

Labour peer George Robertson demands UK welfare spending cull to fund “warfighting readiness”, accusing Treasury of “vandalism”

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Lord George Robertson launched a public attack on Keir Starmer’s Labour government Tuesday, denouncing it for refusing to hand over the tens of billions required to fund last year’s 10-year Strategic Defence Review (SDR) and prepare Britain for “warfighting readiness”.

Robertson, formerly a defence secretary in Tony Blair’s Labour government, before becoming NATO Secretary-General (1999–2003), authored the SDR along with retired British Army officer General Sir Richard Barrons and Anglo-American academic and foreign affairs advisor Dr. Fiona Hill.

Addressing the question, “Can Britain be Defended?” at The Guildhall in Salisbury, Robertson’s 2026 Edward Heath Annual Lecture was a broadside against Starmer and Chancellor Rachel Reeves

Robertson complained, “We are underprepared. We are underinsured. We are under attack. We are not safe... Britain’s national security and safety is in peril.” The Iran war, he insisted, “has to be a rude wake-up call.”

“There is a corrosive complacency today in Britain’s political leadership,” he said. Directing his fire at the Treasury, he accused “non-military experts” of “vandalism,” insisting that Britain’s security was being sacrificed to fiscal caution. Robertson noted that Reeves “used a mere 40 words on defence in over an hour” in her Budget speech last November, and “in the Spring Statement she used none.”

In December, Robertson publicly demanded that the Treasury prioritise military spending, saying “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.”

In January, the former NATO head then wrote the foreword to a politically explosive report from the Civitas think tank, *Understanding the UK’s Transition to*

Warfighting Readiness.

Upon publishing the SDR last June, Starmer duly stated, “We are moving to warfighting readiness as the central purpose of our armed forces. When we are being directly threatened by states with advanced military forces, the most effective way to deter them is to be ready.”

At the same time, he committed to purchasing from the Trump administration a dozen F-35 fighters costing around £1 billion, able to be equipped with tactical nuclear weapons. However, these are not expected to be fully delivered and in service until the end of 2033.

As with Starmer’s pledge to finally increase hardware military spending to 3.5 percent of GDP—as demanded by Trump—but not until 2035, such delays are considered impermissible by an ever-growing chorus of militarists from across the political spectrum.

Robertson not only criticised Reeves for withholding tens of billions from the Ministry of Defence, he spelled out where the money had to come from to pay for military spending.

“We cannot defend Britain with an ever-expanding welfare budget,” Robertson said. “Britain’s welfare budget is now five times the amount we spend on defence,” he added, asking, “Are we certain that this is the right priority, jeopardising people’s future safety and security whilst maintaining an increasingly unsustainable welfare bill?”

Robertson warned that the global situation had fundamentally changed, citing the growing hostility of the Trump administration to NATO’s European imperialist powers. “Recent days have shown that the role and priorities of the United States have shifted and will never be the same again.”

A “lethargic” mindset entrenched in the post-Cold War era and based on the security guarantee once provided by

a US-led NATO membership had to be overcome. “Our adversaries don’t think that way and we can’t afford to. Public attention is focused on planes, tanks and ships we are short of—but they are the important baubles on the Christmas tree. We also need to focus on the tree itself.”

“We are simply not ready and we need to rebuild war readiness to deter any possible adversary,” he went on. The obstacle was the government: “Lip service is paid to the risks, the threats, the bright red signals of danger—but even a promised national conversation about defence can’t be started.”

Robertson made clear his intervention against his own political party was deliberately confrontational, recounting that Defence Secretary John Healey was “extremely angry” with him when informed Monday of the upcoming Salisbury intervention: “They [government] don’t want these headlines but sometimes you have to say it... That’s what I said last night to John. I believe my country is in danger.”

Robertson’s SDR co-authors General Barrons and Hill amplified the demand for accelerated militarisation. Speaking Tuesday to BBC Radio’s *Today*, Barrons complained, “There’s an enormous gap between where we have to be to keep the country safe in the world we now live in, and where we actually are,” adding that the Royal Navy and Royal Air Force were “undernourished”. Echoing Robertson, he said, “The US cavalry is not coming to bail us out now.”

Hill denounced Downing Street, who “don’t have the sense of urgency, which is kind of bizarre really given everything that’s happening”. There was “basically a lack of resolute leadership” as “everybody’s worried about votes and, you know, reactions, and all of this on the left and on the right.”

Hill, a specialist in anti-Moscow propaganda—who Starmer employed to help conduct the SDR for that reason—invoked the spectre of attacks on British cities: “You think we couldn’t get a nice drone on [London landmark skyscraper] the Shard?”

A jingoist media joined the fray. Sky News Security and Defence Editor Deborah Haynes declared Robertson’s decision “to call out the prime minister and his chancellor over their failure to rearm the UK at speed in the face of growing threats marks the most significant intervention on defence spending since the end of the Cold War.”

Haynes summarised Robertson’s message as a demand for “difficult choices to shift cash away from welfare and into warfare.”

The *Daily Mail* led with a front-page banner headline

quoting Robertson: “We cannot defend Britain with an ever-expanding welfare budget.” A strap noted, “Not the *Daily Mail*’s words but those of ex-Labour minister Starmer tasked with writing his defence review—and who’s now lost all confidence in dithering PM”.

The Times editorial hailed Robertson’s “fully justified” attack, complaining of an underfunded Armed Forces for which the “jointly culpable” Starmer and Reeves were responsible. Britain now had “a navy that can muster only one destroyer to protect Cyprus from Iran, an air force that lacks airborne early warning and an army that drives around in antiques.” The funding must come not from borrowing, but from “radical cuts to welfare”.

Accompanying this was a front-page piece, “Reeves dashes hopes of boost to defence funding”, warning that the chancellor “has proposed increasing defence spending by less than £10 billion over the next four years” under conditions in which MoD officials have warned of a funding gap of around £28 billion over the same period hitting their existing plans. The article cited a Sky News report that military chiefs were in fact meeting this week to discuss £3.5 billion in spending cuts for the current financial year.

Seeking to bolster political forces considered more ready and prepared to hike military spending, such as Reform UK and the Conservatives, *The Times* complained that Reeves’ refusal to hand the keys of the Treasury to the military is due to her attempt to placate mass anger at the spiralling cost of living.

She was lining up “a targeted energy bill bailout for low-income households this winter and is also expected to shelve plans to increase fuel duty by 5p a litre from September at a cost of about £2.6 billion.”



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