

Right-wing think tank presses UK Starmer government to abandon “peacetime” agenda and move to “warfighting readiness”

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There is a “lack of warfighting mentality that reaches right across government... The chiefs of staff are saying we need to be ready for war, so when are we going to be prepared, and for what?”

With these words Conservative MP Bernard Jenkin confronted Prime Minister Keir Starmer at the House of Commons Liaison Committee held on March 23, 2026.

Starmer is committed to increasing military spending by £13.4 billion annually from 2027 to meet an increase from 2.3 percent of GDP to 2.5 percent. However, Ministry of Defence officials have complained of a funding gap of around £28 billion over the next four years just to cover their existing plans.

But far more is required to meet Starmer’s commitment to NATO to reach 5 percent of spending on the military, including funding related infrastructure projects. Jenkin denounced Starmer for producing a 10-year defence review last year but failing since then to find the gigantic funding to back it up. That day, Starmer had a COBRA emergency meeting over the Iran war. Jenkin raised that the lack of funding for war readiness in Britain was pivotal and it was the responsibility of the prime minister to tell those in attendance that the Treasury did “not seem to realise we are already at war and we need to be in a warfighting mentality to deal with the emergencies we are facing.”

Jenkin twice held up a report from the right-wing Civitas think tank that he has co-authored with Labour MP Derek Twigg and Chris Donnelly, a former reserve officer in the British Army Intelligence Corps.

Berating Starmer he stated, “We [the authors] are all agreed that the government is not on a war footing and needs to be, very quickly. Why is it not on a war footing now?... It sounds as though you are at peace while we are actually at war”.

The report, *Understanding the UK’s Transition to Warfighting Readiness*, escalates the campaign by sections of the British ruling class—including senior military figures—to force the Labour government to move faster and spend vastly more on military preparations.

In December 2025, the *World Socialist Web Site* reported that Air Chief Marshal Sir Richard Knighton, Chief of the Defence Staff—lecturing at the Royal United Services Institute—demanded a “whole of nation response” to Russia, warning that “sons and daughters, colleagues, veterans”, “will all have a role to play. To build. To serve. And if necessary, to fight. And more families will know what sacrifice for our nation means.”

Jenkin was Shadow Defence Secretary under Iain Duncan Smith from 2001-2003 and served on the House of Commons Defence Select Committee from 2006-2010.

Twigg served as Under Secretary of State for Defence and Minister for Veterans in the Blair Labour government between 2006 and 2008. He sits on Parliament’s Defence Select Committee, the Intelligence and Security Committee and the Joint Committee on National Security Strategy. Twigg

leads the UK Delegation to the NATO Parliamentary Assembly.

Chris Donnelly is a former reserve officer in the British Army Intelligence Corps, who helped establish and headed the British Army’s Soviet Studies Research Centre at the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst. Between 1989 and 2003 he served as Special Adviser to four consecutive NATO Secretaries-General. He subsequently ran the UK Defence Academy’s Advanced Research and Assessment Group, examining “new security challenges to the UK”. From 2010 to 2020, Donnelly co-directed the Institute for Statecraft, notorious for its covert influence operations targeting public opinion across Europe.

The report begins with the vast geopolitical changes resulting from US President Trump’s attacks on NATO and the European powers, which have only intensified in the months since it was written, over their refusal to back—with their own militaries—US-led strikes on Iran.

The authors write, “Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 was the first unequivocal declaration that the ‘international rules-based order’ - which had defined our security and shaped our national defence for the past three generations - was under existential threat.” But “If Russia’s full-scale attack on Ukraine was the first lethal challenge to the old order, then the revolution ushered in by the election of President Trump has delivered the *coup de grace*.”

Under the section, “The Imperative for moving to war readiness - a rapidly changing geopolitical and geostrategic environment”, it notes, “The US commitment to defend Europe was at the core of the international rules-based order. As soon as that commitment was put in doubt by President Trump, the security guarantee it had provided for seven decades was no longer valid and the international rules-based order was effectively dead.”

