

Defence Committee

Oral evidence: Defence Reform, HC 1430

Wednesday 12 November 2025

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

Questions 1-51

Witnesses

I: Dr Andrew Curtis OBE, Author of “We Need to Talk about Defence: Reforming Contemporary Defence Management” and Matthew Savill MBE, Director of Military Sciences, Royal United Services Institute (RUSI).

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Dr Andrew Curtis and Matthew Savill.

Q1 Chair: I call to order today's House of Commons Defence Committee evidence session on Defence reform. We extend a very warm welcome to our esteemed panellists. I am very pleased to say that with us today is Dr Andrew Curtis, author of "We Need to Talk About Defence: Reforming Contemporary Defence Management", and Matthew Savill, director of military sciences at the Royal United Services Institute, or RUSI. You both have accomplished a great deal and are widely respected in defence, so thank you very much for making time to give evidence to the Committee today.

I will kick off. It seems that we have been here before. We have had four different reviews, the Levene review, and there have been lots of things about Defence reform. Every Government say that they are instituting reforms and talk about how things will be made a lot better—but, gents, what do you think is Defence reform?

Dr Curtis: What do I think is Defence reform? I think that is part of the problem—defining what it is you are trying to do. I talk about delivering the defence purpose in two different areas: delivering military effect and managing the business of defence. Delivering military effect is doing harm to the King's enemies and blowing up their stuff; it is operations. Managing the business of defence is everything else that enables operations. Generally speaking, Defence reform is about managing the business of defence; it is not about delivering military effect. A lot of the SDR recommendations and activities are directly focused on delivering military effect, but Defence reform is generally concerned about the business space and the business processes. Part of the problem is that people do not always understand that, so they do not know where they are necessarily focused. The other thing is that it is not the sexy part of defence—it is the boring part of defence, and I think people get bored quite quickly with it, which is one reason why it is not always successful.

Chair: Agreed. That is why the Committee felt that it was important that we set the definitions, so that we are all singing from the same hymn sheet. Mr Savill, what do you think is Defence reform?

Matthew Savill: Glibly, Defence reform is about making the Ministry of Defence better. If I were digging into it, I would say that it is working backward from the conclusion that we do not have the armed forces necessary for the world in which we find ourselves; therefore, there must be something wrong with the Ministry of Defence; therefore, we are going to fix it. It has, to a degree, become a lot of things to a lot of people. There is a heavy focus on what you might call procurement reform, but it now involves a lot on force design—in other words, how do you decide what the armed forces that you need actually look like? Then there is the corporate element, which is, "How does the Ministry of Defence as an institution operate?" That has led to some interesting conclusions.



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John Healey's speech at Policy Exchange when he was still in opposition set out his agenda, but there is a little bit of a chicken-and-egg question there. That very clearly drove us to where we have ended up now, but it was done without having the full insight into what the Ministry of Defence looks like and how it operates on a daily basis. There is a little bit of a question of retrofitting. We should probably come back later to the number of Defence reform-like programmes that were already running, and how those have kind of run into each other, creating both a bit of confusion and some reform fatigue.

Chair: It is good to get your expert insight into that basic, primary definition. I know my colleague Emma Lewell wants to come in on this point.

Q2 **Emma Lewell:** Good morning. It is nice to see you both. Following on from the Chair's comments, every time we hear about Defence reform, they say that culture change is key. Every time it has failed, they say it is because the cultural change has not happened. How on earth do you change culture in the MoD?

Dr Curtis: A lot of what I will go back to is those two different things: delivering the military effect and managing the business of defence. The big problem that defence has is that, actually, it needs two cultures. When you deliver military effect—when you deploy on operations, when you are fighting and sometimes dying—the esprit de corps or ethos that the services need to have men and women prepared to do that is very different from the sort of culture that you need to manage a multibillion-pound business.

The problem that defence has is that everybody joins at a young age, goes through their single-service training, and gets inculcated into the culture of their own service, which is absolutely needed, because everybody is there to be able to deploy on operations and, if necessary, fight for their country. You have to instil that culture—that ethos and that esprit de corps—so that when it comes to warfighting, which is the primary reason for having the military, you have people who can do that.

As people become more senior and get more involved in managing the business of defence, you then want people who are thinking more about defence in the round. John Healey talks about "one defence"; I write about "Team Defence" in my book, but that is more of a corporate culture, if you like, that you would expect to find in a business. The problem is that the people who are now becoming more senior and getting involved in that have all the baggage from being junior officers in the single services, which is very much focused on a different culture, built around the identity of their service—the regimental system, ship's company, and RAF squadrons. The problem is how you transition from one to the other, to be able to have senior people thinking about the corporate need to run defence as a business. The problem that Defence has is that it does not recognise that.

When the Secretary of State for Defence talks about “one defence”, he is talking about that corporate culture—that corporate need. That is absolutely there, but never forget that the primary reason for having the military is to fight and win on operations, and that is a different type of culture. For me, that is the crux of the problem, and it is why Defence never solves the culture problem, because I do not think it understands it, and therefore it is coming at it from the wrong direction.

Q3 Emma Lewell: So should those senior people not be transitioning into the corporate world? Should they stay where they are, and should it be totally separate?

Dr Curtis: No, I think they do need to transition. There are things that Defence can do to make those individuals become more inculcated with a “one defence” culture. I am sure we can get on to specific measures that you could take—radical measures, I accept—to force people to move from that, if you like, single-service, operational, tactical¹ focus to the more corporate focus that is needed. I am not saying it is easy, but it is doable.

Q4 Lincoln Jopp: I think that funny sound I am hearing, on the back of that last statement, is General Mike Jackson spinning in his grave, but there we are.

Mr Savill, I want to go back to something you said about the reform agenda laid out in a speech by John Healey when in opposition, and how it clashes with other reform. For those of us who do not read that speech every night, would you give the major headlines of that agenda, as laid out before the election?

Matthew Savill: I think he opened up by saying that the Government had responded well to Ukraine, but that was fundamentally in spite of the performance of the Ministry of Defence, not necessarily because of it. He said what we need are armed forces fit for the modern world—you will of course remember that this was during the time of the debate about 2.5% GDP spending on defence, and so on. The headline that came out, which I think was influenced by work previously published by Policy Exchange, was that we need a fully functioning military strategic headquarters; the Chief of the Defence Staff to have new authorities and the single service chiefs answering to the CDS; and the MoD to become what he called “a heavyweight Department of State”. He said he would change how long the service chiefs are appointed for, and that “we will establish a fully-fledged National Armaments Director”. This was fundamentally about greater accountability, aligning defence procurement across all the operational domains, cutting waste and duplication, and making better decisions on the balance of investment, and essentially not just focusing on equipment.

That is a very rational, conventional view. What is interesting are some of the points fixed in at that stage, before Government, about a military strategic headquarters and a different way of viewing the Department of State. I remember watching that speech and thinking, “Well, hang on. I just spent 20 years in that building. We already have a military strategic

¹ The witness later clarified that he meant tactical rather than operational, not as well as.



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headquarters; I was in it.” Department of State and military strategic headquarters are functions of the Ministry of Defence, and its ability to switch between the two is one of its strengths, because—to tag back slightly to the culture point—the additional challenge, which has often been a strength of the Ministry of Defence, is that it has practitioners in a Department of State.

The MoD has the military there in large numbers, and they are absolutely vital to it, but you are therefore trying to merge the military culture with the civil service culture, and then work across Government. When you get that right, you have an integrated headquarters that is enormously powerful. If you do not get that right, you have an enormous culture clash inside the building, formerly Head Office, that we know as the Ministry of Defence.

Lincoln Jopp: Thank you, that was really helpful just to baseline the rest of our discussion.

Chair: Right, gents, I want to look now at previous attempts to reform defence, so perhaps you could confine your comments to those.

Q5 Ian Roome: There have been four major attempts to reform defence, in 1946, 1958, 1963 and 1984. Then there was Lord Levene’s report, which I know you did an analysis of, Dr Curtis. You talked about worries over poor implementation and particularly about how “the single Services had cherry picked those parts of the recommendations that had suited them” when it came to budgetary aspects and so forth. Can you explain to me what you think are the approaches and processes that make successful reform more likely, and what the real challenges are?

Dr Curtis: For me, the biggest challenge is that you have to set the ground rules first. You have to have a situation where you can actually deliver that reform. I think the biggest problem is that none of the reforms, and certainly the recent reforms, is actually tackling the key questions.

