



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Defence Committee

Oral evidence: Introductory Session with the Secretary of State for Defence, HC 345

Thursday 21 November 2024

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Members present: Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Chair); Mr Calvin Bailey; Alex Baker; Lincoln Jopp; Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck; Mike Martin; Jesse Norman; Ian Roome; Michelle Scrogam; Fred Thomas; Derek Twigg.

Questions 1-62

Witnesses

I: Rt Hon John Healey MP, Secretary of State, Ministry of Defence; David Williams CB, Permanent Secretary, Ministry of Defence; and Lieutenant General Sir Rob Magowan KCB CBE, Deputy Chief of the Defence Staff (Military Capability), Ministry of Defence.



Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: John Healey, David Williams and Lt Gen Sir Rob Magowan.

Q1 Chair: Secretary of State, it is a pleasure to have you here. Thank you so much for agreeing to come before our newly elected Committee so early on. I also warmly welcome David Williams, the permanent secretary for the Ministry of Defence, and Lieutenant General Sir Rob Magowan, the Deputy Chief of the Defence Staff for military capability. On my behalf and that of our Committee, please convey our thanks to our brave servicemen and women, all the staff at the Ministry of Defence and your ministerial team. Please thank them and extend our gratitude for their brave work and service in discharging your primary duty to our country of our defence and national security.

We have only a couple of hours of your valuable time, so let us get straight in with a nice starter for 10. This will come as no surprise, as I have been questioning you about this issue since last month, but for the record: have the UK Government lifted restrictions on the use of Storm Shadows by Ukraine, given the escalation in the deployment of thousands of North Korean troops in Europe?

John Healey: Mr Chairman, thank you for your welcome. Perhaps you will allow me a few opening remarks, as you have made, before I answer that question.

One of the special privileges of this job is, every day, meeting inspiring men and women who are serving in the military, the civil service and industry, who are totally dedicated to defending this country. I will pass on your message of appreciation for their work, as you ask.

It is an honour for me to appear before this Committee as Defence Secretary for the first time. I offer my congratulations, Chair, to you and to all Committee members on being elected to the Committee. It has always been a high-status, sought-after Committee, but I have to say that in my entire time in Parliament we have never had a Defence Committee with a deeper and broader range of expertise than this one. I know that means you will be set to provide proper, tough scrutiny of me, the ministerial team and the Department, but I welcome that. I take my duty to account to Parliament very seriously.

On that, as a new Government, I want a new relationship with Parliament and with this Committee. I want to increase the transparency that we are able to provide to Parliament and this Committee in doing your proper job, and I want to increase the information that is provided. Mr Twigg, Mrs Lewell-Buck and you, Chair, as members of the previous Select Committee in the previous Parliament under the previous Government, will know of the frustrations that Committee members on all sides had.

We have already held two briefings on Ukraine for all MPs—close to 120 MPs have attended those—and we will do more. We have also done them



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with peers. We are increasing places on the all-party Armed Forces Parliamentary Scheme, and I have discussed with the permanent secretary ways that we can offer you and Committee members closed-door briefings and information that it is not possible to share openly with the Committee in a forum like this. That will be my approach to working with you and the Committee.

I want to say two things, if I may, before I get on to Ukraine. The first is that everyone knows these are serious times, with war in Europe, conflict in the Middle East and growing global threats, and technology is rapidly changing the nature of warfare and what is possible. Everyone on this Committee knows that although we face serious threats, there are serious problems with defence. My last but one predecessor said to the House of Commons about his own Government that “we have hollowed out and underfunded” the Armed Forces over the last 14 years, so, as I told the House in my statement yesterday, we knew there were problems. But the problems were worse than we thought. We are taking action, as I reported yesterday, to get a grip of MOD budgets. We will invest in the areas that we need for the future and make sure that we can deliver better for our frontline forces and get better value for money for taxpayers.

On Ukraine, this is a serious moment to come before the Committee. Defence intelligence will reveal today that the frontline is now less stable than at any time since the early days of the full-scale Russian invasion in February 2022. We have seen in recent weeks a clear escalation from Putin and his forces: they have stepped up attacks on the energy system in Ukraine ahead of winter and stepped up attacks on civilian centres, killing children; they have deployed at least 10,000 North Korean troops to the battle frontline; and there are unconfirmed media reports today of Russia firing into Ukraine a new ballistic missile, which we know they have been preparing for months.

Although the Ukrainian actions on the battlefield speak for themselves, be in no doubt that the UK Government are stepping up our support for Ukraine and determined to continue doubling down on our support for Ukraine. This is what I told Minister Umarov in a long call on Tuesday. It is what I discussed with the US Defence Secretary Lloyd Austin on Sunday. As I told you and the House yesterday—it holds for this Committee as well—I will not be drawn on the operational details of the conflict. It risks both operational security and, in the end, the only one who benefits from such a public debate is President Putin.

Q2 Chair: Thank you, Secretary of State, for your kind words for myself and Committee members. I want to place on the record your co-operation. On my being elected Chair of the Committee, the very next day you and I had a meeting. I am very grateful for the openness and transparency with which officials at the MOD have given us private briefings.

In terms of Storm Shadows, I was fully anticipating that answer, but I will not dwell on that further. We are very much in line with the fact that you and the Government so fully support Ukraine. That is what is required to support our friends and allies.



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Let us move on. When do you anticipate that we will move to a position of spending 2.5% of GDP on defence?

John Healey: As a Labour MP like me, you will appreciate that we stood as Labour candidates on a manifesto with a unique commitment to increase defence spending to 2.5% of GDP—a level that has not been met in this country since 2010, when Labour were last in government. Our commitment is that we will set a clear path to 2.5% of GDP on defence. The Prime Minister has been clear since the first week when he and I were in Washington together at the 75th NATO summit, when he said, “Strategic defence review first; 2.5% to follow.” Subsequently and recently, the Chief Secretary to the Treasury has made it clear on the media that we should expect that path to be set out in the spring.

Q3 **Chair:** I appreciate that, but many of us feel we need clarity. We need a clear timetable to set things out, because that also provides clarity for our allies, our defence community and our defence industrial base. It is wonderful that we have now got a defence industrial strategy, but it is without having that clarity. The Budget was perhaps a missed opportunity for that.

Some of us would also like to understand why certain aspects of defence reform that are being undertaken are so urgent that they cannot wait. For example, the Government created a military strategic headquarters and recruited a national armaments director, without waiting for the strategic defence review—the SDR—to be implemented, but it continues to delay on that 2.5% of GDP. Why that anomaly?

John Healey: I see no anomaly. First, we set out the commitment to establishing a path to 2.5%, but we are not waiting until then. You mention the Budget that the Chancellor delivered on 30 October; you will have noted that, unlike for many other Departments, there was a substantial increase in next year’s budget for the Ministry of Defence—£2.9 billion extra just next year—which is a demonstration that we recognise as a Government that the first duty of a Government is to keep this country safe, and that is what we are determined to do.

In terms of defence reform, you and Committee members may want to get into the detail a little later, but I have embarked on and launched what is probably the most far-reaching defence reform for 50 years, and I have done that because it is essential in order for us to be able to shape our forces for the future. It is essential to being able to deliver the sort of recommendations that we might get and the strategy that the strategic defence review is likely to set out.

Q4 **Chair:** We certainly will go into reform; I will leave that to my colleagues, some of whom are very interested, especially subsequent to your statement to the House yesterday.

I fully appreciate that you get the urgency of this—as I have mentioned in the House over the last couple of months, that is not a matter of question—but the key thing here is whether others in Government get the urgency. Since 2009-10, the defence budget has reduced in real



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terms. Adjusted for inflation, using 2023-24 prices, our current spending on defence is actually lower than it was in 2009-10.

Given the increased volatility you mentioned earlier, we simply cannot as a nation wait for economic circumstances to allow that, nor can we wait in terms of autocracies. Russia has already transitioned to a war economy, spending more than 40% of its GDP on defence, which is obviously unsustainable, but whether we look at North Korea, China, Iran or others, they have substantially ramped up. They will not be waiting until the situation in terms of the economy becomes better. Have you been able to make that point to other colleagues in Government around the Cabinet table?

John Healey: You make the point that I made to the Committee earlier. These are serious times, with war in Europe, conflict in the Middle East and rising global threats, as you say. That is precisely the reason why we must increase defence spending to 2.5%—everyone agrees with that—in order to deal with the threats that we face and the transformation that we require in our Armed Forces. You are right, although I am not familiar with the figures you cite. That is, in the end, what Ben Wallace meant when he said that over the last 14 years we have hollowed out and underfunded the forces.

This was before your time in Parliament, Mr Chairman, but when we had a change of Government in 2010 we were spending 2.5% of GDP on defence and had more than 100,000 full-time soldiers in the British Army. In the first year of the new Government in 2010, they cut the defence budget by £2 billion. Over the first five years, during that period of austerity, they cut defence by 18.8% in real terms. That is part of the long legacy and inheritance that this Government are now having to deal with in the context of the rising and diversifying threats.