While “it has been difficult for many in Europe to accept the reality of this situation because of the magnitude of change it implies” this “does not make the fact less true.”

For the UK this was “a particularly acute dilemma. For the past few decades it has closely aligned its defence policy with that of the US and has accordingly structured and equipped its armed forces to act as an adjunct of the US Armed Forces. Consequently, the UK now relies on US support to deploy many elements of the British Armed Forces effectively.” It warns, “Breaking that dependency will be difficult, painful and costly.”

Criticising Starmer’s plan for closer economic and military ties with the European Union, the report states, “With the shift in the position of the US away from Europe, the temptation for the UK in particular to see a solution to its national defence problems in rejoining... existing EU peacetime structures is likely to be great.”

This strategy accepted a “peacetime” consensus under conditions in which those “structures themselves are now already obsolete. The main

preoccupation with EU defence has been about collaboration on major long-term defence projects and the development and support for the EU's defence industries." The authors warn, "If the EU cannot adapt to reflect wartime rather than peacetime requirements, it could actually hamper Europe's rearmament."

The Civitas authors enlisted the support of Labour Party peer Lord George Robertson who was a defence minister in the Blair government before becoming NATO Secretary-General (1999-2003). Robertson was the lead author of the Starmer government's own Strategic Defence Review just six months earlier. In December, Robertson went on *LBC Radio* to declare "the pressure needs to be on the chancellor" because "she signed up to the Strategic Defence Review... the money will have to be made available in some way."

Robertson's foreword: what the SDR didn't say

When *Understanding the UK's Transition to Warfighting Readiness* was published, Robertson chose to write its foreword, dated January 15, 2026. In doing so the man who led the SDR process placed his authority directly behind a document explicitly written to go far beyond the SDR.

The foreword declares that the report "helpfully starts by highlighting the urgent need to recognise" the Russian threat, and following the SDR "sets out the way forward" to prepare for a war "we must be ready to fight and win."

To emphasise the need for the shift outlined in the report, Robertson told *Times Radio* on its January 27 publication that the SDR drafters were prevented by the government from saying that preparation for a "war footing" is insufficient, and that Britain must actually be put on one. He said: "The [SDR] review is pretty stark in terms of explaining precisely the kind of threats that we are under and the modernising that is being done by our adversaries in the world today. But clearly, we, because we were producing a report for the government, were operating within certain constraints."

The Civitas report states explicitly that the SDR reviewers "were dissuaded from raising public alarm or recommending the more radical and drastic changes which the situation demands." Critically, "They could not make recommendations which would commit the government to significant increases in spending. They could not question the assumption that the US would continue to remain a dependable ally."

Therefore the report, referring to the National Security Strategy (NSS), SDR and Defence Industrial Strategy (DIS), states, "The documents begin the process of defining how the UK might move towards war readiness. It is the purpose of this study to explore in greater detail where the pathways outlined by the three documents should lead, the nature and extent of the transformation which will be necessary for the UK to achieve war readiness, and why the country needs to make that journey."

The militarist framework of the document rests on the premise that Russia must not be allowed to defeat Ukraine, and Britain must be willing to fight Moscow if this worst-case scenario is threatened. The report presents the NATO war on Russia as a civilisational challenge to the entire Western order. It identifies other enemies declaring, "China's support of Russia and the support given by North Korea and Iran established a de facto alliance of autocracies seeking to overthrow Western global dominance."

The authors complain that due to a seven-decade period in which Europe could rely on a US backed security guarantee, there have been three generations in Britain who lived under "stability, prosperity and security." This had "made us complacent. We had forgotten what a nasty place the world can be; we had forgotten what war is and that it can affect

us."