For me, there are two issues. First, from a political perspective, you have a political cadre that do not stay engaged for long enough. They do not invest enough in defence personally, in general, so you do not have the oversight that is needed. When the Canadians did their unification, they had a Defence Minister who was there for five years. That was his driving purpose, and he drove it through. For the defence reforms of 1964, the White Paper was 11 pages and one diagram. That is not a great deal of detail, and what happens is that the actual reform gets delivered by single service officers and civil servants who, in general, have their own agenda. Therefore, what was meant to be delivered is not always delivered. If you do not have the necessary political oversight, that is what happens. That is the first problem.

The second problem is the power and authority of the single services. They are institutions in their own right. In my view, they are too powerful to deliver the management of defence. As a result, when reforms come



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along, they can and do change the direction of travel to suit their purposes, to the best of their ability. I am not saying that they can change everything. Clearly, we had a unified MoD in the 1960s. A lot of the changes that Heseltine made in the 1980s were made and stuck. The services did not like them all, but they can play the long game. The average time in post for a Defence Secretary is two and a half years; the services are omnipresent. They can wait out a Defence Secretary who is really focused.

Unless you solve those two problems, you are never going to deliver the defence reform that you want. You will always deliver a defence reform that gets changed—subtly altered—by the people in whose interest it is to make that change. If you look at what is going on with the current reform, you see exactly that playing out.

Q6 Ian Roome: Do you think that changes to the organisational structure are needed? I come back to what Emma Lewell said about the culture within the Ministry, and the aspect of, "This job has always existed and that is where I'm moving to next. That is my line of promotion and progression." Do you think that sometimes they are protecting their own jobs?

Dr Curtis: There is an element of that. I think it is more about protecting their service's interests, rather than people protecting their own jobs, although some people clearly have that in mind. Individuals are part of their service. I did 35 years in the Air Force. Even though I am very critical of the system, if you cut me, I still bleed light blue, because that is the way the system works. However, I believe there are major changes that you can make.

The key change—going back to the point about how you sort out the culture and get the difference between the more junior members of the service who are focused on fighting and winning and the more senior members who are focused on running the business—is to create a single defence staff. In the 1964 reforms that unified the MoD, that was proposed: at two-star, everybody would leave their service and join a single defence staff. I think that is a good idea. I would do it at OF-5—at captain, colonel, group captain level. People who get to that point spend almost all their time in joint appointments in the MoD, in what was Strategic Command and in the enabling organisations. That is where they spend most of their time.

To have a single Defence staff, centrally administered, that posts and promotes people in a "single defence" way would help. At the moment, part of the reason that individuals are loyal to their service is because their service posts and promotes them. If they are not loyal, they do not get good postings and they do not get promoted. That is the reality. If you wanted one major change—there are others—to go after those two fundamental issues, that one would go a long way to address the power and authority of the single services.

Q7 Ian Roome: Mr Savill, why is Defence reform so challenging?

Matthew Savill: Partly, it is that cultural aspect that I talked about: you have an unusual challenge of trying to mix two organisational cultures within one institution. You also have a slight, but probably growing, challenge of the transient nature of the workforce; the military, for a start, are often cycling through. It is very rare to get somebody who will do back-to-back jobs in the MoD. Often you will not get them for their full tour, because personnel pressures elsewhere mean that they will be pulled back to do “proper soldiering”.

There is a slight attitudinal problem at times, which is that people are parking in Whitehall for a cushy job where they do not have to wear uniform for up to two years and they live in a flat in Fulham or something. There are some attitudes that treat these as nice jobs, despite the fact that I have done jobs in Main Building where I have worked more hours than I did on operations, because they go crazy. That means that some people do not see this as part of their career; this is, “I’ll park here before I go back and do what I actually want to do.”

You do have a problem with the institutional knowledge and understanding of the civil service side of the coin. There is a propensity to lecture the MoD² and say, “We’re the institutional memory. We’re the corporate knowledge.” But increasingly, at the lower levels, that does not exist on the civil service side for a variety of reasons. What you need to do, as Andrew says, is create a coherent one-team approach to the Ministry of Defence among your workforce, but increasingly you are finding that they are not there long enough to remember what reform looked like last time, to know what the pitfalls are and to understand good and bad ways of doing things. There is a degree of repetition because we do not have the corporate memory to remember why something did not work last time and what to avoid.

Q8 **Lincoln Jopp:** If it is any consolation, when I worked in the Ministry of Defence, we had two teams working on a single version of the truth—try to work that one out. We have travelled extensively in this Parliament, to Estonia, Finland, America, Australia, Ukraine and France, so we have seen some international comparators and some phenomenal change programmes that people have undergone as they have joined NATO, for example—or, indeed, reamed out their procurement to be able to win a war against Russia. Have you come across any international comparators specifically on defence reform in your work?

Dr Curtis: Yes. If you look at what the Australian defence force have done, interestingly, their last defence review brought in external people, just as the last SDR here did, which was an excellent idea. What the Australians did was groundbreaking and I was pleased to see that this Government did the same.

If you look at the way that the Australians approach defence and, again, defence management—rather than necessarily the operational side—their

² The witness later clarified that he meant to specify the military, rather than the MoD as a whole.

senior civil servant and senior military officer have a working-together relationship that is defined in law. I think that is a very good idea. One of the problems that we have had within the MoD is that previous Chiefs of the Defence Staff and permanent secretaries have been at loggerheads, which does not work very well. If you are relying on relationships, that is clearly not always going to work. I like that system in Australia and I think that, if you get the management at the top right, there is more chance that it will work as it flows down.

The other thing that the Australians have done is focus on joint capability; obviously the buzzword now is “integrated”. A good example is that, in the same way as within this country, the Australian space force was part of the Royal Australian air force. Now technically, our space force³ is not part of the RAF, but it kind of is—it is very heavily influenced, let’s say, by the RAF.

That was the same situation out in Australia. The three-star operational commander in the RAF is called the air and space commander, and there was a similar role in Australia. The Australian Government’s last defence review recognised the problem with that: if you want to treat space as its own domain—which we do, in the same way that we want to treat cyber as its own domain—it needs to come out from underneath the control of the Air Force. That is exactly what the Australian Government did: they set space apart as a separate organisation within their joint capabilities group.

It is a little ironic that, if you look back 100 years ago, to 1918 when the Air Force was formed, over the next few years you had a massive battle to keep the Air Force in place because the Army and the Navy both said, “No, no, no. That was a great idea, and it worked during the war, but we want air back within our organisation.” Obviously, the Air Force won that argument, and we have a separate air arm⁴. You could say that something similar is happening today, except that it is the Air Force that is trying to control space.

I know I am being a little bit unfair, because if you had the air and space commander here, he would say, “It really doesn’t work like that in operational terms,” and I suspect that individual would be right. But in terms of capability management—everything else that allows you to deliver on operations—I do not believe that that is the case. I think that the change that the Australians have made would work here. So, can we learn lessons? Absolutely. Australia is a good example.

Look at Canada—we all know that the Canadians brought together their armed forces in the ’60s. Everybody says, “No, that didn’t work, and they changed it all back again.” They did not. There is still one Canadian armed forces in law, and there are advantages in that. I am not suggesting unification of the armed forces—I spend a lot of time in my book

³ The witness later clarified that he was referring to Space Command.

⁴ The witness later clarified that he meant to say “separate air service”.



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identifying why that is not a good idea—but I believe that there needs to be more working together to allow you to manage Defence properly, rather than less. There are lessons to be learned there as well.

Matthew Savill: Andrew has a much stronger view than mine. I would add, in terms of international comparators, that one thing to watch is that we do not duplicate the flaws of the US system and how the Department of Defense—the Department of War, if you are so inclined—operates, or does not operate. In the US, the changes to the structures, made for different constitutional reasons, mean that it has quite a split department. The Joint Staff and the Office of the Secretary of Defense are independent institutions. That leads to competing advice, on occasion. It is sort of designed that way, but it is problematic. We spent the entirety of my career in Government pointing to the fact that often the British embassy in Washington, particularly the British Defence Staff, had a better, more coherent picture of what was going on inside DOD than DOD did, because they spoke to both halves of the organisation. We do not want to duplicate that problem.

Q9 Lincoln Jopp: I want to explore the notion of codifying the relationships at the top of the shop in law—which I think was your preferred outcome. The former CDS said, “You can put the wiring diagram where you want; the art of it is how you manage the interfaces,” and that is what you are talking about. With the incoming National Armaments Director, do you think that that approach is going to have to be codified in law in order to obviate any rows between service chiefs, the CDS and the NAD?

