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Fringe 2004

party conference fringe 2004



The Conservative Party fringe meeting at the Annual Conference 2004 sponsored by [EADS](#).

From left to right:

Dr. Julian Lewis M.P., Parliamentary Chairman of First Defence;
Andrew Hargreaves, UK Chairman of EADS;
Caroline Flynn-MacLeod, Director of First Defence

The Hon. Nicholas Soames MP, Shadow Secretary of State for Defence, addressed the First Defence fringe meeting on a "Conservative Vision for Defence" at Conservative Party Conference in Bournemouth on the 6th October 2004
See text below

also link to
[Text of Main Conference Speech by the Shadow Secretary of State for Defence](#)



Introduction

No speech on defence could possibly commence without the warmest tribute to our Armed Forces and their families and all who support them.

The British Armed Forces have a reputation for excellence and skill at arms that is unrivalled throughout the world; indeed they are regarded as the benchmark by which all other armed forces are judged. Of all the great institutions in this country they have proved time and time again at all levels to be the most adaptable and flexible, and almost certainly the most successful and they have never let us down. We salute them.

And to show our unswerving commitment to our Armed Forces and in recognition of detailed assessment of their now urgent requirements, as well as the necessary modernisation of our Armed Forces, a few days ago we announced plans for increased defence spending.

What will this announcement mean for our Armed Forces when we are in power?

- £2.7bn in cash more than Labour on new capability for the front line between now and 2008.
- Reversal of cuts in overstretched frontline announced by the Government.
- Modern and efficient logistics services and equipment.
- A stronger frontline and better security for the UK.
- Continuing the necessary military transformation programme.

Security issues today

It goes without saying that in the last decade the most astonishing changes have taken place. The policy and security environment that I dealt with as a Defence Minister in the mid 90s and the times we live in now could scarcely be more different.

During the Cold War, our security environment had at least the appearance of some predictability. We knew our adversary, his aims and his capability. We understood the threat and developed an effective strategy to deter and eventually to defeat it.

But now, in the great fog of uncertainties that marks 21st Century, the threat is not nearly as well defined.

We live in an age of great unpredictability and considerable danger where the proliferation of WMD, international terrorism and regional instabilities combined with civil strife, represent the new security challenges with which we wrestle and for which we must plan. And we must bear in mind that the war against terrorism is unquestionably a war of attrition.

And when I speak about this new security background I see it as a common framework for all. Not, as some would describe it, an American projection of an American national view.

Indeed, in its deeper sense, it is the common security backdrop not just for Britain and the United States, but for all nations and people concerned with world order.

It is this background that has defined the war on terrorism, a war that knows of no front-lines, knows of no boundary and no rules.

It is against this scenario that our Armed Forces have to operate and plan.

Our Armed Forces

In a world where cynicism, pessimism and ignorance seem to govern the news agenda we would do well to remember the crucially important role that Britain plays in the wider world.

We are permanent members of the UN Security Council.

We are the leading European member of NATO.

We are one of the most important members of the European Union.

We are a member of the Group of Eight most powerful economies in the World. Our Queen is head of the Commonwealth which, incidentally, comprises one-third of the people living on this earth, a grossly underestimated asset for using our influence around the world.

All these provide us with a unique means of disseminating our ideas and influencing events, as well as promoting our international interests and trade. The deployment of our Armed Forces reflects these responsibilities and interests.

The definition and range of Britain's interests over the last 6 years has continued to widen beyond even that foretold in the SDR and with it the military tasks demanded of our Armed Forces have become more and more intensive.

We have looked at these assumptions with the greatest care and see little prospect in doing any less and every likelihood of being asked to do more.

After all we have been involved in 4 wars in 5 years. The Armed Forces have standing home commitments including homeland defence, standing overseas commitments, and contingent operations overseas. Indeed the Government appears to be hyper interventionist.

And whilst our forces have never been so busy with deployments coming thick and fast the overall size of the armed forces and indeed of some of their capabilities is in unacceptable decline.

The recent White Paper on defence, entitled Delivering Security in a Changing World - Future Capabilities, calls for a "shift away from an emphasis on numbers of platforms and of people to a new emphasis on effects and outcomes, and on the exploitation of the opportunities presented by new technologies and network enabled capability."

The central theme of this offering is that of rebalancing and transformation.

There are indeed some good initiatives in the White Paper and those we will support. It is clearly important to use the best technology in the most useful way we can both to enhance our ability to project power and to influence events.

