

Defence Committee

Oral evidence: Modernising Defence Programme - 13 March 2018, HC 818

Tuesday 13 March 2018

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Members present: Dr Julian Lewis (Chair); Leo Docherty; Martin Docherty-Hughes; Mr Mark Francois; Graham P. Jones; Johnny Mercer; Mrs Madeleine Moon; Gavin Robinson; Ruth Smeeth; John Spellar; Phil Wilson.

Questions 43-78

Witnesses

[I](#): Larisa Brown, Defence and Security Editor, Daily Mail; Alistair Bunkall, Defence and Security Correspondent, Sky News; and Deborah Haynes, Defence Editor, The Times.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Larisa Brown, Defence and Security Editor, Daily Mail; Alistair Bunkall, Defence and Security Correspondent, Sky News; and Deborah Haynes, Defence Editor, The Times.

- Q43 **Chair:** Good morning and welcome to this second oral evidence session of the Defence Committee's study of the Modernising Defence Programme. This morning, we are looking at it from the perspective of the media. We have three distinguished defence correspondents with us today. I ask each of you to introduce yourself, with a quick word about the positions that you hold.

Larisa Brown: I am Larisa Brown, the defence and security editor for the *Daily Mail*. I am based in our Lobby office in Parliament, so I also cover a wider politics brief.

Deborah Haynes: I am Deborah Haynes, the defence editor for *The Times*. I just cover defence.

Alistair Bunkall: Alistair Bunkall, defence correspondent for Sky News.

Chair: Good. Mark will start us off.

- Q44 **Mr Francois:** Good morning. Prior to the appalling events in Salisbury, about three weeks ago when the Secretary of State for Defence gave evidence to this Committee, he made an important announcement that the Government now regard state-based threats as the primary threat to the security of the United Kingdom and its allies. He was clear in referring to Russia several times in that context. This is quite an important shift in the Government's defence policy. Alistair, what are the consequences in terms of capability for the Government's reprioritisation in putting state-based threats at the top of the list?

Alistair Bunkall: Prior to the Defence Secretary's appearance in front of the Committee we had seen a shift in tone over a number of years, since British troops withdrew from Afghanistan in a combat role. They were then faced with the dual threat of an insurgency in the face of Islamic State, to be dealt with in Iraq and Syria, which in itself posed a problem that I do not think this country or our allies had experienced or dealt with before in the way that Islamic State operates. That has been backed up as a threat on a second front, which is the growing, resurgent Russia in the east. A lot of the talk, whether it be in the Ministry of Defence or in NATO, is on how to respond to the threat from Russia. At times, I think we have struggled to second-guess what President Putin's aims and objectives are.

- Q45 **Mr Francois:** Would either of you like to follow up on that?

Deborah Haynes: Quite simply, we have completely hollowed out our ability to fight a conventional war. For nearly the last two decades, the



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primary focus of UK defence has been counter-insurgency. The soldiers, the commanders, the training and the equipment acquisition for the greater part of this century has been all about this flexible force and regarding the cold war-style military posture of having lots of effective tanks, aircraft, CBRN capabilities and systems like ground air defence as something we can take a risk on, because the cold war had finished and everybody was friends. The problem is, obviously, that that is not the case.

The statement you talked about—the change in language from the Defence Secretary, recognising state-based threats, and the whole global competition which we are hearing from the United States as well—is a real signal that the structure needs to change. The point people are trying to get across is how the nature of war has changed. It is no good talking about the cold war posture, such as, “My tank’s bigger than your tank.” It is like, “My tank can communicate better than your tank. My jet is more networked than your jet.” It is about using all the different spectrums of war—cyber, space, electromagnetic spectrum—and all those kinds of areas.

If you are not proficient in that full-spectrum effect, you are not going to succeed. That is the message that is coming across. I hope that is what the modernisation programme will look at, but it will require a fundamental restructuring of the force, which potentially will see sacred cows being sacrificed because they are no longer as relevant as new equipment. Equally, it is going to require significant investment. If the Government does not come forward with that, it will again just pay lip service to our defence, which I think would be a complete betrayal.

Q46 Mr Francois: I suspect that a lot of what you have said may come to pass. You mentioned some sacred cows being sacrificed. What sort of sacred cows do you think are for the abattoir?

Deborah Haynes: Goodness; this is where I become really unpopular. That is a good question.

Mr Francois: Thank you very much. We do try, you know.

Deborah Haynes: I always hate it when someone says, “That’s a good question,” to me because I know that they do not want to answer it, or do not know the answer to it—which are actually both true on my part. The question that the UK needs to ask itself is, does it want to continue to be a tier 1 military power with a full spectrum of capability? If the answer to that question is, “Yes, we want to play with the big boys. We want to be alongside America. We want to be alongside France,” which is the only other country that you could compare us to in that sense, we need to keep sacred cows to an extent. In that bracket—I do not want to say particular capabilities, but let us say that you can keep your sacred cows, but you need to increase investment to be able to expand your capability.