The first of your series of questions was about the extent to which the rest of Government have recognised the importance of this. I say to you that it was not just there in the Labour manifesto and the commitment of this Government; it is something that the Prime Minister has reinforced and the Chancellor has reinforced, most recently in her Budget statement on 30 October.

Chair: Before we move on to the strategic defence review, my colleague Calvin Bailey would like to come in on that point.

Q5 **Mr Bailey:** Thank you, Secretary of State, for being here today and for your time. On that point, I very much welcome yesterday's statement and the measures within it to be taken. We may come to this later, but could I ask for your reflections on the damage that was done in the 2010 security and defence review? How much of that are we still living with today? When I say that, I mean damage such as the delaying of Astute-class submarines, and what it has done not just to our operational capability but to the enterprise that exists behind it. I believe there was a reduction in the number of personnel able to work on submarines from 13,000 to nearly 300. I would welcome your views on that.



John Healey: That was an unhappy period for defence. There were delays in major programmes and conscious ministerial decisions to put back major programmes by four or five years. There were decisions made and then changed on major procurement programmes, as well as decisions driven by an austerity Government that cut the defence budget as a whole. In a way, for me now that is ancient history—I mention it because Mr Chairman brought it up—but you, Mr Bailey, were serving in a distinguished way in the RAF during that period. You and other Committee members who were serving at the time will know exactly what it was like during the last 14 or 15 years.

Our task now is to plot a path, which I started to do yesterday, that means that we can get a grip of MOD budgets and make long-overdue decisions to decommission outdated equipment, because our forces deserve better equipment to do their job better. As I said to begin with, the rapidly changing nature of warfare, which Ukraine tells us about, and which is amplified by the accelerating development of technology, means that the sort of capabilities that in large part we have are just not good enough for the future. When we work with allies, we have to make sure that our UK contribution is not just a major contribution to the collective deterrence and strength of our alliances but part of the leading edge that sees us setting the pace of some of the necessary transformations.

Chair: Thank you very much. We would now like to move on to the strategic defence review that the Government have undertaken. I invite my colleague Emma Lewell-Buck to start.

Q6 **Mrs Lewell-Buck:** Good morning all. Secretary of State, you have been unequivocal that the Government have a NATO-first strategy, yet the scope and parameters of the SDR are much wider than that. What trade-offs would you be willing to make?

John Healey: Mrs Lewell-Buck, that is a question that is, in all honesty, not possible to answer at this point. The purpose of commissioning the defence review, and doing it in a way that is unique to the UK—it is externally led but draws on the deep expertise within both the Department and the military, as well as more widely—means that the framework, or the terms of reference, that the Prime Minister published, when he commissioned it on 16 July, set the terms. The sort of assessments that the reviewers, who are drawing on wide expertise, are making at the moment will help to outline those sorts of decisions. There will be trade-offs, but it is not possible at this stage—and certainly not today—to give any sensible answer to that.

Q7 **Mrs Lewell-Buck:** Thank you for that answer, Secretary of State. As a Committee, we are trying to get a feel for what you think are the greatest threats, whether we can balance current UK commitments and what might be deprioritised. As you know, there was an Indo-Pacific tilt in the last SDR. Is that something that we will be pulling back on? As we already went through at the start of the session, you inherited a financial black hole and things are worse than you thought. For too long, our troops have been doing more with less, and I just cannot see how, when



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presented with the SDR, some things will not have to be put on the backburner or pushed to one side. It is about trying to get an understanding of what you see as the biggest threats and what your priorities will be when you are presented with that menu from the SDR.

John Healey: I can run through mine and the Government's priorities, which are essentially captured in the framing terms of reference for the review. Mrs Lewell-Buck, you were on this Committee, and you saw a couple of defence reviews and a couple of integrated reviews. You will remember that the integrated review in 2023, on the Indo-Pacific tilt, described it as "delivered". Our starting point as a Government, which we reinforced in our election manifesto, is to build on the relationships that had been settled with that tilt that had been delivered. There are important allies in that part of the world, demonstrated by some of the support that those countries in the Indo-Pacific have given to Ukraine and the increasing indivisibility between security concerns in the north Atlantic and in the Indo-Pacific.

You are making an argument that I would make, and have made before, about realism and honesty in the commitments that we can make to allies, and that we make in committing our own forces. I have argued on the Indo-Pacific that there is a great deal the UK can contribute in industrial alliances, diplomacy and technological partnerships. There is much to build on, but there is a necessary realism about the level of military deployment that this country can make on a continuing basis into the Indo-Pacific.

Q8 Mrs Lewell-Buck: Would you be able to say today, and put an end to some of the rumours, whether our carriers are safe or is one going to be mothballed?

John Healey: We have some really important programmes and capabilities across the board. The strategic defence review, because it is a strategic defence review, is looking across the board at everything. However, I absolutely do not want you to take that as a signal that any part of our programmes and capabilities—to be clear—are in jeopardy. This is an ongoing question, and they are under scrutiny but not in jeopardy. We will take the decisions that we have to, but we will take them in the light of the reviewers' analysis, when they come to report.

Q9 Mrs Lewell-Buck: I have some practical questions about the SDR. Can you confirm the timelines for us? When will you and the MOD receive it? When will it be presented to Parliament? What kind of implementation timeline will you be looking at for the SDR's recommendations? When do you hope to have the finances in place to deliver them? I know a lot of this is hypothetical, but it would be really helpful if you could give us some guidance on timelines and expectations.

John Healey: On timelines, I expect the reviewers to complete their reports and deliver them in spring. I expect to be able to publish a version of that report, and I will report that strategic defence review to Parliament.



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On the Committee's interest, I am not sure whether you remember from the session we had yesterday in the Chamber, but to complete your two questions about the Indo-Pacific and carriers, I think this Committee should take seriously the commitment to the carrier strike group 2025, which will be one of our aircraft carriers spending four to five months in the Indo-Pacific, taking part in military exercises, as well as diplomacy and trade—a demonstration, if you like, of that capability and of its reach.

On implementation, we have touched on the imperative to see serious defence reform in place in order to make the decisions effectively and then drive the implementation of the strategic defence review. That is one of the reasons that the schedule for defence reform is geared also to that. For the guidance of the Committee, you should expect the strategic defence review to report in the spring.

- Q10 **Mrs Lewell-Buck:** I will leave it there on the SDR, Secretary of State. Last night, you may have seen the nuclear veterans documentary on BBC Two. I was wondering for how long the Government and the MOD are going to hold the line that nothing is being withheld from the veterans, and that their families are not suffering from the effects of radiation.

John Healey: Nothing is being withheld. What we are doing is a detailed dig into what may be held but we have not been aware of. Exercises like that in any part of Government often throw up material and documentation that may have been archived, the records of which may have been lost. We are doing that led by the Minister for Veterans and People.

I take our duty to the nuclear test veterans very seriously. I was with Keir Starmer when he was the first party leader to meet the nuclear test veterans, and he gave them—as I did—his undertaking that we would get to the bottom of their concerns. If there are documents that the Government hold in any part of the system, we will release them, as they ask.

- Q11 **Mrs Lewell-Buck:** That is the issue, Secretary of State. Veterans are saying that they are asking for their medical records. They know they were tested, and they say that they are being told that their medical records do not exist, or come back in partial form. There are two different sides to this, and the veterans have been denied the truth for a very long time. It was not until 2023, after a long FOI battle by Susie Boniface from the *Daily Mirror*, that the MOD actually had to start admitting that it had been doing those tests. You can see that there is a lot of mistrust there, and veterans are constantly being told what they know is the truth is not the truth. You know yourself, Secretary of State, that there is nothing worse than knowing you are telling the truth and not being believed.

John Healey: First of all, hats off to the *Mirror* and Susie Boniface for the campaign that they ran and for the way in which they have supported the nuclear test veterans. But, with respect, there is not necessarily an inconsistency. I am not saying this is the case, but there is not necessarily an inconsistency in nuclear test veterans knowing they were tested—



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medically tested at the time or soon afterwards—and the fact that now, decades later, those medical records may not exist still or, where they may exist, may be partial. That is what we are trying to get to the bottom of, that is what they are asking of us, and that is what we will do.

- Q12 **Mrs Lewell-Buck:** Yes, I think that is the thing they are saying: if the records are not there, where did they go and on whose orders, because the veterans know they were tested. I suppose that comes back to their main ask, which is that they would like—I do not know what your view on this is, Secretary of State—a judge-led special inquiry with the power to investigate, adjudicate, compensate and commemorate them, because they are dying. They are dying every week now.

John Healey: I have met some of these ageing, and some ailing, nuclear test veterans. I have enormous respect for the campaign that they have run, and share their frustrated anguish at not being properly recognised. But with respect, that sort of judge-led inquiry could take years. The important thing is that we get to the bottom of this and try to answer the questions that they have and provide the recognition that they seek—which we have done with medals—and that is what we are determined to do. We came in as a fresh Government committed to doing that. That is what we are doing. But some of this digging is not straightforward and some of those records may not exist.

Chair: Thank you very much, Secretary of State. This is a very emotive issue. You mentioned the *Mirror* and activists, like Susie Boniface, who have been doing a lot of great work. I appreciate that the Minister for Veterans and People recently visited one of our veterans to hand out a medal, but I think this issue will keep going, because those veterans do need justice. I think that you fully appreciate the gravity of that. I believe that my colleague Jesse Norman wants to come in on the SDR as well.