There is also a need for rebalancing to meet the demands of the more likely operations: the Armed Forces do need to be more agile and more usable; we need to ensure that our forces are broadly specialized for fighting low-tech guerrilla wars, confronting terrorism and handling less conventional threats. Yet at the same time they must retain their traditional and irreplaceable skills in the ability to fight the high intensity battle and then revert to the peacekeeping role.

There is a need for transformation both at home and abroad but the balance of forces, skills and capabilities must be right.

As Admiral Giambastiani, of Allied Command for Transformation told a conference the other day: "If you do not like transformation, you will like irrelevance a hell of a lot less".

So it does matter. But boots on the ground matter too.

Accordingly when speaking about Network Enabled Capability, for example, it is essential its advantages and capabilities are most carefully balanced with manpower considerations.

Network Enabled capability plus fewer ships is most emphatically not an improvement in capability.

America's 'new way of war', which includes concepts like 'effects-based operations' and 'network-centric warfare' should not cloud the fact that whilst a new technology can be crucial asset at a tactical level it should not be confused with ensuring that our Armed Forces have sufficient manpower and equipment to carry out the jobs for which we assess they are likely to be.

As we have seen from the operations in Afghanistan and Iraq intense war fighting, the conducting of peace support operations and providing humanitarian aid can all take place in the same theatre of operations, in the same province, or indeed in the same town in a very short period of time.

It is therefore essential to retain a balance of forces with a balance of capabilities that are fixed in such a way that will enable our troops to go from high intensity warfare to low level type operations sometimes within a matter of days.

The reduction in the size of the Army in general therefore, and the infantry in particular from a manpower target of 108,500 to the present size of 103,500 and a proposed established strength of 102,000 (a cut of 6500 men) seems to me to be deeply foolish.

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Nicholas Soames: Action on Defence and Security

"May I first introduce my excellent Defence Team; Keith Simpson, Gerald Howarth, Andrew Robathan and I want to acknowledge special help from the great Dr Julian Lewis and Patrick Mercer.

"On Sunday, 6th June this year Michael Howard and I had the honour to be present when the Sovereign took the salute at the march past of her Normandy Veterans in the town square at Arramanches.

"No-one who saw it will ever forget the rank upon rank of veterans parading before their Queen, to give due honour to worthy pride and still, in many cases, unforgettable sadness at the loss of their comrades who fell on D Day and beyond, during the greatest feat of combined operations ever undertaken.

"All of us will have reflected then at the supreme gallantry and astonishing endurance of the D Day Veterans in circumstances which are today almost beyond the call of modern imagination.

"For it is today the successors of that wartime generation, in the Royal Navy, the Army and the Royal Air Force who are grappling with the dangerous and highly volatile circumstances of counter insurgency operations in Iraq, where 68 British servicemen have given their lives:



who are deployed in Afghanistan; in Bosnia; in Kosovo; in Cyprus; in Northern Ireland and elsewhere, and whose professionalism, courage and fortitude we salute, and to whose families of whom these days to much is being asked and who keep the home fires burning, this conference sends our warmest good wishes.

"In Southern Iraq this afternoon throughout the British area of responsibility supported by the pilots and groundcrew of the Royal Air Force, the Princess of Wales' Royal Regiment and its Battle Group in Al Amarah, who have greatly distinguished themselves in a very tough and demanding deployment; the Battle Groups of the Cheshire Regiment, the Royal Horse Artillery, the Royal Welsh Fusiliers and the Black Watch together with squadrons of the Household Cavalry and Queen's Royal Lancers supported by the Sappers, the REME, the logisticians and of course very importantly our intelligence people, together with their absolutely indispensable and highly professional comrades in the Territorial Army, are doing wonders for the name and fame of Britain, and are every day proving what a magnificent asset for this country are the Armed Forces of the Crown.

"The modern British serviceman and woman, like their forebears, have a reputation for excellence that is unrivalled throughout the world.

"And I want this afternoon to give you an absolute assurance; under the next Conservative Government they will no longer be taken for granted as they are today by an ungrateful and shamefully ignorant Labour Government.

"For the Armed Forces have never let Britain down. In the last few years, quite apart from operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, they have quite literally saved Sierra Leone from certain self-destruction: they helped to secure peace and good order in East Timor: and they brought freedom to Kosovo.

"At home they have bailed out the Government over its dismal failure and astonishing incompetence in dealing with the foot and mouth epidemic and the fire strikes.

"And what has been the Government's big reward for all that they have most loyally and efficiently delivered?

"It has been to axe manpower from the Army..... and ships, aircraft and men from the Navy and the Air Force.