If you decide that you cannot afford that and you think that because we are part of NATO, we are allied, it is all about co-operation and we can let



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other countries specialise in tanks, for example—there you go, I will be hated by all the tankies now—then you could take our massive investment out and reinvest it in making sure that all the rest of the kit is properly networked, for example. There is a huge, vital programme to upgrade our tanks—the Warrior capability and the whole armour—which is hugely needed.

Q47 Chair: Can I just mention a couple of points? We will need to be a bit shorter in our answers, because we are hoping to conclude this session as near to 12.25 pm as possible, because of the important financial statement.

While we are on the subject—perhaps you will want to come in on this, Larisa—can we consider the fact that a culture of leaks to people like yourselves seems to have been the only way of finding out what particular capabilities are being, as Mark put it, taken to the abattoir? For example, there was the widely leaked suggestion that the Albion and Bulwark amphibious assault ships would be deleted. If it had not been for the work of defence journalists, that debate would never have been ignited and the first that we would have known about it would probably have been when it was announced in a review result. Have any of you got any comments to make on that, starting with you Larisa?

Larisa Brown: Yes, I think we have seen a dramatic shift in the MOD engagement policy over the last few months. Clearly, there is a new strategy where the MOD thinks it is better to engage with journalists, to let them know what is going on in the Department and to allow us to speak to the military chiefs to get their sense on where the threat is at and what capabilities are needed. In November or December last year, several of us in the press were getting information about what could be cut. Clearly, those cuts were considered politically unpalatable by the Defence Secretary. That is the position we are in now. Obviously, he wants to review the Department himself and make a decision on where the cuts should be—if there should be any. Of course, the new Modernising Defence Programme is not fiscally neutral, so we in the defence world would assume that he might get more money for it.

Alistair Bunkall: Can I come in with a couple of supplementary points? First, I think the problems that have faced the UK in realigning itself to modern threats are indicative across NATO. In general, the alliance has had to re-look at its purpose and how it faces threats from Russia. I do not want to put myself down the river and try to suggest what the sacred cows are or are not, but in a defence review, you have to look at the conflicts you are fighting now and the conflicts you might be fighting in future. I am not sure that we are necessarily at a stage that is spelling the end of tanks or manned aircraft, for example. However, we are clearly entering an era where unmanned technology is starting to gather pace very quickly. Within a defence review, one would want to see strides towards exploring R&D, perhaps for two or three defence reviews down the line.

Q48 Mr Francois: We have had banner headlines for the last few days about



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the events in Salisbury—I think Tom Tugendhat yesterday said that “this, if not an act of war, was certainly a warlike act”. For several days Russia and Putin have been all over the front pages of our newspapers and dominating our TV screens, but it isn’t always like that. Do you think there is sufficient public awareness in this country about the threat from Russia and other states such as North Korea?

Larisa Brown: I think that people who are not engaged in defence, and who do not work for the Ministry of Defence or as defence journalists have no real concept of the threat we face from Russia. In the past, the older generations knew what it was like to fight in world war two and live through the cold war, whereas younger generations have no idea. The events of the last few days have clearly put into perspective exactly what the threat is from Russia. Yesterday, Tobias Ellwood made the point that this clearly shows that we need to invest in our defences.

Deborah Haynes: On the question about the leak, *The Times* has been writing an awful lot about the parlous state of the Armed Forces, and it is true that we felt worried about the mismatch between what the previous Secretary of State was saying about defence, the growing defence budget and all the great and wonderful things that were happening, and the reality. The reality behind the scenes was an organisation that was being asked to make incredibly challenging efficiency savings in order to make the defence review 2015 add up, and that sort of pressure meant that people didn’t feel as though the true story of defence was really out there. It is true that the defence budget is growing, but you must remember that the price for equipment that the Ministry of Defence has to buy is growing at a higher rate than the defence budget. In reality, our purchasing power is contracting.

On the public debate on defence, this has been such a hard story to get people interested in. People take our security for granted; they have grown up in an environment in the west where they do not know what it is like not to have running water when they turn on a tap, or they flick a light switch and the electricity comes on and they assume that is normal. But for a lot of the world it is not normal, and it is our job, just as much as it is your job, to communicate to people that we should not take those things for granted. There are arguments about the split of budgets between health, education and everything else, but nothing functions if you haven’t got security, and I think people need to be much more alive to that.

Q49 **John Spellar:** Although all that is true, isn’t there a danger that individual services that are competing with each other—and sometimes even within those services—use the media as a way of trying to make their case against the other services, rather than necessarily as part of the strategic priorities?

Larisa Brown: I would argue that there is a danger of that. In November or December we saw the leaks about Albion and Bulwark, but what about the other services? It obviously makes it difficult for the service chiefs and Defence Secretary to cut those two capabilities at the end of this year,



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because there has been such an uproar at the idea of it. Actually, a lot of other potential cuts have not been discussed anywhere near as much, which means that you are looking at saving two assets that might not necessarily be the best assets to keep.

Deborah Haynes: I think there is an element of that, but it is also that those two totemic pieces of kit ignited lots of emotions. It was a symbol of just how screwed up the defence budget was that they were actually having to think of cutting something like that. They also were not answering the question. If that is what you want to cut, that means you are saying to the world, "We no longer want to be a full-spectrum military." Fair enough if that is the case, but come out and tell us. To have the then Defence Secretary rabbiting on about how everything was fine—that was a problem.