- Q13 **Jesse Norman:** I want to come in on the back of what Emma was saying, but first I have one quick question to ask, if I may, Secretary of State. You have made some play of the decisions of the 2010 Government, but isn't it true that you were a member of the Government before that, who published a document, in March 2010, that planned significant reductions in public spending, including in defence?

John Healey: We were dealing, as you will remember, with the aftermath of a global financial crisis driven by the over-extension and recklessness of the global financial system. We were helping to pull the economy out of the deepest recession that we had had for decades. In fact, in the first quarter of 2010, the economy was growing strongly—at over 1% in that quarter alone. So there was a financial legacy to deal with. That is certainly true. And there was an economic recovery to try to protect. We had plans on how to tackle that should we have won the 2010 election. We did not. It fell to another Government, who took a much harder line on public spending.

- Q14 **Jesse Norman:** You have talked about, and I completely respect and agree about, the importance of realism and honesty, but would it not



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have been a bit more realistic of you to acknowledge the financial circumstances in 2010 and a bit more honest, by your own lights, to say that Labour were planning £73 billion-worth of public spending cuts over the following four years, including £4.5 billion in defence. That would have been a material fact. Both parties, the Government and the Opposition, were thinking hard about how to pull the country out of the terrible nosedive it was in. I think it is worth putting that on the record up front and I think you are agreeing with me, Secretary of State.

May I ask about the SDR? To follow up on Emma's question, will it actually state what the priorities are in terms of the scenarios that it envisages that we must be prepared for as a country, rather than just pretending that everything is a priority? Will it say, "We think a war in Europe is the central priority," for example, "and we are prioritising around that," or will there be a degree of fudge, do you expect? What kinds of demands are you placing on it?

John Healey: I am certainly not expecting the reviewers to produce a fudged report. You can get, Mr Norman, some indication of the priorities that will be in the review, because they are what we have set to guide them. For instance, we are a Government who have made the commitment to a NATO-first approach to defence. That helps to frame the thinking and assessment that the reviewers are undertaking, and it will clearly frame the options that they will weigh and the likely recommendations that they may make to us.

If I may say so, I hope the Committee will find it useful when Lord Robertson comes to the Committee. He has offered to do a briefing session with members of the Committee in a couple of weeks' time, and I think you will have a sense of both how serious and thorough this process is and how rapidly—properly rapidly, but nevertheless thoroughly—the reviewers are undertaking it. You will also get a sense of reviewers who are charged, but utterly determined, to make sure that they confront the Government and the country with the decisions that we need to take in order to deal with the state of our forces, but most importantly make them fit for the future so that we can reinforce our contribution to NATO and strengthen our collective and national deterrence, as well as our ability to fight effectively in the changing circumstances if we are required to do that.

Q15 **Jesse Norman:** I have a final question, Secretary of State. Can you give us an update on your thinking and review of the damage to the undersea cables in the Baltic sea in the last few days? I think that is potentially quite a significant further escalation.

John Healey: You are entirely right, Mr Norman. One focus within the terms of reference for the reviewers was to assess the adequacy of our homeland defences. Clearly, there is a recognition in recent months, not least because we have seen damage to essential undersea cables in different parts of the north Atlantic, the North sea and the Baltic, that this is an area that requires attention. General Magowan is very involved in



part of the internal support to the reviewers' work. He may want to add something to your questions.

Lt Gen Sir Rob Magowan: I can add a couple of things. We are looking at the review, supporting the review team, and supporting the Secretary of State and the Prime Minister through four lenses, and we are trying to balance the resource against those four lenses. As the Secretary of State said, "NATO first" is going to run through the heart of any outcome of the review. That is why we go to Brussels every week—to understand what the demand signal is from NATO and how we can influence it, because we are part of NATO. We are an important member state.

Secondly, you have spoken about more global responsibilities. That is another balance we have to play, accepting that "NATO first" is the primary focus of the review. The third area, which the Secretary of State just touched on, is homeland defence. That overlaps with our responsibilities for NATO, but do we have enough homeland defence capability against the new strategic context in terms of warfighting deterrence?

The fourth area, which we have just spoken about, is the so-called hybrid grey zone activity—attacks on critical national infrastructure, Russian aircraft buzzing our airspace on a regular basis, cyber-attacks every day. This is happening now, and we have to ensure that we have the capability to fight the fight today, as well as deter for warfighting.

All these things are in play. That is why there is such an integrated and intense review to ensure that we can offer, through the independent team, a range of options to the Secretary of State that he can choose from in due course.

John Healey: Can I make one point to build on that? I really do not want the Committee to be under any impression that we have somehow set up the strategic review and the Ministry of Defence is sitting back, waiting to see what it has to say. We are dealing with the Russian spy ship, the Yantar, which has been in our waters. We tracked them every mile of their circumvention and made sure that they knew we were watching, and we have kept an eye on them.

We have not been waiting for the strategic review but have recognised your concern, Mr Norman, and built that into the UK-German defence agreement, which we were able to strike within four months of coming into government. Undersea cables are a shared concern that we have for that part of our defence and security, which we can develop bilaterally with Germany, as well as within NATO, and make sure that we do what we need to do as a nation as a result of the strategic defence review as well.

Chair: We are very much looking forward to our public evidence session with Lord Robertson next month. I would like to move on to NATO and other European alliances.

Q16 **Mike Martin:** Thank you, Secretary of State, for taking the time today to



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come with your team. I particularly welcome the comments you made in your introduction about transparency towards Parliament and the Committee. I want to ask a couple of questions about NATO. First, what does NATO mean to you personally?

John Healey: First, and I say this as a Labour Secretary of State, it means a recognition and a sense of pride that it was a Labour Foreign Secretary who was the architect of the NATO alliance when it was first established, particularly the article 5 collective defence at the heart of it. I feel that Labour is the party of NATO and always has been.

Secondly, I recognise it as the most successful security alliance in the history of the world, sustained over nearly seven decades. It is stronger, more unified and bigger now than ever before, which is precisely the opposite strategic effect from what Putin wanted when he invaded Ukraine. We were strong supporters from Opposition, and continue to be so now in Government, of the Swedes and Finns acceding to the NATO. NATO is 32 nations strong, with challenges that we can now meet together, but with the confidence as individual nations that, should any of us come under attack, we will not face those adversaries and threats alone.

Q17 **Mike Martin:** I take from that answer and some of your previous answers that as we work in collective defence, the contributions of individual nations are what make that defence. We as the UK promise certain capabilities and outcomes to NATO as part of that collective defence and other countries do that for us in return. That is what makes us strong. With your permission, I will run through a few capabilities and operations we might have to carry out to contribute to NATO to see where we are on them. Would the UK be able to deploy and sustain a division to NATO's eastern flank?

John Healey: I suspect my answer will be the same as to the rest of the checklist of questions you have. The questions I had in Opposition were the reason I made the commitment before the election to undertake a NATO test, which I have now completed. That was to do exactly the job you are asking about, but I cannot provide the answers in public. However, if you wish, Chair, I am willing to share the results of that NATO test with members of the Committee on a properly classified basis. It is a concern to me that as the leading European NATO nation we are able to make and fulfil our commitments to NATO. Whether that is fielding a full division, any of the other major asks, or over what sort of timescales we have undertaken that test, I will share with the Committee, but not in public.

Chair: Thank you, Secretary of State. We would like to take you up on the offer of a classified session for the Committee.

Q18 **Mike Martin:** Thank you very much, Secretary of State; that is very generous. Accepting that you will not divulge the specific yes or no answers to those capabilities, can I run through whether those capabilities will be in your private answers?



John Healey: Sure.

Q19 **Mike Martin:** Thank you. The UK warfighting division to NATO's eastern flank?

John Healey: Yes.

Q20 **Mike Martin:** How many brigades we could get to a start line in Sennelager in the event of a major escalation?

John Healey: That is more specific.

Lt Gen Sir Rob Magowan: I will say three things, conscious that the Secretary of State has offered a classified briefing on this. First, if the British Army was asked to fight tonight, it would fight tonight. I do not think anybody in this room should be under any illusion: if the Russians invaded eastern Europe tonight, we would meet them in that fight.

Secondly, as we go through the classified briefing, can we sit here and say that the 3 UK division carries no operational risk whatsoever? Of course not. There is a range of operational risks and operational strengths associated with that division. That is exactly what the strategic defence review is addressing. We have spoken at this Committee before about a munitions strategy and a munitions plan. We know we need more lethality; we have not been secret about that. The Secretary of State has talked about stepping up some of the joint enablers that we need. Of course, there are areas that we are addressing through the SDR.

My third point is that critical to responding is ensuring that we can respond and adapt. The ability to respond and adapt absolutely lies at the heart of our industrial strategy. We are seeing that playing out in Ukraine. It is the ability for Ukraine and those allies of Ukraine to have the industrial strength to respond and provide whatever is needed, or in our case, whatever the alliance needs in the event of a major conflagration with Russia. That is why so much of what we are doing through the SDR, and what we have done up to the SDR, is about embedding a sovereign industrial base, and an allied industrial base as well, because the situation changes on the ground, as you well know.

