

Her Majesty's "Throwaway Ministry": Defense, Austerity and the Wasting of Money "Military Style"

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How desperate are the politicians, particularly those with connections to arms manufacturing, selling guns and/or firing them (AKA the military, 'our boys', former career in ...) to continue financing the machines of war while the economy goes down the tube? Very. Whatever else needs tax payers' money – such essentials as education, health and social care – the Ministry of Defence gets favoured treatment. In 2010 all the government departments were ordered to make savings and reductions.

For almost all of them that amounted to a 25% cut in their annual budgets – except the MoD. Oh, the right noises are made: the MoD is 'struggling with cuts to its budget' and so on. No mention that, of all sections of society whether ordinary citizens or those parts of government they think they are funding with their taxes, the MoD is rewarded with the smallest reduction (8%) to its very large budget. Only the rich and the multinationals fare better, their contributions to the public purse being so small as to be almost invisible to the ordinary taxpayer. On second thoughts, I'll rephrase that. Their contributions to our global financial worries have been great. Their loss of income has been tiny.

A few days ago David Cameron suggested that 'we' (that is, the tax payer) should use some of the [money](#) Britain contributes to international aid to fund our military's 'peace keeping and defence-related' actions. I like the 'defence-related' bit. In order to 'defend' this country we trashed Iraq and made the situation in Afghanistan worse, that poor country having been trashed by other nations, including our own, for centuries. We helped trash Libya, using a 'responsibility to protect' UN Resolution (protect whom, I wonder?) while Syria implodes due to the West's interference. I won't even mention the Balkans. Let's just say that any time military forces are sent in it does little for peace. Or development, except that of bigger and better weapons.

Cameron's clever wheeze failed. People were outraged at the thought of giving money to the Ministry of Defence instead of those desperately in need. So, a week later Defence Minister Philip Hammond [tried](#) a different tack – cut our Welfare budget and give the money to the MoD. Why should the MoD get all the goodies? Why should it be favoured over every other area of need in the country, except perhaps, and only perhaps, Health and Education (although their cuts are taking places in hidden ways)? And what sort of record does the MoD have when it comes to housekeeping? Very, very poor.

For years the MoD has wasted much of its over-generous budget. It has lost money through ordering the wrong equipment, failed equipment, unnecessary supplies and committing to huge projects that cost too much, were delivered late and often mothballed as soon as they

were delivered. In 2010 the Public Accounts Committee criticised the MoD for creating a [‘black hole’](#) of £36bn. The chair of the Committee, Margaret Hodge, said budget commitments were allowed to get out of control because the department lacked a proper financial strategy and that the MOD had a dangerous “culture of optimism on spending”. The optimism seems to consist of an attitude based on “the country will pay for it”.

Later that year Channel 4 broadcast one of its Dispatches programmes *How the MoD Wastes Our Billions*, and the sums looked even worse. With what was then a budget of £42 billion a year (2008-9), we were struggling to pay for and equip just 10,000 soldiers in the field. Wounded soldiers in Afghanistan died because the Army didn’t have the right helicopters to ‘e-vac’ them, but here the MoD spent £2.4 million a year on ‘pop star’ helicopters, flying senior military and MoD officials around the country. Following the fuss about the helicopter shortage, this perk was axed, to complaints from the then Chief of Defence Staff, Sir Jock Stirrup. Vast sums are spent on subsidised housing (with servants no less), although another Chief of Staff, Sir Richard Dannatt, maintained it was vital that an inflated number of top heavy staff should be looked after this way. Of *Army* staff alone in the MoD, 496 are of brigadier and above ranks. And note: these are not officers in the field but occupying MoD desks while they wait for their pensions.

Bernard Gray’s 2009 report on MoD spending [said that](#) up to £2.5 billion a year was wasted on the procurement of weapons and equipment, much of it coming in over budget, defective and late. It takes around 7000 staff at the procurement centre at [Abbey Wood](#) to manage this shopping spree. Tell that to a soldier whose body armour had its heat-dispersing panels installed back to front, so that instead of keeping him cool in an Iraq summer, it made him hotter still. In December 2010 Bernard Gray became the top MoD procurement man. Having been so critical, did he fix the problem? Not really. By the time it had been [‘eliminated’](#) in 2012 it had grown to £38bn.

But another sinkhole for the public’s money was identified – the MoD is holding vast quantities of unwanted and in some instances out-of date equipment (including a 54-year-old supply of bombing equipment for an old model of the Nimrod aircraft). This ‘just in case’ mentality is costing the country yet more billions. Margaret Hodge [said](#): “Out of the £19.5bn of inventory the National Audit Office reviewed, they found stock worth £6.6bn was either unused or over-ordered. In February this year the MoD was being urged to [sell](#) about £3bn’s worth of this redundant stock – which would help their ailing budget in these austere times. And they are running out of storage space for all the equipment that will come back from Afghanistan, which is probably one reason why they’ve decided to [leave it there](#) . They say it will cost too much to bring back. Either way, another waste of money.

And the military itself (as opposed to the MoD) is facing large cuts, including a possible [20,000](#) army personnel being made redundant, a few thousand at a time. Many will come back from serving in Afghanistan to be kicked straight out onto civvy street. It is after all, far easier to axe people than say goodbye to the self-important projects or cancel deals with one’s arms manufacturer friends. But veterans aren’t the MoD’s business. That is the responsibility of Welfare & Pensions. And Mr Hammond wants to take money from Welfare and spend it on ... what? For, while he seemed to completely disregard the people who will be made redundant, what I found really worrying was what he said in an [interview](#) with the Telegraph:

“Many people in Britain will regard the end of combat in Afghanistan as a very good news

story, but for many young men and women joining the Armed Forces, the lure of operations is a big recruiting sergeant and we have to think how we are going to replace the excitement of operations for them with equally stimulating training and exercising.” Is he already looking forward to the next war? Has it crossed his mind the damage war does? Has it occurred to him how much in demand Welfare is, and will be, by the veterans of our on-going wars, wars that are mostly unnecessary and often quite illegal, wars that would not be fought if real diplomacy took place instead of the sabre-rattling in Whitehall?

Whether returning troops leave the Forces or are kicked out, they will need support. If they have died, families will have lost their breadwinner and need support. If they are seriously wounded they will perhaps need expensive lifetime care. Many come back with invisible wounds, mental scars that make it difficult for them to adapt to a civilian life. The army was their home and they cannot cope without it. Many become homeless, leaving distressed and struggling families behind. Go into any night shelter for the homeless and you will find a high number of ex-soldiers, veteran alcoholics and druggies, unemployable. And lost. Nearly 10% of the male prison population in the UK are veterans. Many of them are serving long sentences for murder and other violent crimes. And usually suffering from undiagnosed Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) because of what they saw and did in the name of this country. [Combat Stress](#), formed to help veterans with PTSD, has seen a huge increase in men seeking help since serving in Iraq and Afghanistan.

A Ministry that happily throws away our money is just as profligate in its waste of human beings.

A government of rich men, happy to waste a billion or twenty of public money on useless weapons and grand ideas of conquest are hardly likely to know how important an extra £10 or £20 a week will be to a veteran, scarred by our foreign wars or ‘interventions’, homeless, self-medicating with alcohol and drugs and mad with PTSD. I have long believed that, if the MoD spent its money on the proper support of all those who have been damaged fighting ‘in this country’s interests’, it would not have the money to go to war ever again. And in these times of austerity that would be the best saving this country could make.

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