In terms of the inter-service rivalry, I did the 2010 defence review, and it was really bad then. The fighting between them was toxic, because they were all having to sustain significant cuts. I think there seems to be a lot more camaraderie now, although there is still that tension. They all seem to be united in understanding that they need to fight for more and that they need to think smarter in terms of the way they spend their money.

Chair: Do you want to come in briefly, Alistair?

Alistair Bunkall: I am conscious that we are pushed on time.

Chair: Thank you very much.

Q50 **Johnny Mercer:** Larisa, when the British public are polled on issues that are important to them around elections, defence generally comes in around nine or 10. Do you think that the MOD has done a good job in relaying what Russia is up to in particular? For example, when we hear about the jets going down the North sea, do they know that they are doing a dry run, opening the bomb bay doors and practising, or do you think that there is more that could be done, not to educate, but to win the argument around defence spending and what we expect from the military?

Larisa Brown: I think the MOD has got a tougher challenge than Departments such as the health service. With the NHS, you have got members of the public going into hospitals. They know what the situation is like in A&E. They know what the situation is like in doctors' surgeries, having to wait a week for an appointment. With defence, it is not an everyday thing that they come across. Investing in our defences is effectively an insurance policy, isn't it?

The MOD does do a lot with us. One of the reasons I love my job is the access we get and the deployments we get to go on abroad. However, I have been covering defence since 2014, and I have never interviewed a CDS or CGS. I obviously would like the opportunity to do that. By allowing us to speak to those people, we can convey the rising threats and why people should want us to invest more money in defence. Without that, it



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makes it very hard to make the case for spending more money on the defence budget when you have got a crisis in the NHS.

Q51 **Johnny Mercer:** Deborah, what do you think?

Deborah Haynes: I think they are trying their best to get the message out, but over the past few years there has been real control over the message. You have successive Defence Secretaries—it really started in the Labour years, filtering through to Liam Fox, Philip Hammond and then Michael Fallon. Particularly under Michael Fallon and Philip Hammond, there was massive control over the chiefs and letting the chiefs talk. It was difficult with access to the media blocked. Whenever they gave a presentation, their speeches would be gone over with a fine-toothed comb.

I remember there was a Chief of the Air Staff—I think it was Andy Pulford—who gave a speech during the annual air conference. It was a really good speech. He spoke off the cuff. He might have had a few notes, as you would expect—he is the Chief of the Air Staff. I cannot remember the exact example, but the story that came out afterwards—he did say it—was that he was talking about how military leaders are constrained by what politicians say in how quickly they can respond to a crisis. Because it was not a glowingly positive message, I think he got into a bit of trouble for it. It has a bit of a chilling effect.

Alistair Bunkall: First, I second what Larisa and Deborah have said on access to senior chiefs, although I have been fortunate enough to interview some of the senior chiefs, including the CDS. However, last year I was particularly frustrated that in the Year of the Royal Navy, to the best of my knowledge—I have never been countered on this—the First Sea Lord did not do a single interview with any media outlet. I think it would help if they did speak publicly more, because I think the military's best advert is their people, and that has to be led from the top. One of the problems at the moment is that, with the British military not engaged in a large-scale deployment as it was in Afghanistan, the image of the British military fighting abroad is not on the front pages or in the TV bulletins in quite the same way. It is in a different way—it has morphed into more of a national security/counter-terrorism-type role at the moment. Events in Salisbury in the last few days have served to highlight a threat from Russia that was previously hard for some of us to understand. There has been a lot of talk about trying to win the war in the information space, but for a lot of people that is rather nebulous. If, as we are being told, the threat to this country is growing—I think we are all in agreement that it is—it would be helpful to see how and where it is growing, and what precisely this country needs to do in order to defend itself better. For example, if it is deemed that we face a very credible threat from North Korea, what do we need to defend ourselves?

Q52 **Johnny Mercer:** How does access compare in your experience? I don't know whether you have worked in other Departments, or spoken to colleagues—for example, health correspondents. How does it compare with other Departments? Do you know? Do you have any experience of that? Do you speak to your colleagues? Everyone knows who Simon



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Stevens is—if I go knocking on doors in Plymouth, people know who Simon Stevens is—but people don't know defence civil servants or the Chief of the Air Staff.

Alistair Bunkall: I am not speaking out of turn here, because I wouldn't say anything that they do not already know. I have made it clear to the Ministry of Defence that I would like to have more briefings from it. I came up with a formal suggestion of one briefing a month for defence correspondents on a range of issues. If you have 12 months a year, you could quite easily find 12 issues to brief us about. That is something that the Foreign Office do well at the moment, in my experience or in my colleagues' experience. I believe that it is something that MOD could do better at.

Q53 **Johnny Mercer:** Who controls the access that these guys have to meet you? Is it the Secretary of State's team or is it constantly within the MOD?