Lauding Finland as "a comprehensive national 'total defence' model," the report calls for an end to the small professional army model Britain has operated for generations. Stating that "traditional conscription is only one way of raising a military force", it notes, "The Finnish active-duty force comprises about 24,000 personnel, consisting of the Army, Navy, and Air Force, plus a strong militarised Border Guard. In addition, Finland maintains a system of universal male conscription, with about 20,000 men annually undertaking military service up to a year. This creates a large, well-trained reserve force of approximately 870,000 individuals," which is "more than six times greater" than the "UK armed forces including reserves." It notes, "the population of the UK will soon pass 70 million, whereas that of Finland is approximately 5.6 million."

Britain's military had to move away from being small: "A new model needs to be able both to generate mass and to achieve a state of permanent rapid adaptation. This applies to the armed forces themselves, to the political and military command and control systems which will lead them in war, and to the societal and industrial base from which they will draw their personnel and equipment."

Military logic drives this demand for "mass". A small professional army of a few tens of thousands—with the actual fighting elements of the British Army now reduced to around 10,000 soldiers—meant that the UK could not win a modern war, note the authors.

They write, "The high rate of casualties to be expected in a war against a peer enemy are a major cause of loss of fighting power and the consequent need for mass to replace that loss. The experience of many NATO armies fighting discretionary wars in the Middle East in recent years has taught them exactly the wrong lessons when it comes to dealing with the level of casualties that we are seeing in the Ukraine war, which is by no means exceptional as far as peer-to-peer wars are concerned."

The WSWS reported that BBC's security correspondent Frank Gardner made a related point in December 2025, noting that Russia was sustaining casualty rates in Ukraine that exceeded the entire deployable strength of the British Army every two months. The Civitas report's authors draw the obvious conclusion: Mass is not an optional extra, but the precondition of survival on a modern battlefield: "Resilience on the battlefield means the ability to absorb casualties and fight on. That needs mass."

The authors mount a vigorous defence of General Patrick Sanders, the former Chief of the General Staff who called in 2024 for a "citizen army" and the reconstruction of Britain's armed forces around a large, conscript-based reserve. The then Conservative government was not prepared to countenance such a shift at that point and Sanders was removed from his position. Sanders responded by warning that the "realistic possibility" of war with Russia within five years had to be prepared for. Sanders is presented as a political casualty of governmental timidity, symptomatic of the peacetime mindset Jenkin accused Starmer's Labour government of embodying.

Abandon peacetime policies - all of them

A core theme of the report is that war cannot be fought by armies alone and is a "whole of society" effort: "Not only the conduct of war, but also preparation for war, demand that all aspects of government and society be changed, adapted to optimise the contribution they can make to the national war effort. All elements of government, business and society must be capable of being mobilised towards this national effort because war sets different priorities on just about every activity of a country and its people."

They insist: "This is the essence of the distinction we need to make

between ‘our armed forces learning to fight battles’ and ‘our country learning to fight war’”, the authors declare.

The economic implications are starkly laid out, with the National Health Service, the benefits system, and pensions decried as obstacles to be swept away on the march to war readiness. “In many Western democracies which have become accustomed to spending a large part of their national income on health, education, welfare and pensions, finding political consensus to change that spending pattern is the first serious hurdle in any move to put the country on a footing of warfighting readiness, complete with wartime priorities.”

The report calls for new wartime financial mechanisms including considering issuing war bonds and imposing capital controls. It warns that the “unsustainable debt burdens facing Western economies” require “creating financial headroom”—a euphemism for cutting social spending to free resources for military expenditure. The resilience framework the report proposes means “enduring pain” as “The vital core of society must be protected, even at the expense of peripheral comforts and rights.”

The Second World War is invoked as the historical template, with the authors stating that in war there would be “the suspension of some of the basic democratic practices, accompanied by the suspension of certain civil liberties—especially those regarding freedom of speech, information and travel...”

A critical part of the document is its proposal to mobilise a mass fighting force from young workers unable to get a decent job and who have been deprived of further/higher education. To provide the cannon fodder for a vastly expanded armed forces the authors fix on the young unemployed and what the report dismisses as “non-essential service jobs.”