Dr Curtis: It is going to create tension. You talked about previous reforms. When Heseltine delivered his reforms in the 1980s, he had a quad—that is what he inherited. He had CDS, Permanent Secretary, Chief Scientific Adviser and Chief of Defence Procurement. He went, “Too many people—I want two,” so he changed it and just had CDS and the perm sec.

I think there are advantages in having the National Armaments Director, provided that that individual maintains an “up and out” viewpoint. There is an awful lot that needs to be done at the business level outside of the MoD. The problem is that that individual is more and more likely to get dragged in and down. People are going to want them to open factories and get involved in tactical issues. I worry about what that post will morph into. I also believe—we have not touched on it yet, but I am sure we will—that there is a fundamental problem in giving all the capability finance to that individual.

One good thing about the Levene reforms is that it gave the services the responsibility to manage their own capability. If you get it wrong, it is your problem. But if you give it to somebody else, the National Armaments Director, then all that happens is that the services become pressure groups, because they have no responsibility for the money any more, but they still want the capability. So all they will do is bitch about having the best possible capability—“I want this, I want this, and I want this”—without having any worries about how it is going to get paid for. That is exactly the situation that existed before Levene came along. That is one of

the problems that Levene tried to solve with the changes that we had in 2011.

I do see a real tension across the top of Defence. It is not how I would have done it, but I recognise that change needed to be made. That is one of the issues. When you write a critique, you become critical. I do not want to always appear negative about this. There are some good things about what Defence is doing, but you always focus on the bad, which is exactly what we are doing now.

Chair: Thank you very much. Let's now explore the current Defence reform programme, starting with Fred Thomas.

Q10 **Fred Thomas:** You have touched on previous efforts at defence reform. What do you think are some of the problems and aspects that the current MoD needs to respond to that maybe are new in this contemporary operating environment? You have touched already on space, but could you expand on that? I will start with Matthew.

Matthew Savill: You mean the world, rather than the problems with the current Defence reform programme?

Fred Thomas: I do.

Matthew Savill: I am a little bit unconvinced by the "Everything is new, and we need to do everything differently because everything is new" approach that you see. The starting point is that we do not have the armed forces that we think we need that are fit for the modern world. But that is a constant refrain. How do you prepare for all eventualities on a budget that is not only not infinite, but has to be planned years in advance, and in the face of adversaries who are generally trying to anticipate what you are doing and therefore render your capabilities obsolete before you even bring them in, or they try to neuter them?

The starting position is really difficult because it is trying to hit a literally moving target. The current refrain is that procurement is not fast enough and that innovation is not really done. I think both Defence and UK industry are bored with being told "innovate more". But there is certainly something about the current challenge and a genuine question as to whether the vast majority of our capabilities have been essentially overtaken by the rate of technological change. Spoiler alert: my view is no, they have not—and the view of my team is no, they have not. But my goodness, they need an awful lot of upgrading and a lot of thinking about how we use them differently. That challenge is being thrown at us.

Broadly speaking, the language that has often been used is: do we have an analogue force for a digital era? I would say we need to change a lot of things simultaneously. The best example of that is probably the Army, which is fundamentally being caught at the most vulnerable point in its existing programme of transformation. The RAF has got lots of the new aircraft it needs and wants, it just does not have enough of them.



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The Navy knows where it wants to go in terms of new fleets and has been talking about augmenting with uncrewed vessels for years; it is just moving from a slow start. Shipbuilding is not easy or quick. Just as it is trying to change, the Army has been caught trying to untangle a completely botched capability programme—not just the equipment programme. At the same time, questions are being asked: “Do you need any of this stuff?” That is a particularly knotty problem for it. So, I think there is a genuine question.

Bluntly, in terms of high politics and strategy, the Army is operating in an environment in which all the assumptions we made about the benefits of our relationship with the US are open to question. We should not throw the baby out with the bathwater, but that is not as reliable a relationship as we would have seen previously. That genuinely matters to both defence policy and defence strategy, which means that you have to make decisions about how you design the armed forces differently. The SDR’s answer was NATO first, but not NATO only. That is still a bit of a bumper sticker as opposed to an actual plan for reform. I am not going to do the “We live in unprecedented times” argument, because that is a present-ism problem, but we have hit a particularly complex inflection point.

- Q11 Fred Thomas:** There is an interesting balance there, which we are grateful for. Dr Curtis, you spoke about space earlier. In the context of what Matthew mentioned about a new look at our relationship with America, it was reported over the last week—I don’t know whether it is true—that the MoD has stopped sharing intelligence in the Caribbean because of concerns about how the US is using that intelligence, striking vessels instead of capturing the people on them. You spoke a bit about Space Command and the Air Force and the relationship there. We are all expecting the next decade to require a lot of work on our space capabilities, and maybe a lot of work to get more independence there. How will the current Defence reform agenda affect that—positively or negatively?

Dr Curtis: I keep going back to this, but you can look at this from a “delivering military effect” perspective or from a “managing the business of defence” perspective. As Defence reform is about managing the business, that is where my focus will be. The current Defence reform does not seem to focus a great deal on managing the business—that is, making sure that when the capability is needed and when you need to deliver effect in space, you can, and all that supporting stuff.

The other new domain is cyber. We have given Strategic Command a new name with “cyber” in the title. Again, I am not sure that has made a great deal of difference. Personally, I would be a lot more radical and create a space force and a cyber force right now. I know that is difficult. People laughed when President Trump did that during his first term, but that is now established, and nobody is laughing at the US Space Force capability. Recognising that they would be very small organisations—

- Q12 Fred Thomas:** Is it not fair to say that the MoD has created a cyber force?



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Dr Curtis: I mean an actual separate service. At the moment, yes, you have a cyber force, and you have a Space Command that is made up of members of the Royal Navy, the Army, the Royal Air Force and civil servants. What I am saying is that we should have a space force—I would not call them guardians; that is what the Americans call them. But I would have a separate service and a separate cyber service, even if it was only 1,000 or 2,000 people.

The reason I would do that is that when you are making key balance of investment decisions—we are back to the point about the RAF overseeing space—you do not have a service chief who is looking out for space and cyber in the same way as the three service chiefs are looking out for the other three domains. If you are looking to the future, and you are saying, “I want to champion capability that is potentially going to be online in five or 10 years’ time,” you have to be fighting for that right now. For me, the best way of doing that is to have an individual champion, with their own budget, who is able to make the case alongside all other capabilities. Those cases will then either be accepted, and those programmes brought into service, or they will not be. At the moment, you do not really have that.

On the delivery of military effects, we have a cyber force that is delivering military effect, and we have a Space Command that is delivering military effect. However, the back office bit—or managing the business of defence to make sure that it can still do that in the future, and at the correct priority, alongside all the other capabilities—does not exist. I know that it is radical and people will laugh, but it will happen one day, so why should it not happen now?

Q13 Michelle Scrogam: How do you feel the current programme has built on the reforms from the previous programmes? To what extent do you think it is avoiding the challenges that caused the previous ones to fail?

Dr Curtis: For me, that is the biggest problem with these reforms. As Matthew said, they were created before the last election. It was decided that we were going to have a military strategic headquarters and a National Armaments Director. However, there has been no evidence as to why they are going to solve any problems. There has been no study, and nothing has been published, so the transparency of this is particularly poor. As a result, it is just a case of saying, “Trust us. We’re going to solve this.”

The other thing that I have a big issue with is the idea that we have got rid of all the Levene reforms. We have essentially said, “We’ve got rid of all those, as they did not work, and we are going to do everything new.” Again, that is wrong. One of the things that Levene said, if you read the report, was that reforms are of their time. They will only last a certain amount of time, and then they will need to be changed, because the world changes and business practices change, so you need to make them as adaptable and flexible as you can.



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The Levene reforms did a lot of things right. I will give just one example, which Matthew has already raised: one of the points that John Healey said was, "I want the service chiefs to be in post for four years." That is exactly what Levene said—it is written in his report. My problem is that this reform does not appear to be building on the good bits of Levene, and trying to solve the bits of Levene that were poorly implemented; it is just getting rid of it, and I have to say that that is generally a political approach. They are saying, "The other side did that, and therefore it must be bad. We must get rid of it and do something different."