Larisa Brown: Any senior engagement has to be sanctioned by the Secretary of State's team. It depends. Under the previous Secretary of State, for example, he didn't like the stuff that *The Times* was reporting. I believe that made it much harder for me to get any access to anyone. This Secretary of State seems much more willing to let the chiefs speak. The fact that a lot of the chiefs have been allowed to speak and to do interviews over the past few weeks is a massive change, compared with the last five or six years even. I think that is really positive.

Deborah Haynes: Comparing the MOD with other Departments—obviously, I do some of our political side as well—I think that the MOD is much, much better than most other Government Departments that I deal with. That is not to say that it is exactly where it should be, or where we would hope it to be, but still miles ahead.

Larisa Brown: Following on from that, in terms of the press office, I don't know how many questions they must get from different journalists—

Johnny Mercer: They always come back to you.

Larisa Brown: But they always come back, and they always seem to try their best to get me the answer.

Q54 **Johnny Mercer:** So on the whole it is pretty good, but a little more access to service chiefs would be helpful?

Deborah Haynes: Yes.

Chair: A quick question from Madeleine, then Phil.

Q55 **Mrs Moon:** Prior to the events in Salisbury, how difficult had you found it to get defence questions through your editors? Is there a case of the public being less aware because editors always say, "Oh, but there's a sexy story over here about something else." What is the difficulty of getting defence stories actually out to the public?



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Deborah Haynes: It can be quite difficult, especially if it is a quite complex story. If you are talking about defence spending, that is a bit snoozy, and making it interesting can be difficult. My editor is himself a former defence correspondent and has a real passion for defence, wanting to see a strong Britain and a strong Armed Forces. In that sense, I feel that he has really enabled me to have a platform so that I can write these stories. But they can be quite complex. If we are talking about a £20 billion black hole—what does that mean? Where does it come from? How are we going to fix it? Explaining that nuance and those intricacies can be quite difficult, because it is a bit of dry subject as opposed to someone on a bombing campaign against Syria.

Chair: A quick one—

Alistair Bunkall: I was just going to say that I remember standing in Camp Bastion when the Union flag was lowered and combat operations concluded. I wondered, as a defence correspondent, what the year or two beyond would hold for me, now that finally two long-standing conflicts were at an end in Afghanistan and Iraq. But it is very busy. As I alluded to in my answer to Mr Mercer, in my opinion it has morphed from being an outright defence role to being a defence and security role. You do not need me to tell you that on a security and counter-terrorism level things are very busy, so there is no shortage of appetite.

Q56 **Phil Wilson:** We have talked about the lack of awareness among the public about defence issues. What more could the media do to try to raise the profile of defence? Indeed, what more could this Committee and Parliament do to raise awareness of defence among the public?

Alistair Bunkall: Again, picking up on one of my previous answers, I think that language is very important. This is coming from a military or MOD point of view. The way the MOD makes its argument sometimes needs to be in more simple terms. You need to try to persuade people that the MOD, despite the headlines of spending mismanagement in the past, requires more money. Why does it require more money than health? Why does it require more money from schools? They need to lay out very clearly that the threat comes from X, Y or Z and what they need to spend that money on in order to mitigate that threat.

From yourselves, I think the Committee does a very good job in trying to get to the bottom of the defence review programme, the Modernising Defence Programme and the Government's exact direction of thinking. It was a shame that you were unable to get the National Security Adviser to come and give evidence here.

Ruth Smeeth: We haven't given up yet!

Mr Francois: It is still a work in progress.

Alistair Bunkall: When the review lay entirely with the NSA, it was very hard for us—I speak for myself, but I have my two counterparts here—to get any access to the thinking within the National Security Council. In a



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scenario like that, where we might want to fall back on yourselves, to use your leverage, to get the National Security Adviser here—

- Q57 **Chair:** I would like to come in on that point. There is a particular problem because the security capability review was being conducted by the National Security Adviser under the Cabinet Office, but he does not really report to a Cabinet Minister, as such—he reports to the Prime Minister directly—so there is not a Secretary of State for Defence-like figure that we can interrogate and, presumably, that you can interrogate. That really means all you have is the National Security Adviser himself. Does he give interviews to any of you?

Deborah Haynes: I have asked. I haven't had a reply yet.

Alistair Bunkall: I think that is why you saw leaks coming out. There were people within the military establishment who wanted it to be made public that this or that was under threat.

- Q58 **Chair:** Would it be too much of a conspiracy-minded approach to say that the fact that a defence review process was handed over to a civil servant in this way meant that it was impossible to query what was going on; and that, if it had not been for leaks to the press, the first we would have known about proposals to delete one capability or another would have been when that civil servant had reported; and that there was no Minister, other than the Prime Minister, who we could have questioned about it?

Alistair Bunkall: I think leaks to the press about the fate of the amphibious fleet have certainly done an awful lot to potentially—we do not know the outcome yet—save those capabilities. I cannot say for sure whether that information would have come out in another way, but it came out in such a way partly because our access to the National Security—

- Q59 **Chair:** From your professional point of view, would it be an exaggeration to describe there being some sort of silent coup going on whereby control of defence policy, until recently, was being taken over by the security bureaucrats, rather than the politicians? Or is that an exaggeration?