Mike Martin: I am absolutely certain that if the Russians invaded eastern Europe the British Army would be there. I am a reserve officer, so I would probably be there with them.

John Healey: We are there now, of course, in Estonia.

Mike Martin: We are, but I meant in force.

David Williams: The General has talked about close engagement with NATO. As we think through our part in the SACEUR's plans in the event of warfighting with Russia, what we contribute where and when would reflect those plans. It might be on the eastern front very quickly, or it might be elsewhere. We need a degree of flexibility on response.



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John Healey: Of course, we commit the largest part of our Armed Forces across the board to NATO. We commit our independent nuclear deterrent to NATO. We have around 1,000 people in NATO institutions. We have three significant NATO centres in the UK: the maritime command, the innovation centre and the ARRC. We make a massive contribution to NATO. More is asked of us, as it is of all nations. I want to ensure that we meet those asks, and that they are consistent with what we will do to develop our forces and strength in the future.

Q21 **Mrs Lewell-Buck:** You will be aware that the previous iteration of the Committee before the general election, in our “Ready for War?” report, said that our Armed Forces are not ready for a high-intensity war. Has that changed? That report came out in February. Has there been any change to that situation?

Lt Gen Sir Rob Magowan: We discussed this at the last Committee session, and I think your words were, “We will have to agree to disagree.”

Mrs Lewell-Buck: Yes.

Lt Gen Sir Rob Magowan: I made the point that we are ready to go to war, but I also made the point that there are operational risks associated with sustaining that war. I think the previous Secretary of State said that, whatever the context, we would be fighting as an alliance of 32 member states. Looking at a particular country in isolation masks the fact that the strength of the alliance is the 32 nations within it. I will go back to the point, and the Secretary of State is on record saying it, that we have got more to do to ensure that we can endure the fight. That is what the SDR is about.

Q22 **Derek Twigg:** I remember that conversation well, General, and we did agree to disagree. The key question, which you slightly touched on, is how resilient our Army will be. In other words, how long could we keep them in the field?

Lt Gen Sir Rob Magowan: As a number of people in this room know, fighting power is not just about equipment and capability; it is about the moral component. The moral component is about staying in the fight, and I am wholly confident that every member of the British Armed Forces has the moral component to sustain the fight. In terms of capability, we have been clear—we are going over old ground—

Q23 **Derek Twigg:** Sorry—I am talking about resilience. You can put an army in the field, but for how long? I quite understand you have equipment, but as you would guess, we have been around this—we understand that bit.

Lt Gen Sir Rob Magowan: You would not expect us on live television to say exactly how many munitions types we have against a certain scenario.

Derek Twigg: I am not asking that question.

John Healey: Resilience is a really important question. Ukraine reminds us of this truth: your Armed Forces are only as strong as the industry that



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stands behind them. That is why the General laid stress on the fact that the reforms we are trying to make on a defence-industrial strategy are not just what we are embarking on now and expect to be accelerated after the strategic defence review, but a really necessary component of being able to fight more effectively and be better prepared in the future.

That is one of the reasons why we were so badly exposed when Russia did invade Ukraine. It took 287 days for the Government then to get a contract in place for fresh production of NLAWs. It took more than 500 days to get a fresh contract in place for new ammunition. That was because our industry was not in a place that was resilient, as Mr Twigg is arguing, to support a fight in the future.

Chair: No doubt we will look into these issues in the classified briefing. I fully appreciate what the General has said—that we cannot discuss that in the public session. I would like to move on, given the lack of time, to personnel issues.

Q24 **Ian Roome:** Thank you, Secretary of State, for being here with the panel. Obviously, any force is only as good as its personnel. You can come up with all the strategic plans, but without the personnel, we have no Armed Forces. You acknowledged, Secretary of State, in September that the MOD has a massive problem with recruitment and retention. I know that yesterday you went some way towards addressing that with some of the pinch points. Could you tell us what steps you are taking to address the recruitment and retention problem within the Armed Forces?

John Healey: Yes—and thank you, Mr Roome. I am pausing only because I really want to emphasise that we are a Government that will place people at the heart of our defence plans. We are now facing deep-set problems, and those deep-set problems run over the last 14 years: recruitment targets were set and missed every year; in the last year, service morale fell to record lows and over the last year our forces were losing 300 more full-time personnel than were joining, every month.

I want to emphasise that the start that we are making and the steps that I will outline now are just a start. When you have those deep-set problems and established trends, to reverse them and then recover the situation will take time—it cannot be done overnight. The first significant step for me was to award the largest pay increase for our Armed Forces for over 20 years this summer and to be the first ever Defence Secretary to say that everyone in a uniform will be paid at least a national living wage.

As you say, Mr Roome, I announced yesterday the second step on pay, which is a feature of some frustration for forces personnel. That step is for two groups whose expertise we are particularly concerned to hold on to; to keep in service, we are putting in place particular incentive retention payments. Those are the tri-service aircraft engineers—their scheme will come in from April—and those soldiers at the private and lance corporal ranks who have served for four years. Having put in the investment and got these skilled, trained personnel, we want to hang on to them.



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Beyond that, we recognise also that it is often the feelings of the families who stand with and support personnel that influence their decision about whether to stay or go. Therefore, on Monday, you may recall that we announced the extension of childcare provision and support for those personnel serving overseas. It is likely that around 2,700 personnel will benefit from that.

We have changed some of the rules and restrictions that stop people who want to join the forces. Some people say, "Young people today have no interest in serving the country, and serving in uniform," but I have been really struck by the fact—I feel this very deeply—that over the last 10 years more than a million young people have applied to join the forces. The problem is that more than three quarters of them just give up on the application and never reach the point at which they are rejected or recruited.

We have swept away some of the historical restrictions on people joining, and we are setting up a new direct route for those who have cyber skills and a cyber interest so that they can join the forces in that role. We are now working with all three services to put in place really tight turnaround targets for people who apply to be assessed and either rejected or given a training offer. We hope that will drive the system too. We have a lot more to do, but those are the starts that we have made.

Q25 Ian Roome: I have obviously raised questions in Parliament, and this week I raised with you the medical assessments and Capita's long recruitment times. I personally know individuals in my constituency who have had a delay of 10 or 11 months before they have been seen. Some of those have been referred to me by quite high-ranking serving officers, who acknowledge that. One of the ambitions that you set out in September was to set the MOD a target of reducing those waiting times and, I think, having a confirmation of a training start date within 30 days and an application process within 10 days. How far is the MOD from achieving those targets?

John Healey: We are some way off at the moment, but that is the purpose of setting targets. If you or I were not fortunate enough to be Members of Parliament and were in the job market, we would not expect to wait more than a month for some sort of response from any employer we were applying to, so there is no reason why our forces should not be capable of responding in the same way. Frankly, if we do not, we lose good people, who will go elsewhere, especially in a tight labour market, as we have now. We are some way off, but I hope to be able to come back to this Committee next year and give you a good update report that says that we are getting closer. You can see the scale of the transformation, not just in the thinking but in the system of being able to recruit that will be required to meet those targets.

Lt Gen Sir Rob Magowan: It is worth stressing that the Armed Forces recruitment programme, which will go live in 2027, will see a fully digitised pipeline. We believe the heart of the problem of people taking so long is



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that it is often not easy to track where they are, but this digitisation will greatly improve what you just said and help us to meet those targets.

- Q26 **Ian Roome:** Obviously, the Ukraine war started while the investigation was being done for the Haythornthwaite report, so it influenced the report. How is the MOD actioning the recommendations in the Haythornthwaite report?

John Healey: This was probably the first systematic look at the range of things affecting morale, recruitment and retention that had been taking place for years. It was very valuable and, I thought, very comprehensive, even though it was commissioned under the previous Government. David, do you want to give Mr Roome an update on how far the Department has got with the different elements of it?

David Williams: Mr Roome, you will appreciate that we did not get to formally publish a Government response to the Haythornthwaite review before the election was called, but work within the Department to take forward its recommendations has focused, in the first instance, on the engineering cohort. As the Secretary of State said, one of the FRIs that we announced yesterday relates to a group of air engineers. We are looking at the offer, the total reward and what is described in the report as “zig-zag careers”—how to make the most of people who want to leave the services but then come back. We are looking at routes of entry.

There is work in hand on those aspects of the review. With the change of Government and the new ministerial team, we are currently working through a refreshed Ministry of Defence people plan and strategy, with an immediate focus, as the Secretary of State set out and as you have been asking about, on recruitment and retention, with a clear early focus on resetting the relationship between the Government and the Armed Forces. The introduction into the House of legislation around the Armed Forces commissioner is a good example of that.

Taking forward the detailed recommendations of the Haythornthwaite review will get swept up in a refreshed people plan to reflect the particular priorities of this Government, but the direction of travel and the breadth of recommendations will all be encompassed within that.

- Q27 **Ian Roome:** Thank you for the zig-zag career synopsis. Is part of that review about allowing people to come in at a higher rank because of their skills and experience, as reported in the MOD annual report and accounts 2023-24?

