

Burnham pledges nuclear weapons submarines to be paid for by welfare cuts

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Prime Minister Andy Burnham travelled to Barrow-in-Furness, the UK's nuclear submarine building hub, on Thursday. There he announced £8.4 billion for the next phase of Britain's Dreadnought nuclear armed submarine programme.

After handing out the Treasury's equivalent of loose change to fund the rollout of £2 single trip bus fares nationally and reducing rocketing electricity bills for households by 86 pence a week, this was the first significant funding announcement of Burnham's premiership, committing him to austerity, rearmament and war.

The Dreadnought programme is to replace the aging Vanguard-class submarine fleet currently in operation that carry Britain's Trident nuclear weapons. The programme to build four new submarines—then known as Successor—was first initiated by the Blair Labour government in 2007. David Cameron's Conservative government renamed the programme Dreadnought in 2016, invoking the name of the 1906 battleship synonymous with the naval arms race preceding the First World War.

The first of the new class, *HMS Dreadnought*, is to complete sea trials and enter service in the early 2030s.

The funding for Dreadnought's Phase 4 was agreed under Burnham's predecessor Keir Starmer, whose government, after a year's delay, increased the military budget by £15 billion through the Defence Investment Plan (DIP). This was part of a £63.6 billion military fund settlement over four years. Reaching only 2.7 percent of GDP (on hardware and personnel) by 2030—instead of the minimum 3 percent demanded by NATO—this was far less than was being demanded by the military top brass and precipitated the end of Starmer's premiership last month.

Starmer's Defence Secretary John Healey resigned over the underfunding of the DIP, complaining that as well as not reaching the level demanded by NATO, £4.7 billion of the £15 billion remained to be financed in a future budget. A sizable portion, £1.8 billion, was needed in the coming financial year.

Burnham and his new Defence Secretary Wes Streeting

have so far also refused to commit reaching 3 percent of GDP on military spending by 2030, requiring additional annual spending of between £25 billion to £30 billion by that date. But both have insisted that they will meet the overall commitment to NATO of 3.5 percent by 2035, at a cost of hundreds of billions more.

Burnham also appointed Healey as his Chancellor, putting him in direct control of meeting defence spending requirements. Last week Burnham's spokesperson said, "He [Burnham] told the NATO secretary-general [Mark Rutte] the appointment of John Healey as chancellor is a signal of his intent."

This week, the *Times* revealed that Healey plans "to forge deeper ties between the armed forces and the centre of government..." and "on day one in the role as chancellor, Healey requested a military adviser to sit in his private office." It noted that "Although the prime minister and senior cabinet ministers such as the foreign secretary have military advisers, the chancellor's military adviser has not traditionally sat as part of their immediate office. A source close to the chancellor said: 'It signals Healey's commitment that national security and economic security are inseparable, and his determination to meet the UK's defence commitments to allies.'"

Streeting was chosen by Burnham as defence secretary due to his record as Starmer's health secretary when he denounced National Health Service workers for demanding "unaffordable" pay, as well as his record on backing the replacement of the Trident submarines. In 2016, Burnham himself voted for the new submarines—alongside Streeting and Healey—in opposition to then Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn who, while refusing to kick the right-wing out of the party, voted against.

Speaking Monday to *Times Radio*, Streeting said the DIP would be "fully funded". Asked whether a failure to provide the remaining £4.7 billion required would be a resigning issue for himself, Streeting replied, "It is. It is absolutely for me a matter of principle."

On Thursday, Burnham and Streeting announced that the

main corporate recipient of the extra billions in military funds will be BAE Systems, who will receive £5.9 billion of the £8.4 billion with the remaining £2.5 billion going to the wider supply chain. BAE, which also has another lucrative contract to build two Astute nuclear attack submarines, reported half-year profits above £1 billion—on revenue of £14.6 billion—on the day of Burnham’s visit to Barrow-in-Furness.

While Burnham did not make a speech at the BAE site, the previous day while announcing plans to develop a social care package he made clear that meeting commitments to NATO meant “being prepared to look at challenging issues”.

Previously declaring he would not be “squeamish” about cutting the welfare bill to fund the military, Burnham complained that too many people in their twenties were on welfare benefits. Britain, he said, was “paying for failure and we’re paying quite a lot actually for failure. If we change those things then we will open up the way of meeting our commitments on defence.”

The militarist agenda of the government is clear. Britain is the only major NATO power that has committed to entering the Strait of Hormuz—on the pretext of clearing Iranian mines—once hostilities between the US/Israel and Iran cease. It was reported in May that hundreds of sailors are being held at readiness aboard the RFA Lyme Bay at Gibraltar, ready to enter the Strait.

Burnham has also deepened involvement in Ukraine’s war against Russia, announcing Monday that Britain is handing over the intellectual property for its “Stone Cloak” electronic jamming system to Ukraine, enabling Kyiv to mass-produce the equipment which has already been fitted to thousands of drones attacking Russian positions.

Streeting has launched what the *Telegraph* headlined a “charm offensive to win back Donald Trump” following the US President’s regular denunciations of Starmer for refusing to participate militarily in the war against Iran. As well as offering collaboration on reopening the Strait of Hormuz, Streeting said this week—in response to statements from Iran that the UK was a legitimate target for allowing the US to use its military bases—“We stand ready to response to any attacks Iran wishes to wage against this country or our allies and we will continue to do that”.

The *Telegraph* reported that a source close to Streeting said: “The Defence Secretary had a very warm conversation with [US] Secretary [of War Pete] Hegseth. They discussed the situation in the Strait of Hormuz and how allies can work together.”

Streeting and Hegseth have discussed holding a London conference of NATO allies, defence ministers and military commanders from up to 40 nations. This would include

Hegseth and General Dan Caine, chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff. The *Telegraph* noted, “The Europeans had previously held regular meetings without the Americans, but the summit would aim to reconcile all sides following a difficult few months.”

What Burnham said in the Downing Street statement on the Dreadnought programme confirmed the reactionary basis of his agenda to “reindustrialise” Britain. This is entirely geared towards turning school-leaver and unemployed youth into cheap labour for the arms industry. The number of 16 to 24-year-olds not in work, education or training (NEETs) has passed one million for the first time since 2013.

Burnham declared that this would be achieved with “British money, spent on British workers, British firms and British skills, in the places that were written off for forty years”. Many more will be conscripted into the armed forces and a reserve force being demanded by leading military figures, thinktanks and politicians across the spectrum, due to infantry levels having collapsed to around 70,000—in order to achieve “war readiness” through a “whole of nation” effort.

Burnham’s announced this week that 14-year-olds will be offered the chance to deprioritise academic study to engage in technical skills training “suited to local employers”.

In Barrow, one in three of the working-age population already depends on BAE Systems and its supply chain. Downing Street stated that “Investment in the [nuclear] programme supports tens of thousands of jobs and thousands of companies across the UK supply chain, including 22,000 apprenticeships by 2035.” No less than 47,000 arms industry jobs are to be created, many in de-industrialized areas, including in HM Naval Base Davenport in Plymouth (8,000 jobs); Bristol: 2,500; Aldermaston and Burghfield: 9,000; Sheffield: 700; Barrow: 13,500; Thurso: 250 jobs; HM Naval Base Clyde: 5000; Rosyth: 850 jobs; and Derby: 4,000 jobs.



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