Deborah Haynes: I think that is a bit of an exaggeration. The SDSRs are nominally run through the Cabinet Office, so in that sense defence does not have complete control over it anyway—it is part of the wider piece. That just does not seem to stack up, I hope.

Larisa Brown: Clearly, the MOD was very happy about having its own mini-defence review and taking back control. There probably is a feeling that they are now the masters of their own destiny to some extent, in that over the next six months they can decide what needs more attention and what does not, whereas previously it was coming from a different Department, so to that extent yes.

Deborah Haynes: Also, the fact that the capability review is fiscally neutral betrays an absolute lack of understanding by the Government or whoever set that process up of the challenge faced by defence, because

clearly it does not need a fiscally neutral solution. On the point by Mr Wilson on how to raise awareness, it would be great if the MOD does much more to give access. We keep being told there are 30 or so different operations around the world: let us see them.

In the United States, defence is such a strong topic: all the different representatives and senators have a massive defence industry and huge jobs. It is such a vote-winning topic. Surely MPs should be able to speak up about the huge defence industry that we have and the jobs that they secure. Ruth, I know you do—you're amazing and an exception.

Mr Francois: Especially those jobs in Washington.

Deborah Haynes: But it is really depressing in these defence debates that it is the same amazing MPs who love defence and understand it. What about all the other MPs who have military bases and veterans in their constituencies and the defence industry providing a huge economic lifeline to their constituencies? Where are they? Why are they not interested?

Q60 Chair: Before we on, there was no procedure for public engagement or consultation with the national security capability review. There is now for the Modernising Defence Programme. Alistair, what do you feel about the secretiveness of the former project compared with what appears to be a more open process now?

Alistair Bunkall: I'm a journalist—albeit one who has dealt with national security matters for some time—so I want to know absolutely everything, but I have to accept that I am not going to be able to know absolutely everything. Obviously, I am more comfortable now that the review lies with the MOD and is now in the hands of more traditional guardians, such as the Defence Secretary and the service chiefs. I hope that we have greater transparency as a result. To echo what Deborah said, General Sir Chris Deverell spoke the other day, and Vice Chief of the Defence Staff General Gordon Messenger spoke, too. It was refreshing to see one of the junior Ministers, Tobias Ellwood—I say junior only in that he is not Secretary of State—saying that he believes that more money needs to be found for the defence budget. Those are the sort of things that did not happen even six months ago.

To pick up on what was said previously, there are 9,000 personnel deployed around the world, and 26 operations in 25 different countries. I would like to see people banging down my door offering, "If you want to go and see them here, go and see them here". But there is none of that at the moment.

Q61 Chair: Do any of you think that there is a certain irony in the previous Secretary of State for Defence, Sir Michael Fallon, having now come out and made a speech saying that we should spend 2.5% of GDP on defence by the end of this Parliament?

Larisa Brown: I think there has been a lot of criticism but, in October at the Conservative conference, Sir Michael Fallon did come out and say that the Department needed more money to deal with the rising threats.



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Chair: I think he used the phrase “at least 2%”, rather than 2%, which is what he always said before.

Larisa Brown: He said in an evening briefing that later on that he thought there should be more money for his Department.

Johnny Mercer: He initially came out with 2% as a floor.

Chair: No—Gavin Williamson said that in his first outing.

Deborah Haynes: Michael Fallon did fight defence’s corner in terms of the 2015 review, and making sure that Defence was one of the protected Departments, which was fantastic. Where it all went wrong is when he continued that narrative that everything is rosy when everything was the complete opposite of rosy.

Q62 **Gavin Robinson:** I am not sure how far we will get with this question, given the reticence to highlight sacred cows.

Mr Francois: Deborah has already wiped out the army, of course.

Deborah Haynes: It wasn’t that. Please don’t say that.

Q63 **Gavin Robinson:** What is your understanding of the scale of the changes to capability and force structures that are currently being considered under the national security and capability review?

Deborah Haynes: Obviously, the scale of what was being considered under the NSCR—I hate acronyms—was soul-crushingly awful. But that has been stopped, or at least there has been a stay of execution, since they have taken defence out of that process. Genuinely, right now, there are teams of people across the military that are going through the questions they have been set, which are “What are the threats?” and “What capability do we need to meet those threats?” And then, supposedly, they answer those questions and then come up with how much money that is going to cost. My understanding is that there is a realisation that money has to come into this. Even if, as everyone hopes, Philip Hammond does give more money to defence, I believe that there are still some difficult choices that have to be made, which will require cuts to some extent. However, I think it is important that the MOD is able to explain to the public—to avoid hysterical “Ah! Thousands of troops are going!” headlines—the strategic basis on which it is changing its force structure in order to deliver a more capable force. That is, it is important to show that it is embracing innovation, cyber and space, as well as maintaining conventional capability in a meaningful mass.

Q64 **Gavin Robinson:** Do either of you dissent from that, or wish to add to it?

