

UK Prime Minister Rishi Sunak pledges to bring in National Service for 18-year-olds

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Britain's Conservative Prime Minister Rishi Sunak has said he would introduce National Service for 18-year-olds if elected in the July 4 General Election.

The plan, which would be the first stage of the conscription of the wider UK population into the Armed Forces, confirms the warning by the Socialist Equality Party that this is a war election.

Britain is heavily involved in the NATO war against Russia in Ukraine and backing Israel's war of genocide against the Palestinians. Sunak is focussing his election campaign on militarism and national security. He went back to his constituency Saturday and made his first campaign outing a meeting with a group of armed forces veterans in Yorkshire.

Launching his military conscription pledge, Sunak said national service was needed because the world was "more dangerous and challenging than it has been in decades... There's China, Russia, Iran and North Korea. These things aren't just happening far away, they impact us here at home."

Under the plan, national service would be mandatory for 18-year-olds, who must either join the armed forces on a 12-month placement or carry out community work one weekend every month. The plan will cost £2.5 billion annually, with £1.5 billion to be seized from the UK Shared Prosperity Fund (UKSPF)—a package to support charities and community groups.

If the Tories are re-elected a Royal Commission will finalise the details, with a pilot starting next year and a National Service Act bringing it into effect in September 2025. *The Times* reported, "There will be sanctions for teenagers who do not take part."

Sunak launched the policy with a social media video and an article published in the *Mail on Sunday*, with the newspaper revealing that the scheme was meticulously hatched in secret before being aired for the Tories' manifesto. It revealed, "The plan to reintroduce National

Service was drawn up in secret, with only Mr Sunak's close advisers—understood to include former Tory leader William Hague—privy to the details.

"In their confidential 40-page plan, the advisers argued that the growing international threats posed by countries such as Russia and China needed to be addressed by beefing up our Armed Forces—as did the listlessness of many young adults."

Alluding to the massive numbers who will be enlisted under the plan, the article stated, "Nearly 750,000 18 to 24-year-olds are currently out of work, and this age group is disproportionately represented in the criminal justice system."

Sunak wrote, "Those who choose to do military service, and pass the test, will be able to take a 12-month, full-time placement in our Armed Forces."

Wrapping himself in the Union Jack, he said of National Service, "This rite of passage will create a shared sense of purpose among our young people and a renewed sense of pride in our country.

"This is a great country, but generations of young people have not had the opportunities or experience they deserve and there are forces trying to divide our society in this increasingly uncertain world."

He warned, "To those who complain that making it mandatory is unreasonable, I say: citizenship brings with it obligations as well as rights. Being British is about more than just the queue you join at passport control."

It is reported that the Tories estimate around 10 percent of 18-year-olds will do a stint in the Armed Forces. However, such is the hostility of the younger generation to war that Sunak felt it necessary to write, "To be clear, our new National Service is not conscription. The vast majority of those who do it will not serve in our Armed Forces. Only those who choose to, and come through the tough entrance tests, will do that."

On Sunday, Home Secretary James Cleverly was

obliged to promise that those who refused to join up would not be sent to prison.

But everyone knows that the policy must lead to wider conscription and break a consensus that has been in place since 1960 when National Service was ended in Britain. Sunak's announcement made the front pages of every national paper, with the Tory media frothing enthusiastically.

The *Daily Mail* crowed, "Now the election battle REALLY begins!" The *Sunday Telegraph* wrote that the policy was necessary to inculcate "shared national values", in opposition to "extremism", and not just to bolster Armed Forces now, but for other wars ahead: "The anti-Israel hate marches have exposed the extent to which extremist views have already taken root. This is all happening at a time of huge international insecurity, and warnings of new military conflicts to come."

Tory backbencher Miriam Cates linked the call-up of 18-year-olds with the destruction of Gaza, saying the scheme should "emulate" military service in Israel.

Sunak's national service policy has backing from Tory MPs close to the military including Tobias Ellwood, a former veteran and defence minister, who said in an interview with the right-wing TalkTV, "I was one of those who pushed this from the very start." It had to be in place as "Our world is more contested than any time since 1945. Europe is at war, once again. The UK is involved, whether we like it or not, in supporting Ukraine."

He added, "As soon as you're outweighed by your adversaries, then... a failure to address that means war is inevitable... we have moved into a new era of insecurity on a world scale."

The announcement follows the comment in January of General Sir Patrick Sanders, head of the British Army, that the UK's "prewar generation" had to prepare for the possibility of future conflict and this needed to be a "whole of nation undertaking".

Defending the policy, the Tories and the media pointed out that National Service and conscription policies are widespread in Europe, amid talk that NATO forces will have to be placed directly into the warzone to avoid Ukraine being defeated by Russia.

Nations recently introducing forms of National Service are Sweden, Norway and Denmark. French President Emmanuel Macron has announced Service National Universel, which will begin as a one-month residential placement for all 16-year-olds, followed by three months' part-time voluntary service. This will become mandatory when fully rolled out.

Moves are far advanced for conscription in Germany, with a defence ministry internal paper leaked in April stating there were plans to "present options for a German military service model". These would be "scalable in the short term in line with threats" and ensure "overall national resilience." A decision is to be made within a year.

The Labour Party, expected to win the general election, said of Sunak's call, "This is not a plan—it's a review which could cost billions and is only needed because the Tories hollowed out the armed forces to their smallest size since Napoleon."

Shadow pensions secretary Liz Kendall was careful not to oppose the policy outright, saying on Sky News's *Sunday Morning With Trevor Phillips*: "This is an unfunded commitment, a headline-grabbing gimmick, it is not a proper plan to deliver it." This is the same sort of denunciation Labour made of Sunak's anti-immigration Rwanda deportation policy, advocating its own brutal deportation policy as more effective and efficient.

Sir Keir Starmer's Labour is the self-declared "party of NATO" and it will introduce National Service and conscription whenever this is demanded by the ruling class. It was the post-war Attlee Labour government that introduced National Service in 1947, coming into force in January 1949. All physically fit males between the ages of 17 and 21 had to serve in one of the armed forces for an 18-month period and had to stay on the reserve list for another four years.

The purpose of the mobilisation was to ensure that British imperialism, after the devastation of the Second World War, remained able to operate globally in the wars to come. Following the Chinese Revolution in 1949, British forces were thrown into battle in Korea in 1950 and in various military operations in Malaya, Cyprus and to repress the anti-colonial uprising in Kenya.

In 1950, during the Korean War, another National Service Act under Attlee lengthened the period of service to two years. Between 1949 and 1963, more than 2 million men were conscripted to the British Army, Royal Navy or Royal Air Force.



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