For me, that is one of the biggest failings of what is going on now; it does not accept that there are some very good bits that Levene delivered, which have done well for Defence over the last 10 or 15 years. It is almost like we are saying, "Everything related to Levene is bad, so we have to do new." I struggle with that.

Matthew Savill: My understanding is that it has not really built on the previous reforms and the stuff that was in train—it has basically crashed into them. There was a process that had been going on for a couple of years, called defence design, and it was already under way. It involved lots of people meeting and putting Post-Its on boards and things—it was more complicated than that. There was also reform of Security Policy and Operations that was under way, and there was something called Head Office reform—in other words, the Ministry of Defence as a building. You had work on the Integrated Procurement Model, which popped out just before the election, and you then had the ongoing reform programme to change the very way that Defence Equipment and Support operated.

This is smashed over the top of some of that, to the extent that, as I understand it, when the new team arrived in the building, they were effectively told, "Oh, you want to reform defence. Here you go; this is defence reform." "No, you need to look at what I said at Policy Exchange and do that." A lot of time was wasted going backwards and forwards.

The net effect is that you have reform fatigue and reform cynicism in the building. People are just bored of this, and they do not understand it. Transparency has been lamentable outside, which is why we are trying to divine what is actually going on here. I have read the note that the MoD sent, and it is laughably thin. There is obviously more work that has gone on inside, but I know for a fact people are tremendously confused about what this means for them.

If you asked me what within the Head Office and the MoD needed to be fixed, I would say that there needs to be better and earlier interaction between the bit that designs the force and services and the bit that uses them. In technical terms, that means financial and military capability and security policy and operations interacting much more closely and continuously. They absolutely did talk to each other; however, the key problem is that they are both drawing from defence strategy but then kind of doing their own thing. The force is being put together in a way that is agnostic to what the policy is saying we really want to do with it. That means that demands just stack up and we have had overstretched forces.



Similarly, if you are working in policy or operations, what happens is that something happens in the world, and we then react to the crisis without necessarily planning. We say, "We want to do this, because we've got this stuff available." To use examples from my experience, you press the button to send a carrier strike group or ship or decide we now need to launch Tomahawk missiles at it, and then say, "What do you mean we've only got one submarine loaded with TLAM, and it is 1,000 miles away?" There is no interaction between the two early enough to create realism in both policy and force design. That is the thing that needed to be fixed, and I do not understand how this model will fix it.

- Q14 **Michelle Scrogham:** You have mentioned previously that people do not like change. I get the feeling that most are uncomfortable because, when they are told to change, they feel it is because they have done something wrong. How would you change that? If you were trying to reform the MoD and how Defence works, and the people working there do not want to change, but know that the boss is likely going to change in a few years' time, what would be your advice to change that mindset?

Matthew Savill: The first thing is genuinely hard: you must have clarity of purpose, a clear argument and a rationale. Some of the challenges at the moment are because people do not understand the rationale and the logic; they are just being told, "You're now in two institutions, and this is what governs how those institutions work, but, by the way, there are a load of exceptions." My old team, which does policy, is now in the Military Strategic Headquarters, because apparently that is military activity. That makes no sense. The problem is that there is a category error at the very start of this reform programme, which is that it is proving difficult to explain the logic to people. If you cannot do that, then people will not really understand it.

Then you have to take middle management with you, because they are the people closest to the problems who understand the nitty-gritty detail. Top-down change famously dies at what is often called the frozen middle. In truth, the middle is, in theory, the people who understand what someone's daily workload and routine mean, and what your change then does to them: where do they physically sit; who are they working for? The Defence Reform team are heroically trying to write that, and it sounds like they are now taking a more deliberate approach, but the starting point should be: can you actually explain to your people what you are doing and why?

- Q15 **Michelle Scrogham:** Do you think the timescale is realistic?

Matthew Savill: On one hand, it has taken an inordinate amount of time for a thing that was meant to already be in place. The Defence Secretary said that establishing the MSHQ was a "day one, week one change". Well, that did not happen. On the one hand, lots of this seems to have taken far longer. On the other hand, stretch it out, given some of what they are talking about on how they might do things: if you are going to profoundly change an organisational structure, then that takes time. That is before we

get into the question of how you change that culture over time, because then you need people who are going to stick around and work at it.

Dr Curtis: On the first question, I would go back to the point I made earlier: if you do not fix those two fundamental problems—if you do not fix the political oversight and you do not manage the power and authority of the single services—you are not going to deliver the reform you want anyway. All my research tells me that unless you solve those problems, you will deliver an element of reform, but you will never deliver the full reform that you want. I think that is exactly what will happen here. There are elements of this change, which Matthew has alluded to, that people within the MoD do not like and will push back on. John Healey will not be the Defence Secretary forever, but the services will still be around, and they will subtly change and alter. If you do an audit in five years and ask whether the reform was delivered as intended five years ago, the answer will 100% be no, because you have not solved those two original problems.

In terms of the timeline, again Matthew is right that these things take time; it is difficult. Interestingly, the first set of information that came out from the MoD said that it was going to do all this within the financial year—bang! Done. In what you provided prior to this session, the dates were already moving out. This is a Parliament-long process. While it makes me smile, it is true. Go back to the Canadian model—it took them five years. If you really want to make a worthwhile change, especially on the culture point, those things take a long time.

My worry is that the fatigue point that Matthew made is absolutely relevant. Something else will come along. In 2021, when Ben Wallace was the Secretary of State, he was all over defence reform—that was going to be his big thing. He did a RUSI podcast in December 2021 that was all about defence reform, and he was absolutely going to do it. Two months later, Russia invades Ukraine. Suddenly—events, dear boy—he was quite rightly busy doing other stuff.

It would not surprise me if something similar happens and you suddenly get the Defence Secretary dragged away and focused on other things, so the services go, “Great. This is our opportunity. The bits of this we do not like we can now quietly shelve, because the Minister’s eyes are on another ball.” That is why one of the things I suggest is that if you are serious about this, you create a junior ministerial appointment for Defence reform, and you say, “Five years. That is your job. You are not going to do anything else. Crack on.” That goes back to solving the political oversight problem. A realistic timeline still does not mean it is going to happen.

Q16 **Chair:** Just to clarify for the record, when you mentioned information that we provided you prior to the evidence session, I think you are actually referring to information supplied by the Ministry of Defence, which is on our website.

Dr Curtis: Agreed. I am sorry—I should have been a little clearer.



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Q17 Derek Twigg: Do I take it from what you have been saying that we have not really set the right objectives?

Matthew Savill: I think the overall objectives, which are basically that we need to be better at what we are doing with what we have, are fine.

Derek Twigg: The objective of the objectives is to get there.

Matthew Savill: There is a curious case of, "This is what it looks like, by the way, so now do that," which has been fixed in advance. It is a bit like saying, "Here is the answer; what is the question?"

Q18 Derek Twigg: To follow on from Lincoln Jopp's questions, I naively thought when I first came into Parliament many years ago that the Ministry of Defence was the military headquarters. But, as we have been talking about, there are now other headquarters and so on. We can talk about the rights or wrongs of that, and you have already said that the way that has been set up is causing confusion. Let us go back to basics: if you asked the average person on the street who was in charge of the Ministry of Defence, they would probably say a military person, so what is the argument for having two separate heads of service in the MoD? In other words, why do we have a civilian one—the permanent secretary—and a military one?

Matthew Savill: First, there is the question of whether we want to rewire Government. Every time we have a discussion, or every time I had a discussion—

Q19 Derek Twigg: You both said—I know this myself from when I was in there—that there are tensions between the permanent secretary and the CDS over issues as time goes on.

Matthew Savill: Obviously, we do not have a written constitution, but the Ministry of Defence has a bunch of obligations in terms of oversight and accountability. It has a permanent secretary who is the principal accounting officer. Obviously, the CDS comes in, but the person who is actually on the hook for the spending and the running of the Department is the perm sec.

I would say that the strength of the Department is that you have brought in a bunch of practitioners, and the CDS is the most significant example of that, as the military adviser to the Defence Secretary and the Prime Minister. This is the thing that is a bit confusing about "Oh, he commands the chiefs," but when it comes to doing stuff in the world and operating, the CDS is the authority. The royal prerogative is exercised through the Prime Minister to the Defence Secretary, and the CDS is the person who issues the instructions, usually via a senior officer. That is the building being the military strategic headquarters. Orders come from the CDS down the chain to a joint—

Q20 Derek Twigg: Why does the permanent secretary need to have equal standing with the CDS?