Larisa Brown: I was just going to say that Philip Hammond made it clear on the Andrew Marr show on Sunday that there was light at the end at the tunnel and there might be more money for public finances. If I was to predict the future, I would think that defence will get some more money. But clearly, the NAO report published in January showed that there was a potential black hole of £20 billion. Of course, no one in their right mind



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would think that Hammond is going to cough up £20 billion for defence. As Debbie said, clearly some difficult decisions still have to be made and potentially big things will be cut in order to invest more in, for example, CBRN capabilities and cyber.

Alistair Bunkall: There is no blank cheque and I think the Treasury has every right to ask the MOD very strongly how it will spend the money and how the Treasury can rely on it to spend it in a sensible and efficient manner. I think the NAO report was damning. It is probably deemed extraordinary by a lot of us that there was not proper hedging done to allow for a fall in the pound against the dollar, albeit no one foresaw quite as dramatic a fall. Nevertheless, it has left the defence budget in a very tricky position. It is interesting that, of the four main pillars of the Modernising Defence Programme, only one is on capability. I think that is the one that will get the most focus, but if it is to be a truly revolutionary defence review, then it really needs to focus on where efficiencies are made and then carry that through.

Deborah Haynes: They keep on making a big thing about the Forex, but the contribution of foreign exchange to the gap, in terms of the ambition and the money, is not the biggest. The biggest by far is the efficiency target and the ability to meet that target, which apparently the defence review is going to be coming up with a more coherent plan to meet, to get more efficiency without losing capability. The other one is, once again, the Department and the military being over-optimistic about the cost of programmes, so when the reality comes, it is actually much more. Also, the absolute failure to cost support fairly and transparently. For example, how much is F-35 support going to cost? I think it is very easy for them to go, "Oh yes, it's the foreign exchange," and it's not just the foreign exchange.

Q65 **Gavin Robinson:** As a segue to that, can I ask when any of you last wrote a piece on the spending bonanza we got because the pound was in a stronger position? Did you?

Deborah Haynes: No.

Q66 **Gavin Robinson:** No, it doesn't happen. It tends to be an excuse in these situations.

Alistair Bunkall: When was the pound last in a very strong position?

Gavin Robinson: Two dollars to the pound.

Q67 **Mrs Moon:** Do you feel there has been a different approach to engagement with you since the change to the Modernising Defence Programme? How does that engagement compare with the engagement on past defence reviews? Is there a different relationship between you and the MOD?

Deborah Haynes: It all depends on the character of the Secretary of State. He dictates the engagement policy, and the press office has to follow his direction. Under the current Defence Secretary there seems to be a greater desire to acknowledge the difficult challenges, whereas before



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I would come to the press office and say, "I've heard this," and be met with a wall.

Mrs Moon: Denial?

Deborah Haynes: Yes, denial, and a statement like, "We've got a rising budget, £178 billion over the next 10 years, blah, blah, blah," which doesn't actually mean anything. You say, "Okay, that's great, but what about this?" It doesn't answer the question. There is now a desire to acknowledge that there is a problem and that they are dealing with it. That is an interesting evolution, and we will see what happens. I think it is going to become more difficult in the summer, when we actually see the product of the work. If it is more of the same, without a better answer—not a genuine efficiency programme and restructuring, which is what we are told is going to happen, accompanied by more money—we will see how the new engagement survives.

Q68 **Mrs Moon:** Alistair, do you think it is a healthier debate?

Alistair Bunkall: Yes and no. Any public debate over an event like this is right and proper and good. It has been going on for far too long. I am concerned about members of the Armed Forces and their families, who have been facing possible job cuts. If I were a member of the amphibious fleet, for example, and the potential axe had been hanging over my career for some time, I think I would be fairly annoyed about the length of time for which there has been uncertainty. There is a renewed impetus now that the Modernising Defence Programme has gone into the arms of the MOD. I think that has come from the top down. There is perhaps a feeling—I am reading the runes here—that we know that there will be a conclusion to this and we will start to see the flesh of it around the NATO summit in the summer. I would be very surprised if the Prime Minister went to Brussels for the NATO summit to deliver bad news.

Q69 **Martin Docherty-Hughes:** Alistair, you published an article last night that was quite striking in terms of how it held senior members of the MOD to account on their engagement with journalists. I wonder whether you want to say a wee bit more about some of the barriers they face, being at the top of the services, with engaging with you as a journalist. I am mindful of when Michael Fallon, when he was Secretary of State, was interviewed—I think it was by Bernard Ponsonby from STV—on the banks of the Clyde and it was an unmitigated disaster. They were difficult discussions, whether or not you agree with the answers that were given. There is an element of us not wanting to have a difficult discussion under the gaze of good journalistic integrity because it would force that discussion out into the open. Is that really the barrier that we are facing?

Alistair Bunkall: I am rather dismayed that the public conversation and debate over defence spending, the defence budget and defence capabilities always seems to get concentrated towards the end of a pyramid—normally a five-year pyramid, but in this case it has been shorter. It would be healthier for everybody if a conversation like this could be ongoing, regardless of the fact that we have a defence review



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currently under way. I do feel that things have been brought into sharp focus, as is natural, because of the defence review and the prospect of it being fiscally neutral. It is easy to shy away from the difficult questions, and in the past—you alluded to the article I wrote—it was very hard to get any time to interview the senior service chiefs. The point about the article I wrote was that these are all men—as they are—who are highly experienced, highly paid and, in my experience, highly intelligent. They are good advocates for their service. Most of them are pretty good on TV, from my perspective—I don't know what my colleagues feel about them being good interviewees. I could not see any reason why they were not pushed forward more, or allowed to be pushed forward more, to talk about the work that the Armed Forces do, because undoubtedly the British Armed Forces have a very good story to tell, and I worry that that story, for too long in recent years, has been told by the politicians and not by the services themselves.

