

Burnham government a “firm friend” to a “pleased as punch” military

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New UK Defence Secretary Wes Streeting has signalled more spending on the military by Andy Burnham’s Labour government.

In a speech at the AGF Defence Summit at Farnborough airshow, Streeting told military and industrial leaders, “The first duty of any government is to keep our country safe” and that his job was “to maximise our deterrence, and ensure that should deterrence fail, we have the capability to fight and to win. That means investment.”

US President Donald Trump, he added, had “called on Europe to carry a greater share of the burden for our own defence, and he is right to do so. The UK has always been a leading light on defence spending, but the world is changing, and in these dangerous, uncertain times, it is clear that we have needed to go further.”

This was why former prime minister Keir Starmer and now Burnham had committed “£298 billion over the next four years, including an additional £15 billion on top of last year’s Spending Review settlement” and “reaffirmed our commitment to 3.5 percent [GDP spending on the military] by [20]35.”

Asked how he would find the money for any further increases, Streeting replied, “As to future fiscal events, it’s for the chancellor to make announcements on those matters but I certainly feel like we’ve got a firm friend in His Majesty’s Treasury.”

The reference was to John Healey, Starmer’s defence secretary, who resigned that post in a protest for more funding, and who has now been made Chancellor by Burnham. The news of his appointment was greeted with rises in the stock prices of major arms companies: Babcock International climbed 7 percent, QinetiQ 4 percent, BAE Systems 3 percent and Rolls Royce 2 percent.

Streeting said of Burnham, “He told the NATO secretary-general the appointment of John Healey as chancellor is a signal of his intent.”

According to the *Spectator*, Burnham and Healey met Monday and “have thrashed out an agreement on the future funding of defence. The details are shrouded in mystery, but a defence source says: ‘Everyone is pleased as punch. Wes and John sorted it between them and the MoD [Ministry of Defence] thinks it’s getting its money, thinks it’s Christmas...’”

Pledges to spend hundreds of billions of pounds more on the military in the next few years demolish Burnham’s claims to be running a “cost-of-living government” of “change” and “listening to people”. His policies on this score—exempting energy bills from VAT, capping single bus fares at £2 and measures to tackle rough sleeping—amount to less than £1.7 billion.

Besides reassuring the military, Streeting’s main job was therefore to present spending on bombs, artillery shells and missiles as a social good. “Defence will not just be a recipient of the proceeds of economic growth. It will be a central contributor to building that growth, a driver of prosperity in parts of the country that are crying out for the backing they need to make their contribution to the challenge of our time.”

Given that the “challenge of our time” was elsewhere described by the defence secretary as one in which “State-on-state competition has returned on a scale not seen for a generation” and “The skies today are increasingly contested, complex and lethal”, this would be the mother of all poisoned chalices.

But even on Streeting’s own terms, defence spending’s potential for “our economy” and “jobs” is not, as he claims, “enormous”. According to Common Wealth’s Khem Rogaly, writing in the *Guardian*, it currently “directly supports 130,000 full-time jobs in

the UK; if including supply chains, this rises to 209,000 or 0.83% of the workforce,” over half of which is concentrated in London and the South East.

Moreover, despite the military budget rising in real terms since the 1980s (it has fallen as a percentage of GDP), the number of jobs in military industries in the UK has halved. “The sector is hi-tech and low labour,” Rogaly explains.

The German government is currently providing real-world proof of the fact that massive remilitarisation can go hand-in-hand with the equally massive destruction of industrial jobs—roughly a quarter of a million in the last two years. As the trade wars and disruption inevitably bound up with rising militarism worsen, so will these effects.

The real beneficiaries of military spending are the major corporations and their super-rich investors. In the last financial year, according to Rogaly, nearly 40 percent of the £37.6 billion military equipment budget went to just 10 multinational companies. The chief executives of the five largest, Iain Overton writes in *Byline Times*, “received an average of £5.2 million in 2024”.

Overton adds, “The press are—some might argue—useful idiots in this emboldened military industrial complex. Nearly 60% of retired senior military figures quoted in the British media on defence matters were, on at least one occasion, presented as independent experts without disclosure of their commercial ties to the defence and security industries.”

And they are demanding more. Not content with Burnham’s promises, the war hawks are screeching for the government to hit 3 percent GDP spending on the military by 2030. “Wes Streeting refuses to commit to 3% defence spending ambition,” complained the *Financial Times* headline.

Multiple outlets prominently ran the story that Al Carns, the armed forces minister who resigned from Starmer’s government alongside Healey, was invited to join Burnham’s but “declined, with respect and with thanks”. This was because “the argument I resigned over has not yet been settled. To take another role now, in another department, would suggest that it has.

“Until the country is spending what it needs to spend on its own defence, my job is to keep making that case...”

Settling the argument means securing funds and

cheap labour for the armed forces and military industries with a slash-and-burn assault on welfare and another bonfire of regulations. Burnham is trying to achieve a modicum of stability for his government and the British ruling class by covering over these demands with fig-leaf cost-of-living announcements.

But as the *Spectator* gleefully predicts, “the gap between vibes and reality can only persist until the Budget. ‘We fundamentally don’t know the direction of this government until there’s a fiscal event,’ a Labour adviser says. ‘There will be a crunch moment in the autumn where we will know. Andy’s got some choices to make.’”

The ruling class has already made clear with Starmer what will happen to a prime minister who makes the wrong choices.



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