Matthew Savill: That is a good question. The question is, do they need to, or—

Q21 **Derek Twigg:** We have civilian oversight with the Secretary of State.

Matthew Savill: Yes, but if you have civilian oversight in all departments through a minister, you do not need perm secs at all. Politics intervenes, right? It is about having somebody who is responsible for the running of the department. That partnership is quite important. Of course, what we have done is a classic British thing; there is lots written down inside the MoD about how that works, but what you are fundamentally doing is working on mates' rates in terms of having an effective, functioning relationship.

I would also say that policy and military advice are not quite the same thing. That is an important distinction that is lost in a focus on Defence reform. Policy has two meanings in Government. One is our HR policy or our expenses policy. The bigger issue is this: what is it that we want to achieve in the world? It is the distillation of political intent into objectives and ends into strategy. That is done predominantly by the civil service.

Military advice is then, "Okay, what is feasible? What does that technically look like? How do we go about doing that?". I used to specialise in operational policy, which is the parameters that go around military orders set by politicians. Those are all blended in the Ministry of Defence. I do not know whether that answers the question of whether you definitely need a perm sec in the MOD, but you definitely need someone there who is looking at policy in the broadest possible sense.

Q22 **Derek Twigg:** But they do not have to have equal standing with the CDS—is that right? I am just putting that out there because of the questions around reform. We have now created a Quad, and they are all, as far as I understand it, of equal standing. Basically, there is no one now, unless you go to the Secretary of State or Ministers, who is senior in that group. There is no one who can say, "Yeah, it has got to a point where I am going to have to make a decision." It is decision by committee. How is that going to work?

Matthew Savill: I think this is going to be one of the problems. The MoD would say that the perm sec remains *primus inter pares*—a very British answer—but I think that is problematic because the perm sec is responsible for policy and what we want to do in the world, but they have a counterpart who is the defence and nuclear lead, and their area does a lot of work on deterrence. Is that not policy? What is our nuclear weapons policy? Who leads on that now? I am sure there is an answer in the MoD, but I am not sure it could articulate it externally. The NAD is designing the force. They are sort of now equal to the CDS—but hang on, the CDS is the ultimate director of the force. I think there is a lot of work to do to work out what it means.

Q23 **Derek Twigg:** But factually, we have now gone from two people who are equal and technically cannot outvote each other to four.



Dr Curtis: I would say that is a mistake. I reach back to what Heseltine did in the '80s. He inherited that, and he said, "That doesn't work" and changed it. The military strategic headquarters is not a bad idea, but I don't think it is being delivered very well. I would have what was head office, the Department of State, doing policy and governance in that building, and a military strategic headquarters, completely separate, with a completely separate focus on delivering the military output and a four-star commander commanding everyone else one level down. I would have service chiefs with three stars sat within that organisation, alongside my space force and cyber force, separate from the Department of State. A number of militaries in NATO do exactly that. There are advantages and disadvantages of doing it, but if you look at the problems that still exist within the Levene model, you can help to solve them.

Let me go back to the point I made about the power and authority of the services. If you make the service chiefs three-stars, with only two four-stars left in Defence, for example, immediately those individuals have one more step to go as individuals to achieve four-star rank. If you are then looking at them for that final promotion alongside a bunch of other three-stars, suddenly they are going to become more team players and not solely focused on their individual services for their own individual needs. Rightly or wrongly, you are changing their behaviours.

I believe there are elements of this reform programme—military strategic headquarters, for example—that are a good idea, but the way they are being viewed within this reform programme is wrong and I don't think it will work. On the point about the Quad bringing those four together, I do not think there is any evidence back through the history of the management of the MoD over the last 50 to 60 years that has said, "That's a good idea. It works." There is no evidence.

Q24 **Derek Twigg:** This is my last point, because you have covered some of it. This reform process is supposed to be delivered in the autumn, but we are nearly out of the autumn, so we will see. Given the various scenarios you have painted, what would you say are the top two or three outcomes or indicators that would say whether it is a success or not?

Matthew Savill: There is a really prosaic one: do the people working in the building understand what they are doing, and do they work more efficiently? You could measure that by their actual reaction to it. There is a note of caution in there, because of course people do not like change. I could be sitting here saying, "This all looks terrible because it wasn't like this in my day." But if you look at Defence's current scores whenever it does a people survey, it has dismal results on leadership and managing change. Do those scores improve? That is a straight thing. I think they are pretty much bottom across Government at the moment—41% engagement or something like that. It is bad. Do those scores improve in terms of people having a clearer idea of their role and how Defence works?

You could look at whether decisions are being made faster. Is the Department more agile? Some of this could take ages, because what you are really saying is, "Did we make the right decisions?". I do not think the



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people making decisions on how the military looked in 2010 or 2015 were deliberately making wrong decisions, but we have ended up saying that the British armed forces are not right for contemporary warfare. We will have to leave some of this to history.

It will be interesting to see whether Ministers feel the Department is working in response to them. To a certain extent, they are expressing a repeated belief: "This place feels clunkier than I want it to be." Ben Wallace had lots of complaints about how the building worked and how decision making happened on Ukraine. In a lot of cases, he was right. The interesting thing will be, while we might say, "Ministers are making the wrong decision," given that they are ultimately democratically elected and accountable, that if they say, "What I really want is a Department that feels like it is actually working for me," whether that feels true. Whether or not they will sit in a Committee and tell you that it is or is not, I don't know.

There is an element here where the most immediate feedback is, "How do people actually feel about the functioning of the Department?" Lots of the other stuff is, "Does the equipment programme improve?". If you think that a key part is to delay less, reduce bureaucracy and be more cost-effective, then surely there has to be an improvement in terms of variance in the budget, and so on.

Chair: I know we only have another 40-odd minutes left, so we need to crack on, as there are a few areas that we still need to cover. Let us move on to the challenges of the current Defence reform programme with Jesse Norman.

Q25 **Jesse Norman:** Gentlemen, it has been very interesting testimony—thank you so much. You have described to us an MoD and a defence establishment that is talking about reform, but in a context of being pre-war across Europe, and actually at war on the fringes. There is therefore a massive disjunct between the pace of activity as it appears inside the system and the appetite for reform, and the posture that perhaps we ought to have if we took pre-war seriously. Do you think that is right?

Dr Curtis: As I promised to do at the start, if you look at this in terms of delivering military effect versus managing the business, there are two slightly different answers. The Government's view is that, in big handfuls, the SDR will solve the delivering military effect problem and Defence reform will solve managing the business, and that they are symbiotic. The worry here is that you are looking at Defence reform and are worrying about solving a problem that is mainly in the delivering military effect space. A lot of the answers to your questions are about the changes that the SDR is going to deliver, rather than specifically what Defence reform is going to deliver. Having said that, you cannot do one without the other.

Q26 **Jesse Norman:** Right, but the claim was made earlier that somehow reform was opposed to warfighting when, in fact, it is essential for warfighting.

Dr Curtis: No, what I said was that the culture you need to manage the business is different from the culture you need to warfight. That was the point I was trying to make earlier.

- Q27 **Jesse Norman:** I want to ask about how good you think the leadership of the reform programme is at the moment, and the point you have made about the changes of culture. It seems to me that we know what good culture looks like in the civil service. It is very fast, responsive and outcome-oriented, and we have not got it—is that right?

Dr Curtis: For some situations, I would absolutely agree with you. I don't think that is fair in every situation. You can point to examples where the system has reacted in exactly the way that you have suggested. If you look at some of the support to Ukraine, I suggest that the system has reacted in exactly that way. Unfortunately, you could argue that that is the exception rather than the norm. We want it to be the norm. In that respect, if you are looking at the problems that Defence reform is trying to solve, they are around management techniques, budgetary control and procurement processes. They are not around force structures and how we will fight.

- Q28 **Jesse Norman:** You are right, but we are talking slightly at cross purposes. I want to get your answer to the question of whether reform has the right leadership, plan and resources. The way I am going to get to that is by highlighting that your argument draws a distinction about what appears to be managerial, steady as she goes due process, and I am saying, "No, I don't think that is true." The best managements are very outcome-oriented. They are much more operational than you are suggesting. They crank the handle of due process, but they do it twice as fast as people might expect, and they are outcome-oriented and solution-oriented. That is the problem; we have not got enough of that. I am asking you to agree with that proposition.

Dr Curtis: I am not sure that I suggested that you need slow-moving managerial processes.

