UK Defence Secretary Ben Wallace demands up to £11 billion extra for military budget

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UK Defence Secretary Ben Wallace has denied speculation that he will resign if Rishi Sunak's Conservative government does not commit to ramping up military spending to levels not seen since World War II.

The budget to be presented next month is being cast as putting the nation on a "war footing", with leading military figures and hawks within the political elite demanding billions of pounds are immediately handed over to the Ministry of Defence (MoD).

The ground is being prepared to divert vast sums from health care, education, welfare benefits and housing to the war machine, at devastating cost to millions of workers already crushed by 15 years of unrelenting austerity and a surge in the cost of living.

On Tuesday, the *Times* reported that Wallace "is pressing [Chancellor] Jeremy Hunt to increase the defence budget by between £8 billion and £11 billion over the next two years to avoid deep cuts to the armed forces."

It noted, "The Ministry of Defence wants its budget to rise by as much as a fifth to cover the costs of inflation, foreign exchange fluctuations and the higher cost of funding Nato and Ukraine."

Under current plans the "defence budget is set to rise by just £700 million over the next two years."

In December Wallace and the head of the armed forces, Admiral Sir Tony Radakin, visited Downing Street to lay out the case for the "UK military's need for money." According to reports, Wallace threatened to resign last November as part of his campaign to ensure the military is handed billions. He has spent months enlisting the support of senior Conservative MPs, to demand the military budget is boosted and Sunak reverses planned armed forces cuts, including a decision to reduce the number of the Army's regular troops from 76,000 to 73,000 by 2025. Other demands include a "review" of plans to slash the number of tanks. The *Times* reported that under "existing plans, just 148 out of a fleet of 227 Challenger 2 tanks will be upgraded to Challenger 3 tanks, at a cost of about £1.3 billion."

On taking office, Sunak refused to commit to his predecessor Liz Truss's pledge to increase military spending to 3 percent of GDP by 2030—a staggering uplift in money terms of £158 billion. He said he would not back "arbitrary" defence spending targets and any increase in funding would have to follow a new Defence Review.

The Defence Review will be published on March 7, one week before Hunt's next major budget. Hunt previously declared his support for defence spending to increase to 4 percent of GDP, surpassing Truss's pledge.

Speaking to *Sky News* Wednesday, Wallace piled further pressure on Sunak and Hunt, declaring he was in "uphill battle" with the Treasury over increasing military spending. "It's the right thing that the secretary of state will argue for an increase to meet their priorities. And of course, between now and the Budget, I've got lots of time and lots of meetings with the chancellor to make sure that we try and come to a deal on it," he said.

Wallace was clearer in spelling out what this means for the working class. For decades, "since 1991, since the end of the Cold War," there had been "a consistent, effectively raiding of the defence budget over time." With the war against Russia, the military has to be prioritised to confront "growing" threats.

"Maybe a peace dividend was appropriate straight after the Cold War. We had huge armies in Europe. The Cold War finished and it was right that the taxpayer who'd invested in defence got a return on that.

"The problem is that continued and has continued for many decades as the threat has increased. And I've been very open here that the threat has increased."

Wallace was echoing Britain's main defence and security think-tank, Royal United Services Institute which, hailing Truss's pledge, declared that the post-war "peace dividend" was over.

A graduate of the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst and a former Captain in the Scots Guards, Wallace became defence Secretary in 2019 under Boris Johnson and has retained the position despite the extraordinary political turmoil which saw last July's resignation of Johnson; the six-

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week term in office of Truss and her replacement Sunak.

Wallace was kept in place due to his intimate involvement with provocations against Russia, leading to NATO's de facto war in Ukraine. He is trusted by Washington to maintain Britain as a partner in provocations against Moscow and the second largest provider—after Washington—of weapons of war to Ukraine.

The *Times*, owned by billionaire oligarch Rupert Murdoch, has led an incessant campaign for more military spending, foregrounding Wallace's demands of the Treasury. On Monday, an MoD source told the newspaper "the request was not a 'shopping list' of new equipment. 'It's the cost of standing still,' they said…. 'The Ministry of Defence is particularly exposed to inflation because of the amount it spends on military kit. The world has become significantly more dangerous, not less. It's time to invest.'"

Top military figures have outlined doomsday scenarios for the armed forces if the Treasury's coffers are not opened up. Retired General Sir Richard Shirreff, formerly Nato's Deputy Supreme Allied Commander Europe, stated this month, "Our Army has been hollowed out."

"Britain is more vulnerable than it has been at any time since the 1930s," he added. "As it stands we no longer have the troops, the kit or the ammunition to defend ourselves. It is a truly perilous and unforgivable situation."

Leading Tory MPs backing Wallace include Tobias Ellwood, another former army veteran and chairman of Parliament's Defence Select Committee. He told *Sky News* last month, "The army is in a dire state…. It is up to the Treasury and Number 10 to recognise the world is changing. We are now at war in Europe. We need to move to a war footing."

Figures in the US military have also intervened on behalf of Wallace. Deborah Haynes, a Sky News journalist with close connections to the MoD and intelligence agencies, reported on January 30 the comments of an anonymous "senior US general" who told Wallace the British Army was no longer regarded as a "tier one force", saying "It's barely tier two."

Her article cited an MoD source who said, "We have a wartime prime minister and a wartime chancellor.

"History will look back at the choices they make in the coming weeks as fundamental to whether this government genuinely believes that its primary duty is the defence of the realm or whether that is just a slogan to be given lip service."

Sky News produced a film urging more arms spending, "Is The Army Fighting Fit?", backed by several Haynes articles including, "Why spectre of British military becoming a 'hollow force' is now a reality".

Other pieces took up the complaint that defence cuts were preventing British imperialism from intervening effectively in the war against Russia and threatening its commitment to exceed the £2.3 billion in military hardware already handed over to Kiev. Each concluded that the era in which welfare state spending was allowed to rise while the defence budget fell, was over.

"What is the current state of the British armed forces?" by Sky News data journalist Saywah Mahmood, stated, "In 2021, the UK spent 2.2% of its Gross Domestic Product on defence, amounting to about £45.9bn.

"However, this number has fallen since the mid-1950s. In the financial year ending in 1956, the UK spent just under 8% of its GDP on defence and in 1980 it was 4.1%. Since 2000, the proportion has remained around the 2% mark.

"In comparison, health spending as a proportion of GDP in 1956 was just under 3% and in 2020 this figure jumped to over 7%."

In its report on Wallace demanding extra spending, the *Times* included a graph showing public expenditure for the top six departmental groups in 2021-22. Health and Social Care was in first place at £274.7 billion, with Work and Pensions in second place at £225.7 billion. Education spending, even with a cut of over 5 percent from the previous year, accounted for £120.2 billion in spending. Below all these was defence spending, accounting for £71.4 billion (which included an 18 percent increase put in place by the Johnson government).

Institute for Fiscal Studies Senior Research Economist Ben Zaranko wrote in *The Conversation* last March, "Defence cuts effectively paid for UK welfare state for 60 years—but that looks impossible after Ukraine".

The main parties of the political elite, Tory and Labour, are seeking to outdo each other as to who can be entrusted carry out the attacks on the working class required to slash social spending to fund a surge in militarism and war against Russia.

Speaking at RUSI this month Labour's Shadow Defence Secretary John Healey praised Truss for pledging to increase spending to 3 percent, castigating Sunak because, "Since the invasion, there has been no new money allocated to the defence budget. None."

The main problem arising because the government "crashed the economy" was that it "sent inflation soaring" so that "defence budgets are being squeezed even further, just as threats against the UK are increasing."

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