Q70 Ruth Smeeth: Building on that, we obviously have a much more combative Secretary of State than we did six months ago. The service chiefs have been out and about a little more. Is this really a PR shift or is it just a case of, "Well, we are doing the modernising programme"? And do you think they can justify asking for more money, given all the reports and the overspend on so many programmes. Can we get to a point that will justify the extra money that we need, even with this very nice PR trip that we're currently on? I'm asking Deborah.

Deborah Haynes: Thanks, Ruth! I thought you made a really good point in one of the sessions: how can you possibly ask for more money when you look at the mess with Annington Homes? That was shocking—was the figure £4 billion or something? That's an insane amount of money that we lost.

It is really difficult. There are so many examples of money not being spent very well, so when it comes to people going to the Treasury to ask for more, you can almost imagine the pinstripe warriors at the Treasury rolling their eyes and putting their heads in their hands. It is a difficult one. Taking that as read—the MOD hasn't got a very good record, although it has improved, on spending its money—I think the reality that the chiefs are able to talk to is the threat and the need to be able to have the capability to respond to the threat. If the Modernising Defence review is able to demonstrate a fundamental reordering and restructuring that will make defence more efficient by design—at the moment, a lot of the structure means that it's just inefficient by default—I think that could, maybe, win some confidence from the Treasury, and that will help them with the argument, which is very real, that there is a threat and the force structure that we are afforded to deliver at the moment is insufficient to be able to deter and, if necessary, respond.

Larisa Brown: Could I add to that? There has been a shift, but I don't think it's just about a PR opportunity. I think there is recognition that public debate is good and is healthy; and also we hear from the chiefs and members of the military that there is an information war going on. You have seen that in the last few days with Russia's reaction to the

allegations about the poisoning of Skripal. By allowing us to speak to the chiefs and get all that information, you are debunking the myths and the fake news put out by Russian troll factories and things, so I think there is a wider strategy than just a PR opportunity.

- Q71 **Ruth Smeeth:** This is obviously to all of you, but on that, the Secretary of State made a big deal about saving two attack dogs. That was just a PR stunt, versus the genuine, real issues that we are now talking about. So the credibility factor that is within this, too, adds to it, but that is a personal view, obviously.

Alistair Bunkall: The Defence Secretary is the Defence Secretary and is a politician. He knows, as someone relatively new in the job and having inherited a defence review halfway through, albeit it has now morphed, that he will be judged on a successful defence review—he will want a successful outcome from it, which is only natural. You could describe what is going on now as PR or as a new Secretary of State who is trying to get on the front foot in order to make the case in order to win the argument nationally, within Parliament and within his own Government.

I completely take your point: does defence deserve more money—

Ruth Smeeth: Oh, I think it does.

Alistair Bunkall: —given the mismanagement of spending. But you could also flip the question on its head and say, “Well, what if you didn’t give defence more money? Given the current threats facing this country, what then?” Just forget for one moment that there has been a mismanagement of the budget in recent years. If that was not the case, would you still be asking for more money for defence? In the current climate, I think most people would be saying, yes, defence does need more money. My concern is that there is going to be a lot of blood spilt and it will get enough money to basically stand still and to fulfil the obligations that are already in the pipeline anyway.

Ruth Smeeth: Not to modernise.

Alistair Bunkall: There are ways of modernising without actually having more money. You can look at the internal structures that you have already and your working practices already. They have done things like creating the 77 Brigade to try to address information warfare. I do not think modernisation has to equal more money, but more money helps.

- Q72 **Ruth Smeeth:** The Pentagon has just appointed an audit process to find where its overspend is. Four thousand accountants over five years are going to crawl over the budget. That shows the scale of the budget—I don’t think with 4,000 that would take us five years. That is how you modernise a budget, surely. You invest and find the holes and gaps.

Alistair Bunkall: There has been elements of that. I am aware that accountants went into RAF Brize Norton for many years up until quite recently and looked at the way the RAF structured its operations both within that airfield hub and within the wider service. Accountants have



looked over the books. If you get an accountant and a service chief, the accountant can always make more cuts and the service chief is always going to want more money. That is a clash that you will probably never ever resolve. As I said earlier, one of the major successes from this defence review, if it can achieve it, will be to highlight efficiency savings that don't impact operational capability but in the long run put the defence budget in a far better state and, by connection, put the entire Armed Forces in a far better and more efficient state.

