compared with 80 per cent of Germans. That ignorance is costing British lives.

This week St John Ambulance is launching a campaign to teach the elementary principles of life-saving — such as how to help someone who is choking, or how to give the kiss of life. St John's campaign, called The Difference, highlights five situations in

which amateur first aid can prove decisive. Something as trivial-sounding as a blocked airway causes 2,500 avoidable deaths every year.

The campaign's graphic adverts are clearly intended to shock. One shows a close-up photograph of a boy who drowned because his father did not know any first aid. But the underlying message should be optimistic. Consider how many lives could easily be saved if the message of St John Ambulance now begins to get through.

Some social problems are complex and expensive, but learning rudimentary first aid could

scarcely be simpler or easier. Each of us, with very little effort, could become more responsible about finding out what to do. A good start is texting LIFE to 85010 to receive a free pocket guide to life-saving.

Charities face a recurrent struggle to be heard. In getting out their message they must always compete with the dominant news cycle — this week, inevitably, it will be the publication of the party manifestos.

It would be a terrible irony if the business of winning votes obscured learning how to save lives.

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Letters to the Editor

Gratuity not included

I understand that good service from a dentist or barrister in Britain is not normally rewarded with a tip. Of course, in many occupations the issue does not arise and bankers and legislators, for instance, are able to make their own arrangements regardless of the quality of their work.

Gregor Macaulay, Dunedin, New Zealand

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