It states, “Our educational system will have to change to make this possible and to increase the capacity for robustness and resilience in our society. At the moment in the UK there are almost a million young people not in employment, education or training, only a third of whom are registered as job seekers. People in this situation, plus those currently employed in non-essential service jobs, must expect to find themselves drafted into war work if the war becomes a long war.”

“Education is the domain of government absolutely crucial to any national war effort”

The authors are explicit that the entire educational system—from secondary schools through to universities—must be restructured around the demands of wartime production and military manpower.

The report states: “Education is the domain of government absolutely crucial to any national war effort. This is the prime means by which a country’s intellectual capital is nurtured and through which it can be harnessed to deal with a national emergency, such as war.”

It was vital that “the national curriculum must provide the basis by educating pupils in international affairs, in defence and security issues...”

The authors write, “There is an even more fundamental problem that moving to war preparedness will expose in our education system. Preparing for war requires mobilising not just troops and defence industry; all aspects of the nation will gradually find themselves directed to work based on the priorities of winning the war rather than on pre-war priorities which they may have identified as their own personal interest. A country facing war cannot afford to educate a large percentage of its population in subjects which do not contribute to the war effort in some way.”

What is needed to win a war is what young people will be permitted to learn: “We should expect to see many university courses close down, perhaps some universities closing, for lack of students. Universities will need to operate on much lower administrative overheads.”

The “entire mechanism by which universities are funded,” the report adds, will need to be reconsidered by government. The “current dependence on foreign students—and influence—from hostile states [mainly China] must be addressed to protect intellectual property and national security.” It suggests “waiving tuition fees for students in key subjects and restructuring higher education to support defence.”

At secondary school level the report demands the expansion of “courses and apprenticeships in those technical skills and trades which war will demand.” It insists, “We will need (indeed, we already need) many more engineers, welders, electricians and so forth to build classic weapons and equipment of war.”

The report asks, “how will our modern society react to a call to fight for King and Country?” A problem to be overcome was that “The less society understands that there is a risk of war and what war actually means, the more the UK’s regular volunteer forces are wholly dependent on an offer of excitement and adventure, reasonable pay and conditions.” But the reality is that the “Armed forces recruiting for a possible war are not offering a good time but asking for service and sacrifice in the defence of our country and its values. How much of this is discussed in schools?”

Nothing could be left off the table to “toughen up” for war. The report complains, “In many NATO militaries today, health and safety regulations so constrain the commander that realistic training is impossible” as it is “considered too dangerous.” The report’s caveated advice is while “there is no excuse for accidents caused by an unjustifiable lack of care,” it “is also important to realise that realistic training will be dangerous and that some level of casualties must be accepted. Failing to accept risk in training transfers that risk to operations.”

The authors’ conclusion is the insistence that the “unpalatable, unthinkable, but unfortunately real and possibly imminent threat of war now demands that we move from a peacetime footing to a wartime readiness; that we adapt structures, procedures, laws, attitudes and domestic spending patterns suited to stability, security and predictability so that they become suited to instability, uncertainty and constant drastic change.”

That such plans are being seriously considered, and not just in Britain—but in the think tanks and within the capitalist parties of all the major imperialist powers—must serve as a warning to the working class. The response must be the building of a genuine anti-war movement, not one based on appeals to any section of the political establishment.

The International Committee of the Fourth International has established that the building of a genuine anti-war movement must be based on four essential principles:

- First, the struggle against war must be based on the working class, the great revolutionary force in society, uniting behind it all progressive elements in the population.
- Second, the new anti-war movement must be anti-capitalist and socialist, since there can be no serious struggle against war except in the fight to end the dictatorship of finance capital and the economic system that is the fundamental cause of militarism and war.
- Third, the new anti-war movement must be completely and unequivocally independent of, and hostile to, all political parties and organisations of the capitalist class.
- Fourth, the new anti-war movement must, above all, be international, mobilising the vast power of the working class in a unified global struggle against imperialism.



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