David Williams: That is the intent. If you leave, go out and gain different, additional skills and then look to come back, we should reflect that in the roles and responsibilities and the rank that you get when you come back in.

Lt Gen Sir Rob Magowan: And you can do that today. You can join the Navy today as a petty officer.

Ian Roome: That is important, because obviously they have equivalent



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skills in civvy street and it is a choice. That is good to hear.

Chair: There is a great deal of interest around this, so we will delve further with Lincoln Jopp.

Q28 **Lincoln Jopp:** Secretary of State, you said yesterday to the House that the permanent secretary would lead a leaner Department; so, permanent secretary, does leaner mean fewer MOD civil servants? If it does, how many are going to leave and by when?

David Williams: Yes, leaner in a number of ways. There is a range of processes and bureaucracy that we need to reduce and streamline to make sure that we are making more effective decisions more quickly and then delivering against them. That kind of streamlining, simplicity and clear accountability is at the heart of the defence reform programme that the Secretary of State set out and on which we are working at pace.

My expectation is that the number of civil servants in the Department will fall. We have reduced by 1,000 over the past 12 months, down to full-time equivalents of 56,800. That is a net reduction of 1,000, having increased civil servants within the overall defence nuclear enterprise by about 500.

My sense is that at the very least we need to get down to 2019 levels as a net position, but there will be areas where we want to increase the number of civil servants, either by permanent recruitment for currently external professional services—Defence Digital is a good example of that—or in areas where civilianisation makes sense. Aspects of the home-based medical services are an example of that.

I am happy to share a note with the Committee, but within that current 56,800 we have around 6,000 police officers and guards, around 1,500 healthcare professionals and over 3,000 scientists, so it is not 56,000 traditional policy civil servants sitting in Main Building. I think the combination of simplification, clearer accountabilities and reduction of bureaucracy, as well as investment in automation and modern back-office functions, means that we should be able to deliver the support to Ministers, the Armed Forces and the wider public with fewer civil servants than we currently employ.

I currently have no plans for specific redundancy programmes. We will look at the balance between in-flow, retraining and out-flow, but that is something we will want to keep under review as the recommendations from the SDR come forward. We are already engaging with the new Office for Value for Money about how we can lean in with broader cross-Government productivity initiatives as well. So I think there is a “watch this space” in that area.

Q29 **Lincoln Jopp:** I thank the permanent secretary for that fulsome answer. The £56,000 is going to come down, then; do you have in your mind a particular percentage, say, as a target, and in what sort of timeframe?

David Williams: If we take last autumn as a baseline, which would be around 59,000, and if we look to get down to 2019 levels, that would be a



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reduction of around 10%. In order to create the headroom for permanent recruitment where currently we rely on professional services, or to create headroom for civilianisation, we need to take some of the core roles down further to build back up. I think that as a minimum a 10% reduction over the lifetime of this Parliament is a good jumping-off point, but as we think through the opportunities in our productivity work and as we think through the recommendations from the SDR, we may well want to adjust that.

Chair: Thank you, permanent secretary. We would very much like to take up your offer of a detailed note. It is good that you are on top of the various facts and figures, and a detailed note to the Committee would be greatly appreciated. Alex Baker is next.

Q30 **Alex Baker:** One of the areas where we are losing recruits is in respect of Commonwealth soldiers, because we put a 15% limit on the number of recruits we take per cap badge. With 36,000 Commonwealth soldiers in the pipeline, are we not missing a trick?

John Healey: I think we have a good record of recruiting Commonwealth soldiers. Our level of recruitment of soldiers from the Commonwealth in particular is actually relatively high at the moment. It might be that many more want to apply than we can take, which is good, because it means that we get a selection of the best. We can offer in any of the forces, but particularly in the Army, an extraordinary career, fresh skills and the chance to transform the lives of individuals and their families as they serve our country and make their contribution.

Q31 **Alex Baker:** Could we not get additional flexibility and try to take more Commonwealth soldiers as quickly as possible?

John Healey: Theoretically we could. As I explained earlier, I have a concern about our recruitment across the board rather than one specific group, but I recognise the essential and invaluable contribution that they can make to our forces.

Q32 **Alex Baker:** We have specific shortages around medical roles. I was pleased to see the expanding of the fast-track process around cyber engineer roles. We have shortages of radiographers, dental nurses and mental health nurses. Is there an opportunity for a fast-track process around those sorts of roles?

John Healey: The short answer is yes, undoubtedly. The opportunities are there not just for full-time recruitment but for reservist recruitment. That sort of hybrid can be attractive to many people, particularly if they have skills like that. Many of those in the medical service who are full-time forces personnel work a lot of their time in the NHS and make a contribution to our NHS as well. In a sense, Mr Roome, you have your fluid boundaries and some of your zig-zag career path happening in practice, particularly in the medical field. General Rob might have more detail to add to that.

Lt Gen Sir Rob Magowan: I would add that we want to manage them better in service, and that is what unified career management is about.



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Medical was the first unified career management pilot we started that is now fully fledged. What does that mean? It means that because they are so highly skilled and so valuable, we want to manage them across the whole of defence rather than in a single service. We also want to give them a proper skills pathway, and for that to be recorded and recognised outside. So we are taking real special care of these niche cadres, if you will, to ensure that they are recognised and retained, because they are so valuable. That has been a deliberate policy over the last two to three years.

Chair: I am mindful of the time, but we will have a short question from Mike Martin.

Q33 **Mike Martin:** I will be very quick. Thanks very much for offering to write us a detailed letter about the headcount reduction plans. Would you be able to include in that your plans—or say whether you have any plans—for the reduction of generals, admirals and air marshals? When you look at the UK compared with other militaries, you see that we have an extraordinarily high ratio of those ranks to fighting troops.

David Williams: I am not sure I have a plan to reveal, but we can certainly set out the facts and figures.

Q34 **Michelle Scrogam:** Thank you for your time today, Secretary of State. The chief executive of the Defence Infrastructure Organisation has said that the condition of the defence estate is, in his words, “shocking”, and that it will take at least £2 billion to bring it up to standard. Is it possible to improve the condition of that estate meaningfully without a substantial level of capital investment?

John Healey: The comment you cited is a reflection of the results of what hollowing out really means in practice over a period. You are a businesswoman, Ms Scrogam; you know that, when there are pressures, the things that very easily get put to the side are the long-term investments that are part of the infrastructure that any organisation needs. They are perhaps more critical and more fundamental in defence than in many other services and departments.

That is one of the reasons why, if you refer to the framework and the terms of reference for the strategic defence review, you will see that it is not just about the threats, the capabilities and the general military questions that are normally asked. I have asked the reviewers to look in particular at what enables more effective fighting forces that are more ready and more capable of deterring. Fundamentally, some of those things are the less visible infrastructure support behind the forces.

I expect the reviewers to have a strong focus on the state of the infrastructure now and the critical role that it will play in the future. Inevitably, that will pose some big and difficult decisions about where the best direction for investment will lie.

Q35 **Michelle Scrogam:** What is the plan if that investment is not available?

John Healey: David, do you want to come in on that?



David Williams: I will pick that up. For me, it is a question both of the level of capital investment and of providing a degree of confidence and certainty about that enduring over time as a pipeline. Although we have allocated additional capital investment to the accommodation aspects of the estate over the last two years, it is short-term investment and at that time we were able to get the money out of the door. We have not really begun to get the full effect of that money.

As the Secretary of State says, off the back of the strategic defence review, and as we settle our investment plans for the rest of this Parliament and make assumptions about a longer-term programme baking in an appropriate level of capital investment for infrastructure generally, but for service accommodation in particular, I think that will be an important part of how those plans are finalised.

Lt Gen Sir Rob Magowan: There is also resource DEL. It is not only the capital investment. We have been living on a sort of fix-on-fail approach to our single-living accommodation, and particularly our service families' accommodation. We have started to move to a preventive regime, but that is also going to involve increased investment in our infrastructure.

It is also about the rationalisation of what we have, which is what the defence estate optimisation—DEO—programme is all about, to ensure that what we have is in the right place and is of the right quality. That is a long-term programme in defence, which is funded.

John Healey: I am going to be blunter. The permanent secretary has said that we were not able to get the full effect of the additional money—£400 million—that was put in under the previous Government, in a welcome move, in 2023-24 and '24-25. With all due respect to what the General said as well—it is not either of their responsibility—I think Armed Forces housing has been left in a crippled state over the last 14 years. The additional money that was announced and deployed at short notice in 2023 was not managed properly by Ministers. Officials have admitted to me that the money was not spent effectively. In particular, there are serious questions over the profile of that spending.

This financial year, almost all the £180 million allocated was effectively committed by the end of April—the end of the first month of the second financial year for that funding. That means that the ability to deal with an expected increased demand with the onset of winter is reduced, because the money that should have been there throughout the year is not available. There are some big questions to ask of previous Ministers about why it was managed in that way, why the spend was profiled in that way, and why that welcome fresh investment is not available for the large part of this financial year, to deal with the problems that Armed Forces personnel and families too often face with their housing.