"It is to the eternal shame of a thoroughly complacent and pedestrian Secretary of State that he has been totally incapable of standing up for the Armed Forces and is simply too wet to take on our dysfunctional Chancellor in the Services' interests.

"Both Geoff Hoon and the Ministry of Defence have been severely criticised by the Defence Select Committee, by the Public Accounts Committee and by the National Audit Office for persistently ignoring the lessons learnt of previous operations, and for unforgivably failing to address serious shortcomings in equipment, procurement and logistics.

"In particular Hoon stands guilty of not ensuring that service personnel received the equipment that they needed on operations including in Iraq, desert boots and combat kit, flak jackets, and most shamefully given the threat adequate chemical and biological protection equipment and other critical items.

"This was an abject failure on the part of Ministers and in Government we will never again permit it to happen. If troops do not get the equipment they need when they put their lives on the line, then Ministers, senior servicemen and officials will be held fully accountable.

"Ladies and Gentlemen, on Hoon's watch each of the services has declined to a size lower than ever before.

"The frontline fighting strength of the Royal Navy is now set to fall below that of the French fleet for the first time since the 17th century.

"The Government plans to decommission 3 destroyers and 3 frigates, one of them only eight years old. They are also taking out of service all the Naval Sea Harriers thus denying our aircraft carriers essential protection.

"He calls it rebalancing, we call it cuts.

"On Hoon's watch 4 of our great infantry battalions are to be axed and the unique strength of our regimental system which has given so much in war and peace will be eroded. We will fight this every step of the way in Parliament and in the country because it is the wrong thing to do.

"Hoon calls it restructuring, we call it cuts.

"On Hoon's watch the RAF will lose all its remaining Jaguar squadrons, a squadron of air defence Tornados, and Nimrod aircraft.

"He calls it modernisation, we call it cuts.

"Indeed Ladies and Gentlemen, the latest round of defence cuts announced in July of this year are the seventh since this Government came to power. Five wars – seven rounds of cuts what an abysmal record.

"With all the operations that the Armed Forces are undertaking, with all the deployments required of them, they are today significantly undermanned, severely overstretched and under funded.

"So when we take office we will put this right.

We will increase defence spending by £2.7 billion more on frontline services than Labour's planned expenditure over the next three years.

"We will increase our resources to match our commitments, and we will streamline the whole business of defence and exploit to the full the potential of the new defence technologies.

"For months it has been Labour's big lie that we will cut defence. After this announcement that lie can never be pedalled again.

"Thanks to the work of the James Review on Public Expenditure, and to the support for our Armed Forces by Michael Howard and Oliver Letwin, we will be able to transfer savings from other departments into the defence budget as well as making major savings in the vast and inefficient bureaucracy of the Ministry of Defence.

"As a result of this settlement we will retain the infantry regiments that Labour propose to do away with, thus ensuring that we will have enough boots on the ground to meet our demanding commitments.

"We will restore the military training programme decimated by Labour but so vital for the safety and effectiveness of our servicemen.

"We will review sustainability and put in place a modern and efficient system of logistics across the three Services.

"The First Sea Lord has said, "No matter how good a ship is it can only be in so many places at any one time".

"We agree with that.

"We will therefore keep the three Type 23 frigates: Grafton, Marlborough and Norfolk, which are to be axed by Labour thus restoring essential capability at a time of heightened threat.

"We will exploit and encourage our cutting edge defence expertise and research, and seek to develop a genuine and much more effective partnership with Britain's

highly successful defence industry and thus improve the whole process of procurement.

"Ladies and Gentlemen, in the great fog of uncertainty that marks the 21st century, unlike the Cold War, the threats to our country and to our interests overseas are not nearly so well defined.

"The architects of these new threats seek no armistice: they have no territory to defend, no population to answer to and a very large pool in which to fish.

"You may be absolutely assured that an incoming Conservative Government will pay the premium on the most important insurance policy that our country can have – the policy which enables us to deter or defeat those who wish to do us harm.

"Our Armed Forces, by their everyday excellence, by their bravery on operations, by their steadiness in the most difficult and hostile circumstances, by their determination and above all by their humanity, have proved again and again how irreplaceable and how important they are in our national life and for our international interests.

"Thus, Chairman, Ladies and Gentlemen it will be for us an article of faith that when we come to power again, as surely we will, we will reaffirm by our actions that our Party regards the defence of the realm as the first duty of Government and that we will do right by our superb Armed Forces."

ENDS

For further information, please contact David Hart on 07951 574 137

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