Jesse Norman: No, but the contrast you were bringing out is operational versus managerial.

Dr Curtis: I was trying to suggest that, for the more junior individuals that are focused on warfighting, the culture they have is built around single services—it is built around regiments. Within the Ministry of Defence, you need a business-oriented culture that is built around "one defence", not three single services. That is what you need to move towards before you can start delivering your business management at pace, which you are talking about.

- Q29 **Jesse Norman:** Or possibly at the same time, or possibly after. Matthew, does the reform programme have the right leadership, the right resourcing or the right plan? Or how far has it?

Matthew Savill: I hesitate to make a judgment on the leadership, because then I am basically making a judgment on what is happening day



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to day with individuals, DG Transformation and a two-star military officer leading it. I do not want to say, "I don't think they're doing any good," because I do not see what they are doing on a daily basis. We were lucky enough to have a briefing from one of them, but with the way that the current Government are doing things, I cannot tell you anything about it, because it was all off the record—there is a slight problem there.

It sounds as though there is plan and it is evolving but, as I say, I think they are starting from a presumption that the answer is this Quad, the new structure and various other things. To link to your previous question, I am not sure I see the link between those reforms and us being better at industrial war—it is kind of a nonsense.

Jesse Norman: That is interesting.

Matthew Savill: I bounced around a lot over the past few years, because we had a lot of crises. I was involved in the Russia-Ukraine crisis team—my team did the operational policy for getting Storm Shadow to Ukraine, got the first armoured vehicles out there and set up Interflex. We did that all quite rapidly. Then we set up a team—Taskforce Kindred—who do the rapid procurement. Were there bumps in the road along the way in all those things? Yes. Were those as quick as people such as Ben Wallace wanted? Probably not—I think a lot of credit should go to him for driving a lot of what the UK has done on Ukraine, against the caution of his Department. That was not about the process; that was about—

Jesse Norman: That is my point. That is about culture and driving. You said that capability programme was "completely botched".

Matthew Savill: For the Army.

Q30 **Jesse Norman:** Are you seeing any of those fractures or signs in the Defence programme reforms?

Matthew Savill: A lot of this depends on what has happened to what was announced as the integrated procurement model. That is an area we would love to do research on at RUSI. When it was announced, a slightly implausible example was given that "We've accelerated DragonFire,"—we can talk about how credible that is as a claim for the success of the model. But the SDR sets out that we are going to work on new timescales for making decisions on major capability decisions. A lot of the truth will be in what the Defence Investment Plan looks like. As you know, we have not had an equipment plan for three years; I think that is because they cannot make the numbers add up.

Jesse Norman: That is our view, but they will not give us the information, so we cannot judge it.

Matthew Savill: My personal view is that you will see that the new money that comes in is profiled from 2027. You will see cuts before that happens, which will be difficult, because everyone has been told we are entering a land of plenty in preparing for war.

Q31 **Jesse Norman:** That is exactly the point I want to make. We do not have a culture of readiness or outcomes in the way that you would expect.

Matthew Savill: That is partly because the oil tanker takes time to turn around, and they might have to take some really difficult decisions. If they do, we should probably credit them—if they can demonstrate that that then frees up the resourcing for later on. The key thing is that this is happening behind the scenes at the moment, so I do not know whether they have genuinely changed it.

What we can see in our work with the Army is that it is taking a section of money, for example—not in Ukraine-style rapid procurement, because, to be clear, that comes with a complete absence of serious oversight and a lot of accepted waste to get stuff to the frontline; you would not want to run your whole equipment and capability programme in the same way that we have done in getting stuff to Ukraine, because it would be completely wasteful. But what you want to do is say, “Where is the stuff? Yes, we should definitely improvise that; yes, we can definitely buy it off the shelf and modify it in a matter of months.” The Army is trying to work out how it can do that, but it is working with Ajax, which is a £5.5 billion sunk cost.

Q32 **Jesse Norman:** A final question, if I may. Obviously, reform is not just about the MoD; it is also about the transmission of culture and effect through the whole defence establishment. One of the things we are seeing is that, in many ways, our prime contractors are not responding fast enough to deal with some of the issues we are talking about, and Ukraine is a great example of that. Is there something you can tell us about how you think that ought to work, and where the improvements could be made?

Matthew Savill: I think many of the defence contractors would say—and if you were doing the rounds of the bazaars at DSEI, you might have heard this—“We are ready to change and support, but we need to know what the contracts are, are you laying them—then compete stuff?”

Q33 **Jesse Norman:** That two-year gap is killing the demand signal.

Matthew Savill: There are a lot of people, and this is where the question of separate investment to kick things off comes in, and how you go from experimentation to getting stuff actually into service. All the services have done really interesting stuff with experimentation on all sorts of things over a decade. How long has the Navy been looking at uncrewed vessels? But they consistently cannot get over what they call the valley of death, in terms of, “Can we now get the damn thing into service?”

I think industry is ready, but it needs to know what the requirement is, what “always on” actually means, and the minimum level of investment that enables us to take genuine financial risk with the promise of stuff happening down the line. Otherwise, the MoD is saying, “There will be money! Jump!” and then, “Hang on, why haven’t you invested in a third production line when we haven’t placed an order?”



We had this challenge when we were looking to recover munitions—sorry, replenish our stocks after we gifted—sorry, gave and donated a load of stuff to Ukraine—which was a problem for the Department, because it had a ministerial direction, “Replace the following stockpiles.”⁵ The Department wasted months because it basically wanted industry to create new production capacity without placing the order, which meant there was no predictability. Why would anybody take the risk of taking 18 months to do that?

Q34 Mr Bailey: Thank you for your insights. It is interesting to reflect on them, having worked in both the military strategic headquarters within the Department of State and briefing all our future senior officers on why that duplication existed within the MoD.

I was quite excited to see Defence reform, because it sought to separate those things out and perhaps focus on the command and leadership stuff within the military strategic headquarters, and then the management of the business within the Department of State.

The reform also has to bring about, as you have both discussed, structural and cultural change. There are two things I would like to hear your views on. The first is how it addresses that challenge with the removal of a military manager for personnel, as is at the moment—especially as one of the aims of the Defence reform is, “A highly engaged organisation that values its people and enables everyone to fulfil their potential and contribute to the security and defence of the Nation.”

The second is how much buy-in we think there is in the delivery of that cultural change. We heard from General Barrons during our inquiry on the SDR, who said that he had already heard there were people who were reluctant and would “resist” that change, and that they needed to see it as “not optional” and to be held to account.

Dr Curtis: On the first point, I am slightly lost on what you were saying about losing the military—

Mr Bailey: The CDP.

Dr Curtis: At the moment, the CDP is still within the construct. The wiring diagrams I have seen of the military strategic headquarters still has the Chief of Defence People as a three-star post. In fact, the diagram that was provided and is on your website has CDP on it.

Q35 Mr Bailey: Not within the upper echelons of the structure.

Dr Curtis: That post is within the military strategic headquarters.

Q36 Mr Bailey: Do you think that is adequately placed to deliver the cultural change that we are talking about?

⁵ The witness later clarified that he was referring to a situation where the MOD had, despite a clear ministerial direction to replenish munitions stockpiles, been slow to place an order for new munitions with the supplier.



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Dr Curtis: I am not sure that that individual will see themselves as being on the hook for delivering the cultural change. That might be one of the problems. I think they would definitely see the DG transformation post as the individual who is on point for that. That is potentially a problem, because, as we know, cultural change is all about what people think.

There is a point—again, depending on how senior you are—about how much of this really matters to a lot of people in defence. For example, if you ask a young subaltern from an infantry battalion what they want to be when they grow up, they are not going to say, “I want to be director of military capability in a military strategic headquarters, thank you very much.” They are going to say, “I’d like to be a brigade commander,” or, “I’d like to be a divisional commander,” as you would expect. But the same individual probably does not give two hoots whether there is a Quad at the top of the defence construct.

I think of my own time as a junior officer in the mid-’80s, when all of Heseltine’s change was going through. I look back at that as an academic, and it was considerable, but when I was a junior officer, I did not even know it was happening. There are vast swathes of Defence that this will not impact at all.

When it comes to culture—I apologise for banging the same drum—there is nothing wrong with the culture at the tactical end of Defence. The focus on warfighting delivered by the single services is absolutely what you want from fighting forces. That is fine. The problem is that when you try to take that culture into managing a multibillion-pound business, it doesn’t work because those individuals are focused on the needs of their service, not the needs of Defence as a whole. The challenge is moving them from one to the other. That is why one of my solutions is a single defence staff, because when you get into that senior space, you need to be made to think Defence, and not think single service.