Q36 **Michelle Scrogam:** You mentioned recruitment and retention, and that we are losing more than we are recruiting; what weight would you put on the conditions in accommodation contributing to that problem?



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John Healey: From the conversations I have had and visits I have done, I know it is a big feature. Frankly, if you are deployed overseas and your kid's bedroom has mould and your partner cannot get the boiler fixed, those are problems that worry you when they should not. I feel we are letting the forces down on that. It does not really matter in the end what I think: what matters is what those who are serving think.

Ms Scrogam, I will share with the Committee the latest forces attitude survey, because that details the points and pressures that those who are serving feel most, which either affect their morale and increase their satisfaction with service or lead them to feel that they and their family want to get out of military life.

Lt Gen Sir Rob Magowan: We would not want to underplay it at all, but in the latest statistics it is not one of the top three. But we would not want to underplay it.

Chair: I am sure we will discuss many of the issues faced by our serving personnel and the issues around the Armed Forces Commissioner Bill at future Committee meetings. I would like to move on now to veterans' issues.

Ian Roome: We have well over 2 million veterans at the moment. That is likely to reduce by 2028 to just over 1.6 million. I have been told to be very brief, so I will go straight into the question.

John Healey: What the Chair really means is that he wants short answers from me.

Q37 **Ian Roome:** What details can you provide of your proposals to put the Armed Forces covenant fully into law?

John Healey: In the next parliamentary Session, we will do an Armed Forces Bill, which is one of the periodic requirements to continue to have an Armed Forces. That is the vehicle through which I am looking to legislate in full. Between now and then, led by our Veterans Minister, we are encouraging as wide views as possible on how best to do that and how best to prepare for it, because we will do that. I really invite input from the Committee and you, Mr Roome. If you have a particular interest or view on this, the next four or five months is the time to make sure that we have it.

Q38 **Ian Roome:** I must declare an interest: I am a veteran, so anything you can do to help me is fine.

The other issue is homelessness. When I woke up this morning, I turned on the TV and saw homeless people all over London. They were stating facts about how many of our ex-serving personnel are now homeless. Can you elaborate slightly on what your Government were saying about the Homes for Heroes scheme? I think that is important.

John Healey: I will say two brief things first, if I may. In the end, we will deal with veterans' homelessness to the extent that we deal with rough sleeping homelessness in general. It is not inevitable, and I was proudly



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part of a Government until 2010 that virtually eliminated rough sleeping homelessness with the proper priority and willingness to lead from the top, lead from the centre and marshal all the efforts. It can be done.

We have brought a fresh focus and concern to homelessness in these first four months, led by the Prime Minister in his speech at the Labour party conference. The MHCLG is now changing the rules to make it easier for veterans to score a higher priority on social housing lists without necessarily having local connections. That will help. On remembrance weekend, he announced an extension of funding that will allow the telephone helpline for veterans who need help with homelessness and housing advice to continue beyond March. It will continue giving that help with the veterans' homelessness programme throughout the whole of next year and into 2026.

Chair: Thank you very much, Secretary of State. I would like to bring in my colleague Derek Twigg, who will no doubt touch on the industrial base aspects.

Q39 **Derek Twigg:** Given all the issues and problems, many of which you have outlined today, what is it that most keeps you awake at night, now that you are four or five months into the job?

John Healey: What most keeps me awake is the positions of jeopardy and risk to which we ask our service personnel to deploy. Not all are as risky as others, but we have 10,000 UK forces deployed around the world in over 50 countries at the moment, and some are in very tight spots. It is a special responsibility: we are asking people who serve and are willing to take that risk, but nevertheless the decision to deploy and the decisions that come with that are the ones that weigh most heavily.

Q40 **Derek Twigg:** Let me come on to the industrial base. You have mentioned NLAW. I know that, for the operational reasons you have set out, you are not going to talk about Storm Shadow. To be able to send Storm Shadow missiles to Ukraine or elsewhere or keep our own stockpiles, we need to produce enough of them. Another example is the Aster missile system, which, prior to 2022, took 42 months to get going. What is your current assessment of stockpiles in both missiles and munitions? What are you doing about it?

John Healey: The General touched on this earlier on. There is a broad recognition that—in part because in previous years we have not sufficiently invested in ensuring that we have the stockpiles we need, but in part because we have rightly donated what we can and supplied Ukraine for its fight—there is a big job to be done, both to continue to supply Ukraine and to replenish our own stockpiles. It is a job that is not just about Government making a financial commitment and providing leadership and certainty, but about the defence industry also making investments for the long term. That is beginning to happen.

Encouragingly, I was able to announce, alongside the UK-Germany defence agreement last month, an investment from Rheinmetall that will set up a new factory to manufacture artillery gun barrels in this country



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and draw on British steel manufactured and forged by Forgemasters in South Yorkshire. It is a combination of the determination and recognition of Government that we need to rebuild the stockpiles, and working with industry to make sure that it can respond and that we can sustain it if that should be necessary in future years.

- Q41 **Derek Twigg:** What would you say are the three main issues out of your control that have had an impact on industrial capacity? What discussions have you had with industry to improve that?

John Healey: One of the flaws has generally been the contract-by-contract approach to industry that this country, unlike many others, has taken. This cannot work. If we want to leverage higher levels of private investment into defence, which we must do and which the Government are looking to do right across the board, we have to be willing to have a long-term relationship and long-term strategy. We have said that that is what we will do. It is part of our offering as a new Government to have, if you like, a new partnership between Government, business, the workforce and trade unions. We can do that. In defence, we have a particular opportunity to do that with our workforce. Uniquely for the private sector, the level of unionisation in defence is 38%, so there is a great deal of potential and an appetite for that. That is the first thing.

The second thing is that we have too often been blind as a nation, when we are looking at procurement, about where the jobs and the economic benefit lie. We need to do more to recognise that defence has a vital role not just in strengthening our security, but in boosting our economy. You will see under this Government a recognition that, where we can, we should look to develop our own British jobs and support British-based companies.

The third thing is another lesson from Ukraine. When the pace of technology development and the nature of warfare are changing so rapidly, we simply cannot have a procurement system that may take several years even to get to the point of a contract. It is therefore about the nature of the relationship and the characteristics of the industry, including making more use of smaller and medium-sized companies, which are often much more flexible and innovative. They have to be built into the industrial base and the industrial strategy to meet the changes in the procurement system that are needed.

- Q42 **Derek Twigg:** Would you agree, then, that we are still some way off being able to replenish our current stockpiles?

John Healey: Yes. To be fair to the previous Government, it is why they said, "Right, we now need a 10-year strategy to do that."

- Q43 **Derek Twigg:** How long do you think it will be before we get to a position where you are more comfortable—I am not going to suggest that you will be satisfied completely—with the situation?

John Healey: General Rob, this is your area.



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Lt Gen Sir Rob Magowan: I will add a couple of things to what the Secretary of State said. First, on the long-term demand signal that the Secretary of State was talking about, I think we are better now. Let me give two or three examples. We are now formally signed up with MBDA for 10 years. They know they are going to get £6 billion of investment from the UK Government to do exactly what you are talking about. We can go through those munitions if you wish, but you have named two already: Aster and Storm Shadow. The global combat air programme, GCAP, is absolutely central to the UK's defence industrial base, from combat air and jet engine to missile sensor capability. That is a very long-term—

Derek Twigg: The question that was referred to you by the Secretary of State was my question about how long it will take.

Lt Gen Sir Rob Magowan: That is the munitions strategy, which is available. The munitions plan that underpins it, which is at "Secret", outlines the types of munitions that we need to invest in, over and above the programme of record, and when they will be delivered. That document exists, and it is at "Secret".

Q44 **Mike Martin:** Can we see that document when we have the classified briefing?

John Healey: Let me have a look at the level of classification on that. It is not automatic that I can share everything that the Committee might want at every level of classification.

Lt Gen Sir Rob Magowan: Can I add one other thing? There is this expression "always on". "Always on" is a critical part of the response to the issues associated with our munitions resilience. We do not want to produce a surfeit of munitions that then run out of what we call calendar life. We need to be able to create a system whereby we can turn to industry, whether it be Thales, BAE or MBDA, in the particular case of the UK, and say, "I want you to ramp up by X per cent within two months." We do not have that capability at the moment, and that is central to the munitions strategy. The so-called "always on" approach is a significant change.

John Healey: I want to add an upbeat note to this: we can do this. It is not just the Defence Department and the military, but the industry too. The recent NAO report on Taskforce Kindred demonstrates that we can do things differently. We can do it rapidly and can meet the demands of supporting, in this case, Ukraine in conflict. We can take some of those lessons into our own system and learn from them. That is the challenge with the new defence industrial strategy.

Chair: Thank you very much. I would now like to move on to the future of parliamentary scrutiny and the equipment plan.

Q45 **Fred Thomas:** Secretary of State, you are a champion of parliamentary scrutiny, but last year the MOD did not publish—or partially published—an equipment plan, which should give insight into £300 billion of spending over the next decade. Are you able to commit to saying that the MOD will



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publish that this year and every year that you are the Secretary of State for Defence?