Deborah Haynes: Although they have been trying to do that for years. You had the Levene reforms that devolved the budgets to the different frontline commands, but did they devolve the competencies to be able to manage the budgets? And what about at the centre? We are told that, as part of the Modernising Defence Programme, we will see a beefing up of the muscle in the centre, which is much needed, in order to be able to have a more coherent efficiency programme. Stephen Lovegrove at RUSI last week was very forthright in admitting that there was overlap with the efficiency programmes and that they were tangled in a knot. He used some analogy about a campfire, I think, to try to visualise the unknotting that urgently needs to happen. They have appointed a chief operating officer. Maybe he will be able to deliver some magic solutions. There are reports that have been drawn up to offer some ideas about how to get real efficiency, but that is going to involve sacred cows. It is not about equipment—it is sacred cows in terms of HR policy, payroll policy, IT systems. If you could make uniform the information systems, if you could make defence forecasts more using algorithms that are more modern, you could find efficiencies that way. There is so much inertia in the system and reluctance and conservatism to change that I think really causes problems.

Larisa Brown: Can I just come in on the dog point?

Chair: Very briefly, please.

Larisa Brown: Sorry—very briefly. I think sometimes people assume that members of the public want to read about the serious nature of defence and cuts. Actually, a lot of people think that the idea that the Ministry of Defence is killing dogs because they are too dangerous, for example, when they have won awards in Afghanistan or Iraq is actually quite an important issue. I would just say that we don't want to always write about cuts and the more serious nature of defence. Sometimes it is better and it is more engaging for our readers.

Ruth Smeeth: I have no doubt about that.

Q73 **John Spellar:** We had the welcome removal of defence from the national security review. Looking forward, do you think that the MOD can or should be basically responsible for future reviews?

Deborah Haynes: No, because I think the whole premise of the SDSR structure is for it to be a pan-Whitehall thing. When they gave evidence before your Committee, or another Committee, about pulling out of the



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defence review, it was very clear that, even though the MDP is separate, it is still feeding into the conclusions of the capability review. It is important to keep that cross-Whitehall thing, because there is so much overlap between what defence does and what the Foreign Office, DFID and the agencies do. It does not make sense for it to all be bespoke. However, it does make sense for defence to have a lot of control.

- Q74 **Chair:** But won't any of you worry that, when the National Security Adviser did make an appearance before the Joint Committee on the National Security Strategy in December and was asked whether he had the power to recommend an increase in defence spending, he said he did have that power but it was not a conclusion he expected to reach? Yet each of you seems to be agreeing that more money needs to be spent on defence. Is there not a problem when the advocacy of the defence budget is taken away from the Ministry of Defence?

Deborah Haynes: Massively. And I thought that was incredible evidence, because I did not understand—

- Q75 **Chair:** Incredible in which sense?

Deborah Haynes: He is a super-smart guy, so I assume that—I do not know what he based that conclusion on, but either someone was not telling him the real problems gripping defence or he did not think that that was important enough an issue to ask for more money. I have not spoken to him so I do not know the answer is—

Chair: We haven't yet, but we hope to do so.

Deborah Haynes: It is a really good point that you make.

- Q76 **Chair:** Any other comments on that?

Alistair Bunkall: Defence reviews have a tendency to become over-politicised. I tend to worry about the turnover in personnel from review to review, on the political side but often on the Armed Forces side and on the civil service side. One more point: I think it is a failing of the national security review that it was not able to complete successfully with defence as a part of it, and as the MOD is a full contributor.

Chair: The final question is from Martin.

- Q77 **Martin Docherty-Hughes:** What does the Ministry of Defence need to do to improve external engagement and communication?

Larisa Brown: Access, in one word. We have quite clearly made the case that, by letting us go and see what the troops are doing—they are in 25 different countries—we get to write about all the positive stuff that soldiers do. We do not get enough of it at the moment.

Deborah Haynes: I totally agree with Larisa. But also, I would like a loosening of this insane paranoia and control freakery over letting senior military talk. It is really interesting that other NATO countries allow their chiefs to talk without having a press officer present, but in the UK every



single media engagement is managed far too much—there is far too much control.

Alistair Bunkall: I was going to say “take risks” but I will rephrase that: be less risk-averse. Accept that the news will not always be positive, and accept that things will go wrong but the long-term view of the British Armed Forces will probably be positive.

Q78 **Martin Docherty-Hughes:** On that note, can I ask you briefly to turn the question on its head, to internal communication? One of the big problems we have is around things like retention.

Chair: Martin, we really are up against it.

Martin Docherty-Hughes: Very briefly, when looking at internal communication I look at countries like Denmark, where they do pay negotiations separately, whereas the MOD gets a block grant. If we are having that internal discussion on different elements, we can see the MOD block grant as it really is and put aside things like pay negotiations, which really do deal with the bare bones of retention and morale for our services.

Alistair Bunkall: Very briefly, the Danish model is one that is worth looking at, but it has its own flaws. In terms of internal communications, I would always go back to this: the best advert for the Armed Forces is the people who serve in it, and I would give them greater freedom to advocate for the profession they are involved in.

Chair: On that positive note, I thank all three of you. We are all going to make rather speedy exits so as to be in the Chamber in time. I am very grateful to colleagues on the Committee and, above all, to our panellists for enabling us to finish on time and yet having conveyed such a wealth of information that will be of great help in the compilation of our report.