

# Britain's defence secretary resigns as Starmer government hit by military spending crisis

Robert Stevens  
12 June 2026

Britain's Defence Secretary John Healey resigned Thursday in a move described as "fatal" to Keir Starmer's premiership. Trailing in the polls as the most unpopular prime minister in modern times, and following disastrous local elections in May, a direct leadership challenge was already expected within weeks.

Healey resigned as part of the offensive by the militarist cabal which has directed the policy of the Labour government since it came to power, in order to determine the outcome of a leadership contest. Their aim is to counter all demands from backbench MPs for an attempt to restore whatever remains of Labour's popular support through a partial retreat from savage austerity measures.

Their insistence is that Labour must utilise its existing parliamentary majority to push through a vast increase in military spending, while slashing welfare and social services to pay for it. This means implementing the agenda of Reform UK and the Tories, not seeking even token political distance. This places whoever is to replace Starmer on notice, while laying the groundwork for a still more fundamental lurch to the right.

Starmer is committed to publishing the long-delayed Defence Investment Plan (DIP), originally slated for last autumn—to fund the 10-year Strategic Defence Review to 2035 announced a year ago—prior to the NATO summit in July. The DIP was expected to be unveiled this week.

Healey's resignation letter indicted Starmer and Chancellor Rachel Reeves, accusing them of being "unable and unwilling" to commit the resources required to defend the country "at this time of rising threats."

More pressure was piled on Starmer with the resignation, six hours after Healey, of Al Carns, Minister for Armed Forces. Upon Healey resigning, Carns said he agreed with him and would only remain if Starmer/Reeves stumped up more military funding.

When Starmer refused, Carns quit, responding in his resignation letter that the DIP was "neither transformative enough nor sufficiently funded." The government was "asking our Armed Forces to operate in a more dangerous

world on a budget written for a calmer one... a serious country funds its defence to meet the threat it actually faces, not the threat it wishes it faced."

Carns, a former Royal Marines officer who has been an MP for less than two years, is being touted in some quarters as a possible leadership challenger to Starmer whenever a contest gets underway.

Healey stated in his letter that he only became aware on Monday, after demanding for months a settlement of around £18 billion over the next four years, that Starmer/Reeves had finalised just £13.5 billion. Of this, according to sources cited by the *Financial Times*, only £10 billion represented genuinely new Treasury money, with the rest constituting what military chiefs dismissed as "Treasury trickery."

This falls far short of the actual requirement of at least £28 billion to fill a "black hole" in the UK's military budget. Healey complained that £13.5 billion would increase military spending to just 2.68 percent of GDP by 2030—a tiny uplift from the current 2.3 percent, and nowhere near the 3 percent target he regarded as a floor, let alone the 3.5 percent promised to NATO at last year's summit.

The military made its opposition known the same day. *Sky News* revealed Thursday that Air Chief Marshal Sir Richard Knighton, the UK's Chief of Defence Staff, "met with fellow military chiefs to discuss the proposed settlement on Monday" with a source saying "there is thought to have been dissatisfaction expressed by at least one of the service chiefs who were present about the inadequacy of the amount."

Sky News security and defence editor Deborah Haynes noted that Knighton subsequently made a "highly unusual move" of writing directly to the prime minister to communicate the military's objections.

With the Starmer government coming to power in July 2024 committed to supporting the war in Ukraine and backing Israel's genocide in Gaza, the military is insisting that far more is handed to the Ministry of Defence. Starmer is also committed to sending military personnel as part of a Multinational Force coalition, alongside France, following a

peace deal in Ukraine and to sending forces to the Strait of Hormuz following an end to the US-Israel war with Iran.

Healey's Strategic Defence Review—headed by former Labour minister Lord George Robertson (formerly a NATO leader) to put Britain on a “war footing” —required spending of at least £68 billion to pay for new weaponry to the end of the 2030s.

In the *Financial Times*, retired Air Marshal Andrew Turner complained, “My view is that the government wasn't short by £28bn, it was short by more like £78bn.”

Turner concluded, “That doesn't mean the SDR itself is dead. It just means that the current government spending priorities don't deliver the SDR. It's entirely plausible a new government and a new cabinet might.”

Retired British Army officer General Sir James Everard, formerly NATO's deputy supreme allied commander Europe, was equally blunt: “For those who measure true capability and war-fighting readiness, UK standing in NATO is at an all-time low. This resignation [Healey's] will further reinforce that their fears over UK commitment are justified.”

*The Times*, which has led the campaign for a vast uplift in military spending, backed by an austerity offensive to pay for it, congratulated Healey on his “bazooka of a letter”, and advised: “If Sir Keir wishes to salvage what is left of his reputation he must overrule his chancellor and increase defence spending substantially without violating established fiscal rules. That means taking a scythe to welfare. Speed is vital.”

The far-right Reform UK—currently leading the polls—and the opposition Conservatives also backed Healey, stating that if elected they would back heavier military spending and under a faster timetable than Starmer has committed to.

On Friday, Starmer announced as Healey's replacement former soldier Dan Jarvis, with both sitting alongside a stony-faced chief of defence staff Knighton.

Asked about claims from military figures, including Sir Richard Barrons—a co-author of the defence review—that the DIP was under-funded, Starmer said, “I have the highest respect for the individuals that you have quoted, but I don't agree. These are hard-edged decisions and we are seen as a leading member of NATO.” Starmer added, “We have another spending review coming up before the end of this parliament, and defence will be a number one priority in that space.”

Were Greater Manchester Labour Mayor Andy Burnham to win a parliamentary by-election next week, Starmer could face a challenge for his office soon after. Starmer described such an outcome as bringing “chaos” that he was backed into power by the ruling class to end, and declared, “If [there is a leadership contest], then I will fight.”

Nothing that is being demanded by the ruling class has any popular support. This week *The Telegraph* and other media gave prominence to an Ipsos survey carried out last month. Those surveyed were asked where they would prefer to see cuts to public services if the government introduced them to boost military spending. Respondents were given the choice of six services to cut (welfare, housing, education, healthcare, public transportation, and local emergency services) as well as the option to select none or reject any sort of public service cuts. *The Telegraph* hailed the fact “that 27 percent said they would cut benefits to boost the UK's defences,” while all but ignoring the 38 percent who “would not want to see any public services have their spending reduced”.

The plans for war by all the European powers are driving policies to empty national treasuries to be handed over for rearmament. As the crisis in the UK erupted, it was leaked that Italy, in its defence review, will propose increasing its troop levels in 2033 by 40,000 via a new national reserve system—bringing its serving military personnel to over 200,000. This compares with Britain's force of just 72,000 soldiers, of which only around 10,000 are battle ready.

The crisis of the Starmer government is a stark confirmation of the assessment of the Socialist Equality Party, which warned workers—against the position of pseudo-left forces who backed Labour's election in 2024 as the “lesser of two evils”—that his government was on a collision course with the working class.

Central to this was Starmer's pledge that Labour was the “party of NATO” and would back rearmament. In a statement in March last year, “No to Starmer's war and austerity government—fight for socialism!” the SEP explained that “Starmer's call for a ‘Coalition of the Willing’ against Russia in Ukraine, with ‘boots on the ground and planes in the air’ and a massive increase in military spending, confirms the Labour Party is ruling as a militarist cabal, the most right-wing and authoritarian government in post-war British history.”

With the escalating crisis facing a largely bankrupt British imperialism in little over a year since, leading figures within the military cabal have concluded that Starmer has failed to do what is required and should give way to someone prepared to take on the working class and impose the savage cuts that are needed.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)**