John Healey: I can clearly see that I may regret saying that I am an advocate of strong parliamentary scrutiny. My colleagues may want to reflect on last year's equipment plan. At the moment, with the strategic defence review under way, it is unlikely that we will produce an equipment plan in the same way for this year.

Fred Thomas: Okay.

John Healey: David, do you want to add anything on last year?

Chair: We note the letter from the Minister to the Chair of the Public Accounts Committee. I think this is an issue that we will be coming back to.

David Williams: There is absolutely an intent to return to publishing an equipment plan and getting the National Audit Office to review it and produce a report, if that is what serves the purpose of parliamentary scrutiny. Some of the conversations that we had with your predecessor Committee and the Public Accounts Committee highlight that if we have a snapshot of where our planning has got to, by the time we produce a publishable summary and it gets into in-depth audit by the National Audit Office, we are essentially having scrutiny a year after the equipment planning round has concluded.

There is something about the granularity and, critically, the timeliness of information that supports the work of this Committee and allows us to demonstrate where taxpayers' money is going in order to deliver the capabilities that our Armed Forces need for the future. It may simply be a return to what we have previously done, but my ambition is to do this better. It may be that we look not simply at the equipment plan but at broader investment, including infrastructure.

There are some choices, and we would welcome views from the Committee on what would be helpful to you as we think about how we come back to this, as the Secretary of State says, post the SDR. The SDR is concluding next year, and there is the spending review. We will then be able to set out the Government's plans for the rest of the Parliament. I am absolutely up for publishing something, but something that is helpful.

Q46 **Fred Thomas:** Thank you. To continue on the theme of parliamentary scrutiny, we are able to ask you an array of questions, some of which you cannot give us the answers to here because they are at a high classification. We understand that. The parliamentary establishments of Five Eyes friends of ours are able to ask about their respective special forces' activities; in the UK we cannot.

I would like to ask you specifically about the parliamentary side of things, not to comment on anything relating to UKSF in terms of organisational operational training activity. Specifically on parliamentary oversight, Secretary of State, do you think that we have enough scrutiny over



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UKSF?

John Healey: At present, I want to allow a really important inquiry, which Haddon-Cave is leading, to complete its course and conclude. I think that will be the moment at which there may be a case for returning to these sorts of questions.

Q47 **Fred Thomas:** Mr Williams, you are the permanent secretary. You have previously been a director general in different Departments. You have held a lot of risk. From your understanding of Whitehall, and having seen other Departments being scrutinised in Parliament, do you consider that the MOD is holding risk by not allowing UKSF to be scrutinised in Parliament?

David Williams: Holding risk? Well, generally speaking, the Department is better for parliamentary scrutiny, but that needs to be within appropriate parameters. As the Secretary of State has said, we will come back and look at that particular question once the inquiry into Afghan events has concluded. In the end, that will be a political decision. No doubt we will have a conversation about it, but it is really a matter for the Secretary of State, with my advice, rather than for me to offer an independent view.

Q48 **Fred Thomas:** Secretary of State, are you implying or suggesting that once the Haddon-Cave inquiry resolves, you would potentially be open to reassessing how this country scrutinises UKSF? Is that what we are to understand?

John Healey: I am not implying or suggesting anything at this point. I am saying what I said a moment ago: that will be the point at which to turn our attention, in my view, to these questions.

Chair: We will now move on to operational aspects.

Q49 **Mr Bailey:** As I mentioned earlier, I think some of the decisions made yesterday were essential. It is really good to hear that defence reform is under way. To use an analogy, for an athlete you would highlight the fat that they need to cut away before starting a training programme; hopefully that fitness programme is the SDR.

I want to focus on the decisions that relate to over-stress and to your ability to build capacity within the Armed Forces and meet its commitments in terms of "NATO first". On 11 November, you stated that 10,000 personnel were deployed in 50 operations around the world. What percentage of the fighting force does that represent? Is that a sustainable ratio?

John Healey: General Rob, can I ask you to deal with this first, as you are in charge of military capability?

Lt Gen Sir Rob Magowan: We will have to come back to you on the exact percentage, unless David, the permanent secretary, has it.

David Williams: Let us imagine not.



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Lt Gen Sir Rob Magowan: We will answer the question about that specific data point, but the answer to your question is yes. We can sustain the current operations that the Secretary of State has outlined.

You are asking whether we are ready to continue to deploy in our current operations. We look at readiness through three lenses: capability, availability and sustainability. We can go into those three if you wish, but it is a combination of those three things. It is a complicated formula that ensures it, but the direct answer to your question “Can we sustain operations today against the current laydown?” is yes.

David Williams: We have talked quite a bit in this hearing about recruitment and retention. To get to the heart of your question, one of the other important metrics we track is whether personnel are medically fit to deploy. This autumn, the number of regulars classed as medically fit to deploy is at around the 100,000 mark. That does not necessarily mean that they are in deployable roles in the jobs or trades that they are currently in, but that is about 80% of the strength of the regular Armed Forces overall. Medically limited or medically not fit to deploy is a margin that we are looking to tackle, as well as working on recruitment and retention.

Mr Bailey: I was employed to look at ACS.

Lt Gen Sir Rob Magowan: I know you were: that is why I mentioned it.

Mr Bailey: Absolutely. I would love to delve into that, but the Committee would not.

Lt Gen Sir Rob Magowan: Thank you for being part of the team.

Q50 **Mr Bailey:** It is probably important to recognise that there is not a recognised readiness policy. We would welcome a written response in that regard. The ratio is quite high, and the number of countries you are committed to is quite high. Out of those personnel, how many of those operations would you align directly to the defence of the UK and “NATO first”?

John Healey: I am hesitating only because I have not applied those two lenses to that broad figure, so I simply could not give you an answer to that directly. It is a very specific question, and I cannot give you that answer.

Lt Gen Sir Rob Magowan: Let me go back to what we said before. Running through the defence review is “NATO first”—you used the expression yourself just a couple of minutes ago. We are working very closely with NATO on the meaning of that through the review. But there are other things the nation has to commit to, whether it be in support of the homeland; broader global operations, which you have deployed on yourself; or fighting in the grey zone, as I mentioned. I do not think it would be easy for us to do a defence review and target just the areas associated with NATO. Unfortunately, as you well know, the strategic landscape is much more complicated than that.



John Healey: There is also a really important element of military-to-military relationships and the role of defence in diplomacy and the exercise of UK interests and influence around the world.

Q51 **Mr Bailey:** Absolutely, but those things are not necessarily owned by your Department, and maybe those costs should fall outside the Department.

I am trying to highlight what was in the readiness for war paper: the hollowing out. It has been mentioned here a number of times. We know that part of the force is committed to; you have assured us that that will be there. Those people are at readiness. But the residual capacity has to come from the people who are training and on their wind-down, and there is very little description or discussion that shows how much of that has been hollowed out to maintain that wedge forward. That is what I am trying to get at. The recruitment and retention problem points to people being overstretched somewhere; we are just not seeing adequate detail or information about why.

Lt Gen Sir Rob Magowan: I do not disagree with you, but as you know, our look at readiness is much broader. One of the propositions that we have committed to from the independent review team is on readiness and—to use your expression, although it is not called this—hollowing out.

The cycling of people is one factor, but there are many others that we look at: whether we have enough niche cadre skills, which we talked about earlier; whether we have the medical support necessary to warfight; whether we have communications architecture that is survivable in a war fight. There are a whole range of things. What you point out is one of them, but I would not put it in the top three or four that we are really focused on in terms of readiness. We think we have the right resilience within our workforce, assuming we address the recruiting and retention issues that we talked about before.

Q52 **Mr Bailey:** We would welcome, if possible, some data on the number of non-formed-unit deployments and what percentage of the deployed force that forms, because that is where a lot of that damage is done.

Let me move on to our support for Ukraine. This particularly impacts the Army and its ability to work in that readiness mechanism. Can you say what percentage of the Army is currently committed to this effort, and how that would be impacted were there to be a change in the geopolitical situation that meant we needed to shoulder a bit more than we are currently?

Lt Gen Sir Rob Magowan: You are talking about Interflex, I assume. Again, I have not got a percentage for you, but you raise a good point—and we have got this—that through the defence review and through the independent team reporting to the Secretary of State, we have to provide them with advice on our future commitment to Ukraine, which is clearly ironclad. How much of that is going to be force driving? In other words, how much of the structure of the Armed Forces—not just the Army but all the services—would be dedicated to an enduring campaign in Ukraine, as opposed to them conducting these operations in addition to other



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commitments they have? That process—the point you raise—is something we have absolutely identified, and we need to give advice through the SDR.

- Q53 **Mr Bailey:** In the round—I am conscious that we have other things to go—I applaud the honesty in highlighting a whole load of equipment programmes that should have gone a long time ago. I would like to investigate how much honesty we feel the military has in terms of toning down what it is doing so that it can develop the capacity to build the resilient plan that the Defence Secretary would like to see in the SDR.

Lt Gen Sir Rob Magowan: Well, we need to, and we are. Central to deterring major state-on-state aggression is a robust, frequent and regular exercise programme, at the right level, both individually and collectively, up to collective training level 5. That is a central part of our deterrence posture, to ensure that our forces are ready, but also to ensure that we are shown to be ready. We are already doing that. Steadfast Defender earlier this year was one of the most significant NATO exercises for some time. We will always be able to commit to that.