Q37 **Mr Bailey:** But you also need an understanding of the culture of authority and a policy that is empathetic to the needs of the people right at the bottom. That is why we need people appropriately empowered and involved with it.

Dr Curtis: Absolutely, and that is why you cannot manage all Defence people in one place. That is why the single services need to maintain their own HR function. I am suggesting that the single services still maintain all that people management at the lower levels and continue to post, promote and do all those things. They must continue to deliver the warfighting culture because, frankly, if you do not have that, there is no point in having a military. Look at the situation in the Bundeswehr after reunification: ultimately, they were pared back so much that all their focus on warfighting was lost. They effectively became a bureaucratic business, and were, to a certain extent, the laughing stock of the rest of NATO because they could not deliver a military output. The tail was wagging the dog.



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When it comes to changing the culture, we have to be very careful that we do not swing the pendulum too far the other way and end up with a culture that is great at delivering a multibillion-pound business, but is absolutely useless on a battlefield. That is a real danger. The service chiefs will absolutely argue that point, and so they should, because that is their primary role: to deliver warfighters.

Q38 Mr Bailey: In essence, you are supportive of the structure as is—or as is put, because that is a removal and dispersion of personnel policy into the single services, not a centralised—

Dr Curtis: There is both. An element of single-service HR policy is required—being an aviator is not the same as being a soldier or a sailor, so we have to accept that there are differences—but some elements of policy, such as bullying and discrimination, are the same for everyone and therefore must be delivered centrally. I suggest that the more senior someone is, the more their career and HR management, as it were, are influenced by that central nature, because we are trying to turn people into Defence people the more senior they become. Defence absolutely has not got that right, because it is not even thinking about it.

Q39 Mr Bailey: To the point about adequate buy-in, Matt, do you have something to say?

Matthew Savill: This is tremendously anecdotal—for which read “gossipy”—but I speak to people in the MoD all the time and when I ask them, “How’s Defence reform going?”, not a single person has said, “It’s going well.” There is genuine confusion. To a degree, that is resistance to change, and I would caveat any analysis of my comments with the fact that it could just be that I am a stick-in-the-mud, who thinks that it should be largely like it was before—although I do not. There have been problems for several years in the function of the MoD and there are things that need to be addressed, but it has been received at the working level with—as far as I can tell—a mixture of bafflement, confusion and some people getting on with it. I genuinely believe, however, that it creates or introduces a greater civilian-military split into the MoD than has hitherto existed.

Q40 Mr Bailey: Where or why is that buy-in not taking place?

Matthew Savill: It is essentially below the senior management. In essence, everyone who runs a team, a deputy director, a one-star or something, is trying to understand, “Where do I fit on the organigram now?” “I am being told that I am moving,” “I am not moving,” or, “I have institutionally shifted while sitting in exactly the same place.” “What is going on?” “Why is this happening again?” That is more problematic for some people than for others because, as I mentioned, the population is quite transient. We will reach a point soon where a lot of people will just accept it as normal jogging, but it will have been improperly implemented, so what you will have is a broken structure that no one realises is broken. That is the worst case; it might be that the issue is addressed. Do not take that as, “This is definitely going to happen,” but it is slightly built on quicksand.

Q41 **Emma Lewell:** You said that there was bafflement and confusion. Who is to blame for that?

Matthew Savill: That is a difficult one. I imagine that the senior leadership of Defence would say, "We have explained this. We have presentations—here is a presentation. John Healey stood up and gave a speech." As I said, this is a partial picture, because there is not great transparency, but the danger that what has happened is that the result has been fixed, and now they are trying to contort an explanation around it. As I said, I do not really understand how some of the changes relate to some of the alleged outcome, which is that we are going to be warfare ready and all that sort of stuff. That is where the growth of Defence reform to be all things to all people is a danger, because it means that we have to explain how everything relates to Defence reform, and in some cases it does not.

If you want to say, "We want to make decisions more rapidly in head office and we want to change how procurement and force design work"—those are slightly techy, nerdy ways of describing it—that allows you to explain a lot of cultural and institutional changes. Saying, "This is going to radically transform how we do defence"—you asked me what Defence reform is, and Defence says, "Reform is the means by which we implement the SDR." I am not sure that is really true. Given the breadth of what is in the SDR, the idea that you cannot implement the SDR if you do not reform Defence strikes me as a falsehood.

Q42 **Emma Lewell:** I suppose what I am getting at is this: who is in charge of Defence reform? Whose responsibility is this?

Dr Curtis: There is a DG for transformation. There is a three-star civil servant who has a two-star military programme director. Having delivered transformation within the MoD, I have some real sympathy. You get to a point where you have to say, "This is not a debate. This is what we are doing." Defence is very good individually and collectively at consenting and evading. People say, "Yep, I'm all for that," but as soon as you walk away, they think, "No, we'll just go back to what we were doing."

If you look at it from the perspective of the people charged with making the change, they are running a "think, plan, do, review" process. They want to move at pace because they want to bypass the consent-and-evaders. Their argument is, "We're going to do this. We recognise that we might get some of it wrong and we will catch that in the review." I get that. That is a way of delivering transformational change. If you do not, you just get bogged down. People spend all their time discussing. You get back to the point that I mentioned earlier, where people are able to resist the change simply by filibustering, if you like, in a military sense.

I have an element of sympathy with the pace at which they are moving. The result of that is that people are saying, "Hang on a minute. Stuff is happening, and I don't really understand it." In my view, that is fine, provided that when you come to the review part of the process, you genuinely say, "We moved too fast. We got that wrong. We are going to



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change it.” Defence does not have a good record of that—once it is in, it is in. That is my worry. It is a balance between the two. You have to bypass the consent-and-evaders, but you also have to recognise that if you move at pace, you will not get it all right and you have to be prepared to fess up to those mistakes and change them. Defence does not have a good track record of that.

Q43 Emma Lewell: As an aside to that, do either of you think that the Government’s defence reform programme is going to work?

Dr Curtis: I think it will deliver the outcomes that the Defence Secretary has identified. The problem with that—somebody was talking about objectives earlier—is building your change around a new military strategic headquarters and a National Armaments Director. That is effectively what has happened. Those were the big up-front decisions and everything else has been built around them. Provided that you deliver a new military strategic headquarters—done—and we have a new National Armaments Director—done—it is very easy to declare success because those big things have been done. The reality is that you have not changed anything. None of the process has changed. You are still moving at the same glacial pace as before. That was one of the points that you were trying to bring out earlier.

My worry is that, yes, change will have been made, but in my view, it is not the right change. I think that other things needed to be done as a higher priority. But change will happen, and success will be declared. Provided that you are basing your change on organisational change, that is a very easy thing to do.

Q44 Chair: There has been a lot of talk about Defence reform, but to the best of my knowledge the cost of the Defence reform programme has not been confirmed. The only bit of information that we have received, during a parliamentary question, is that £4.2 million has been expended on the establishment of the National Armaments Director group.

Matthew Savill: Is that million or billion?

Q45 Chair: £4.2 million. That is in workforce costs on the establishment of the NAD group.

Unlike previous defence reforms, no Command Paper has preceded this Defence reform programme. I am not aware of any comprehensive publication around this. Do you not think that that could limit the understanding and the scope of what the MoD is trying to achieve? I would be interested in your views about that. Also, if we compare this with previous Defence reform programmes, what are your views on the level of transparency and engagement that there has been, and the impact that that has had on the delivery of the programme?

Dr Curtis: You are absolutely spot on about the lack of transparency. All the other major programmes that we have talked about had at least a Command Paper. The Levene reform had a long report that was socialised and circulated; an awful lot of work went into that. There was an awful lot of up-front activity. The reality was that you then got buy-in. In 1963,



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Mountbatten said, "This is what I want to do." The service chiefs did not like it. The Prime Minister said, "Right, I'm going to have an independent review." He did, and that is what got delivered. That kind of thing works, and the lack of that is a big worry for me.

Consider the way the SDR was done. As I mentioned earlier, I thought it was done very well, with independent people, lots of dialogue, lots of discussion and a good product. You have the complete opposite here: choices that were made before the current Government were even in power are driving a major reform with no evidence to suggest that they are going to deliver change, and no documentation or dialogue to back it up. Of all the problems that we have identified this morning, that is the greatest.