- Q54 **Mr Bailey:** Secretary of State, would you like to see less of your resources being used for Foreign and Commonwealth Office defence engagement, so that they can focus on the stuff that only the military can do?

John Healey: No, I would like to be able to make more of the extraordinary network of defence people in uniform and civilians that we already have. I think there is a great deal more we can do alongside the FCDO.

- Q55 **Lincoln Jopp:** Chair, may I come in on the really important point that General Magowan made about whether our support to Ukraine becomes force driving in the SDR? We have seen some evidence that the training that we have been providing to Ukrainian forces is falling short because we cannot replicate the combat conditions in Ukraine, specifically the utility of massed small drones. There is also the issue that we cannot dig Soviet trench systems on Salisbury plain, apparently.

Chair: That point was made to us by a delegation of Ukrainian MPs when they met Defence Committee members. We heard that along with other concerns, which I have relayed to the Secretary of State in the Chamber, but yes, a response would be much appreciated.

Lt Gen Sir Rob Magowan: We would be really keen to see that and respond to it. It is great feedback.

David Williams: We have shifted over 165,000 tonnes of earth to dig trenches for Interflex, which is not a bad start, but I take the point.

Lt Gen Sir Rob Magowan: But if you are getting feedback that we are falling short, we want to meet that challenge.

Chair: I am sure that Committee members will address that. I believe Mike Martin wants to come in briefly.



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Q56 Mike Martin: Really quickly on global deployments. The clear and present danger from Russia, versus a global expeditionary military, is one of the big questions that clearly the SDR is grappling with. In the light of that clear and present danger, and in the light of the changed strategic context because of the US election, do you still think it is appropriate that the carrier strike group spends four to five months on the other side of the world next year?

John Healey: I think there is a great deal of potential value in the carrier strike group undertaking this tour. There is military and exercising advantage, alliance building and consolidating advantage, and economic and diplomatic advantage, as long as we plan it properly.

Q57 Mike Martin: But you understand the point that I am trying to make, which is that all of those advantages could be had in the Baltic or the North sea, with allies that we might have to fight with in the near future.

John Healey: You would not be able to exercise with the Australians or the Japanese or the Koreans, or the extent of the US, in those different parts. You could not replicate the extent of part of the elements that the carrier strike group tour is planning. There is a value; otherwise, I would not be sending it.

Chair: I would like us to move on to the global combat air programme.

Q58 Michelle Scrogham: You briefly mentioned GCAP earlier—the General mentioned it—and the Prime Minister has mentioned it recently, too. Can you confirm that we are fully committed to it and that funding will be available and released as it is needed?

John Healey: We are committed to it. It is a really important programme. General Rob has underlined that. The Prime Minister has said we are committed to this. Clearly, we have got the strategic defence review under way, but I have made it one of my areas of major focus in my four months in this job to maintain the momentum in that programme.

I have had a number of meetings with my Italian and Japanese counterparts. The areas that I have been most concerned to maintain momentum in have been the completion and passage of the treaties through all three Parliaments, in order that we can set up the joint governmental office, which we have been able to confirm this week we will do before Christmas—that will be in Reading—and maintaining the work with the three leading companies to set up a formal joint venture. I expect that to be in place before Christmas as well.

These are the foundations, which are innovative. They are essential foundations, but I think they are also the hallmarks of a programme that is maintaining momentum and therefore has the best chance of successful delivery. That has been a concern, especially of the Japanese, as well as of the Italians and of mine.

Yes to the commitment; yes to the momentum; yes to the importance of this long term, to meet the emerging threats and technologies that we can see in the mid and late 2030s, but also, as General Rob put it, because it



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is fundamental to our industrial base in this country and to maintaining what has been for decades world-leading global air combat capability and technology in Britain.

- Q59 **Michelle Scrogham:** You mentioned retaining those capabilities, the industry base and the staffing. Where does Typhoon fall into that? What are your thoughts on GCAP going forward?

John Healey: Perhaps General Magowan can talk about Typhoon from a military capability point of view. From an industrial point of view, it is an essential part of a thriving, flourishing and very productive industrial base in this country. It is really important that we do our bit, as Ministers and as the UK Government, to make sure that we are able to secure fresh orders for Typhoons to keep that base going. As it happens, I was in both Turkey and Saudi Arabia last week, I met both Defence Ministers, and the opportunity for those countries to take advantage of Typhoons was a significant part of our discussions.

Lt Gen Sir Rob Magowan: As you know, GCAP replaces Typhoon. The industrial hinterland is matched between Typhoon and GCAP, from British Aerospace to MBDA to Leonardo to Rolls-Royce, and so on. As you know, we are retiring our tranche 1 Typhoons in 2027, but we are spending a significant amount of money to increase the capability of the tranche 2s and 3s, which will make them world-leading, even though they are fourth generation. We are doing that to ensure that they can meet the operational challenges through the 2030s. As the Secretary of State said, GCAP will start to come online in the late 2030s, but we are very confident, from an operational capability perspective, that Typhoon will be in the fight all the way through to GCAP coming into service.

- Q60 **Chair:** Secretary of State, do you feel that the US election result accelerates the need for a larger defence spend?

John Healey: No. I feel that the case for increasing the defence spend is there. That is why I recognised and argued for it before the election, and it is why, as a new Government, we have made a commitment to doing so. I am quite sceptical of sweeping statements—if I may, Mr Martin—that somehow the election result changes the strategic global context. We need to wait to see what the policy, military and strategic definition of the new President and Administration will be, and we may get a limited idea of that, certainly before 20 January.

- Q61 **Chair:** There is a principal concern among many defence experts that an incoming Trump Administration may make certain decisions about supporting Ukraine independently, or in a hasty manner, with little consultation with allies and partners. I am referencing the Doha agreement with Afghanistan. In that eventuality, are we fully prepared to continue supporting Ukraine, and have we made contingency plans around that?

John Healey: Partly as an extension of the point I just made, I do not think it is productive to try to talk in hypotheticals until we are clear about the approach that the new Administration may want to take on a number



of fronts, including on Ukraine. I, and we as a Government, are very clear. We have done this from day one. On day two in this job, I was in Odesa with President Zelensky confirming that from that point on we were stepping up support, which we are continuing to do.

In my view, our job is to rally allies as best we can, but also to continue the proud leadership that the UK has had from the outset of the Russian invasion in leading support for Ukraine and making sure that, particularly in this period when Ukraine is under significant pressure—over the next two or three months—we do everything we can to ensure that it is successful on the battlefield and capable of withstanding the Russian pressure. If President Zelensky and the Ukrainians decide at some point that they want to start the talking, our job will be to support them in any of the negotiations, just as it is with the fighting.

Chair: I believe that my colleague Alex Baker wants to come in briefly on this point.

- Q62 **Alex Baker:** From everything we know and everything you have told us today, the current threat is quite sobering. In your opening piece you touched on some of the work you are doing to make sure that Parliament understands the situation we are in. What is your plan in terms of having that conversation with the Great British public?

John Healey: There is certainly a role for Government, and a particular responsibility for the Defence Secretary, but our Parliament on all sides has a role, on Ukraine, for example, to help people see as clearly as possible a number of things. The first is that the Ukrainians are fighting for their sovereignty and their right to territorial integrity—they have that right under the United Nations charter—but they are also fighting for the same values that we stand for: individual freedom, long-term peace and, as a country, a right to decide their own future.

The second thing it is important for us to help people see clearly is that if Putin prevails in Ukraine, he is not going to stop there. For us in the UK, the first line of the defence of the UK starts in Ukraine.

The third thing is that this is a good example of how, in this day and age, the strength of our allies matters, and it matters perhaps more than it has ever done. I see a particular responsibility myself, and I know that many parliamentarians share that responsibility. If we are going to encourage the public to understand the decisions that we have to take as a Government and as a Parliament, that explanation is part and parcel of what we need to do. On Ukraine, if we want the British public to maintain the extraordinary level of hospitality and support that they have demonstrated to Ukrainians who are in the UK and to Ukraine as a country, that is not something we can take for granted. Unless we nurture it, we could see it wither. We have seen that in other countries, where Ukraine has started to become a matter of public criticism, or support for Ukraine has started to become a matter of party political argument. I am really proud that this is still a country that stands united for Ukraine, as we have from the outset. Our support for Ukraine remains steadfast.



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Chair: Thank you, Secretary of State. Finally, with respect to the debate in the Chamber on the Armed Forces Commissioner Bill, if a written response to our letter about the Committee's concerns were forthcoming so that we can have that on the record, it would be greatly appreciated.

I thank and convey my gratitude to my fellow Committee members. Despite our various questions, we have managed to finish on time, with almost military discipline. Halfway through the session, I was getting worried about whether we would finish the questions. Thank you, Secretary of State, Mr Williams and General Magowan, for your valuable time and input. I am sure that those within the wider defence community and in the country will have been very grateful to hear your responses. Thank you for appearing before the Committee and I look forward to future interactions.