Q46 **Chair:** Mr Savill, given the lack of documentation that I outlined, what are your views on the level of transparency and engagement? What impact do you think that will have on the delivery of the programme?

Matthew Savill: Those are obviously two different questions. The transparency has been dismal—quite bluntly. As I said, the note that they sent to the Committee says almost nothing. It is a flim-flam repetition of what was said in a couple of speeches, plus a wiring diagram that does not actually explain what is happening. As I said, we were fortunate to have a breakfast briefing from the Defence reform team but it is all off the record so we cannot talk about it—brilliant! What I am driving at is that I am not entirely sure that they know what they are doing.

Q47 **Chair:** That is very worrying, isn't it?

Matthew Savill: They have not cumulatively set out, "This is how we're building this." The note that you got looks exactly like the description that would have been given a year ago. We know that much more work has been done internally; why can they not explain that externally?

Q48 **Chair:** Basically, they are looking to implement this iteratively, but there is no clarity and transparency at the beginning. That was my feeling as well, but I wanted to have it directly from yourselves as experts.

How important is the publication of the Defence operating model, and would you expect an updated version of "How Defence Works" to be published following the implementation of the reform programme?

Dr Curtis: The current version on the gov.uk website already says that it is out of date and should not be adhered to. I am aware, through speaking to individuals within the service, that a lot of work is going on to deliver a new Defence operating model. One of my issues—and this goes back to the Quad—is that you effectively have four organisations, each looking at its own operating model. If you look at the NAD group, because of the way the enabling organisations have traditionally worked—they are very programme-focused—the NAD group is streets ahead in what it has done. But my worry is that, because the Defence Nuclear Enterprise already has an operating model, you are going to end up with four operating models at the Quad level, and making an overarching one is going to be difficult. In answer to your question, it absolutely needs to be made public, and it

needs to be a better job than the last one. Compared with the original publications, which had a lot of detail, version 6 was woeful in terms of its detail, so it needs to be a lot better than that.

Q49 **Chair:** Mr Savill, we have got the outdated 2021 version. What are your views on the defence operating model and how defence works?

Matthew Savill: They absolutely must produce both of those things, if only to demonstrate that I am wrong and they know what they are doing. I am a nerd. This stuff matters. I should say that throughout all of this there is always the point that it is never quite how it says on the page. I used to give a presentation on the Defence Crisis Management Organisation, which is the virtual link between head office and permanent headquarters running operations. I would say, "This is what it says on paper. It does not work this way, but the point is we use all these principles."

They need to explain what the principles are and how this new thing is going to work, because the alternative is that maybe I will be wrong and it will not break defence, but that is because people will ignore defence reform and make do and mend. But that will have kind of defeated the object and it is also not great for democratic accountability if the Defence Secretary says, "I want x," and it does not happen. So there is a lot of danger, but yes, they should produce a new version, and it would be really helpful if they could write it in English and not the godawful gobbledegook that currently issues forth from the Ministry of Defence.

Chair: I think we agree on that. I am sorry the Committee has thinned out a bit. This is the problem with the slot before PMQs—all the Members are rushing to try to get a seat at PMQs—but you have the dedicated four to make sure that we conclude today's session. I call Alex Baker.

Q50 **Alex Baker:** Apologies for not being here at the beginning of the session. There was a Westminster Hall debate on Typhoons that I was speaking in. You have obviously covered a lot on the key measurement of success for defence reform. I am specifically interested in the process. We have become aware that there was an absence of a Command Paper or a comprehensive statement on Defence reform as the MoD have been going through this process. From your perspective, how significant is that absence?

Dr Curtis: I think it is very significant. It is Alice in "Through the Looking-Glass" asking, "Which road do I take?". "Well, where are you going?". "I don't know." "In that case, you can take any road you like." Without that guiding document, Defence reform can be anything that the decision makers want it to be. In terms of holding them to account, that is your role. For us, a defence academic and a senior individual in the best think-tank in the world, it is kind of our role as well. It is very difficult to do that when you do not have that document to hold them to account to. The scrabbling around and trying to get the information, reaching back into old speeches and looking at the information that has been generated are all things that make it very difficult to do that holding to account, which,



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ironically, is part of the problem around the reason that the Levene reforms did not work properly, because Defence was never able to deliver the holding to account processes that Levene identified as necessary.

I am as much of a nerd on these things as Matthew is. For me, it really matters, because you will not deliver the military effect that you need in the future if you do not get the management of Defence right today. If you get today's management wrong, you are putting in jeopardy the delivery of military effect in the future. My worry is that without the ability to hold these people to account, there is an element of playing fast and loose with today's defence management, which will only have a detrimental effect on tomorrow's operations.

Matthew Savill: I wonder whether it is less significant, but very telling. If you are in defence and being told to make changes, you do not need a Command Paper to make them—if there is strong leadership and clear direction. The creation of a Command Paper would not have done that. But there is a degree to which the Department and, perhaps, the Defence Secretary are caught on their own rhetoric. They are describing this as the most profound change in the Department since its formation—you should probably have a Command Paper for that—but at the same time, it clearly was not intended that way. He stood up and said, "Having a military strategic headquarters is a week 1 change," and there was obviously no intent to publish a Command Paper before that change.

You get the impression that the programme has accumulated stuff as it has gone along. It has become bigger than Ben-Hur, is now "the most profound change," and so on, but that is not matched by communicating it publicly and telling Parliament. Are these just some internal changes, which turned out to be more difficult than we thought, that we wanted to get stuff done and make the Department leaner and better—and all those other phrases that get used as if they are a football team? Or is it the most profound change to the running of the Ministry of Defence in 60-plus years? Pick one, but then act that way.

Q51 **Alex Baker:** That is interesting. You highlight the implications, beyond just the MoD getting this right, in terms of making it harder for all of us to do our jobs. If we all get to do our jobs, the MoD will probably get a better outcome out of this process.

I have a final question. What questions do we need to ask the MoD to evaluate its success in the coming years?

Dr Curtis: The best way of delivering this is through a programmatic approach, which is what the MoD has said it is doing. I am not convinced that that is the case. With a programmatic approach, you have a proper construct, with a vision, objectives and plans, and you can hold that to account. You can look and see that those things are happening. My gut feeling is that you will be able to see that in the NAD Group, because that is the world that they live in. I reckon that if you went down to Abbey Wood and said, "Show me the programme plan for the delivery of the NAD

Group, with all the objectives," they will be able to do it. But if you say the same thing in Main Building, I think that is less likely.

If there is a programme plan and it is all being delivered programmatically, prove it: show us all this information, the KPIs, everything that you are working to, the timelines and the Gantt charts, yada yada. Talk us through it, and prove that you have delivered against your milestones. By the way, when you do that, it will identify the measures of success that we talked about earlier, and you will be able to prove to us that you have delivered those as well. That is not just the delivery of a new organisation or the creation and filling of a new post. This is a bit of nerd answer, but show me the programme.

Matthew Savill: I would ask them, "How will you measure, in terms of outcomes, the success of Defence reform?" Not output, and not, "We established a NAD Group and changed the chain of command for the Chiefs,"—what is the outcome? Show me the causal logic: show how the Defence reform did that, rather than it just happening. Then I would be digging into some of the rationale: "Can you explain to me why this structure is going to result in better advice than it did previously?" I would test them on nerdy questions like, "Do you understand the difference between military advice and policy advice? Can you explain to me how advice on decision making is currently happening?"

As I said, a lot of this is focusing on equipment, procurement and force design, but that could make it more complicated when it comes to the actual use of the military in operations, which is my bread and butter. I sat in an integrated operations directorate with a military counterpart, and we started the campaign to counter the Islamic State—Operation Shader. We did that in the Ops Directorate, which does not exist any more. I would dig into this: "Explain to me why you have made these decisions on how civ-mil integration works; do you think civilians just navel-gaze and do airy-fairy policy, and all the real stuff is the MSHQ?" To be clear, that is not why I joined Defence; I joined it to do stuff. It is worth digging into some of that rationale, but the big one is, "Explain to me how this works, the logic of how this works and what success looks like."

Alex Baker: We will endeavour to ask those questions.

Chair: Thank you, Mr Savill, for recently hosting me at RUSI. It was wonderful to catch up with you and the team for very insightful discussions. I thank you and your good self, Dr Curtis, for your insightful contributions today, which will no doubt be the catalyst for further discussion on Defence reform.