



**THE FORK IN THE
ROAD**

BRITISH DEFENCE IN CRISIS

by

The Rt. Hon. Michael Ancram QC. MP.



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THE AUTHOR

Michael was born in 1945. He was educated at Ampleforth College; Christ Church, Oxford (MA) and Edinburgh University (LLB), was called to the Scottish Bar in 1970 and practised until 1979. He took silk in 1996.

He has been a Company Director to several companies including industrial (paper), Corporate Communications (Chairman) and Parliamentary Consultants. He is a partner in a tenant farm.

Michael won Berwickshire & East Lothian in February 1974 – the only Conservative gain from Labour at that election. He was Member of Parliament for Edinburgh South from 1979-87. He has been Member of Parliament for Devides since April 1992.

He was Chairman of the Scottish Conservative Party from 1980 until 1983 and became Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State at the Scottish Office in 1983, holding that post until 1987. Michael was a member of the Public Accounts Committee and Chairman of the Backbench Constitutional Affairs Committee from 1992 until May 1993.

In May 1993, Michael was appointed Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State at the Northern Ireland Office. In January 1994, he was promoted to be Minister of State at the Northern Ireland Office responsible for the peace process. He was made a Privy Counsellor in January 1996.

He was appointed to the Shadow Cabinet with responsibility for Constitutional Affairs in June 1997. In October 1998, Michael became Chairman of the Conservative Party. In 2001 he stood unsuccessfully in the Party leadership contest. In September 2001 he was appointed Deputy Leader of the Opposition and Shadow Secretary of State for Foreign & Commonwealth Affairs.

Following the 2005 General Election Michael remained as Deputy Leader of the Party and became Shadow Secretary of State for Defence. He relinquished both posts in December 2005 and returned to the backbenches. He presently serves on the House of Commons Intelligence Select Committee.

His hobbies include fishing and folk-singing.

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DEFENCE IN CRISIS**

A BLACK PAPER, GETTING BLACKER

June 2006

FOREWORD

Michael Ancram's pamphlet is timely.

Our Defence Forces are over-extended and the problems they face are understood by very few outside their ranks. We are involved in a number of operations in different parts of the world. Iraq is unpopular with many of the general public and there is a danger that Afghanistan will compound difficulties and support for the forces will diminish further. The public have over many years been very supportive of servicemen and women but there are now indications that they are now less so. Recruiting is down and those serving do not feel they are backed as they deserve to be. The services are suffering from being committed to actions which many at home disapprove of and this is a new experience for them.

The British Armed Services are one of the very few national institutions which have been continuously admired both by our own nation and internationally over the years. They have not let us down but now feel they are being taken for granted. The Services are rightly loyal to their political masters to a degree which is not mirrored by the leaders of other national institutions. The Chiefs of Staff do not rush to the media when they disagree with government measures but their loyalty is not always reciprocated by government.

Michael Ancram highlights the problems. The Government can safeguard the future of the forces, their reputation and the part they play but they have to show they care and make the resources available which enables them to carry out their duties and prepare for the future. This is not the case now.

This pamphlet spells out the fears of those who are concerned about the future of the services and of British defence and as such deserves to be read widely.

Lord Guthrie of Craigiebank
(Chief of the Defence Staff 1997 – 2001)

June 2006

Introduction

There is never a good time publicly to outline shortcomings in our national defences, or weaknesses in our armed forces. To do so is easily pilloried as ‘an attack on our brave servicemen and women who give themselves so selflessly to the defence of the realm’. Let me make it clear at the outset that I have nothing but praise and the highest regard for the professionalism, the commitment and the loyalty of our armed forces. Their dedication and bravery puts the rest of us to shame. Their recent service in some of the most difficult trouble spots of the world has done them and us proud.

I am writing this because I believe that these same splendid servicemen and women are now being manipulated, short-changed and traduced by our Government in a way that is not only unacceptable but cannot be allowed to continue.

It is therefore, in my view, no longer an exaggeration to say that we have reached a fork in the road, that the defence of our country and of our national interests is in crisis. It is conversely a truism not only state that the situation is black but also that it is getting blacker. It is quite simply time to wake up.

I therefore make no apologies for this pamphlet. If anything I am sorry not to have written it sooner. Much of it, in fact, formed part of a recently delivered lecture, but I believe that the grim message which it seeks to convey deserves wider dissemination. The picture which I seek to draw is both detailed and dark. It is drawn from facts obtained from official sources. In some ways it is too complex to attract instant media attention, although it will strike an instant chord with our servicemen and women who will recognise it as all too true. It will also be unpalatable to many both in Government and Opposition who take the view that there are no votes in defence. It will make uncomfortable reading for politicians and bureaucrats in charge of the defence of our national interests, and alarms those in our country who take our national security to heart; but it deals only in facts.

I write it for a number of reasons. I write it because day by day and week

by week I learn more about the increasing shortfalls and failures in commitment and proper support to our armed services who are inexorably and increasingly being short-changed - and some would argue betrayed, I write it also because after four years as Shadow Foreign Secretary and six months as Shadow defence, necessarily restricted by the doctrine of collective responsibility in relation to spending commitments, I can no longer stand back and watch while the well-being of our armed forces and the safety of our nation are being compromised in the way that they currently are.

I will undoubtedly in some quarters – mainly governmental and bureaucratic - be accused of subjective special pleading. However, the sentiments I express here are not so much my own as a distillation of the very strong if private feelings I have encountered amongst serving members of our armed forces and others with a deep understanding of these issues over the past few years. They have increasingly felt that they have no voice. They fear that the politicians, the top brass and the media and academics – the so called ‘political class’ - are combined in ensuring that their very real concerns remain unheard. I too am surprised by the silence of the media, including some great champions of our armed forces, who have suddenly apparently lost their tongues.

Michael Ancram

The Politics of Defence

We all know the nature of the politics of defence. All governments mislead the public about defence. All governments rely, too often surprisingly with media connivance, on a programme of disinformation perpetrated by politicians, refined by Treasury mandarins and ‘loyally’ articulated in public by serving Defence Chiefs. It is a blatant and, in my view, damaging conspiracy constantly to pretend that our defence capabilities are improving and our objectives succeeding when the very reverse is the case. Why do they do it? Because they know that real defence does not come cheap and they are determined not to have to pay the price – because ‘there are no votes in defence’. They gamble that our defence will not immediately or substantially be threatened and therefore they will never be brought to book.

There is a high stake and dangerous gamble where if they turn out to be wrong - and in this increasingly unstable world no one can gainsay that possibility – they will not lightly be forgiven. It is a gamble which apparently they are prepared to take. In fact never has that conspiracy of disinformation been as great as it is today. And no Government has been more blatant in advancing it than our current Government.

If I sound angry it is because I am. Angry at the cynicism with which they would have us believe that they are increasing defence resources, streamlining and improving our defence forces and that those same defence forces are more than able to meet the very substantial military commitments which this government has imposed upon them. Talking privately to our forces on the ground, as I have done recently as shadow defence secretary, makes clear that nothing could be more dangerously further from the truth.

Our armed forces are more overstretched, more under-equipped, more over committed and more under-trained than at any time in the last fifty years. Yet in this vulnerable state they are ever more frequently being asked to respond to unforeseen and unexpected new commitments, such as that in Afghanistan in 2001 which came out of the blue. This is no theoretical point. It is factual and it goes to the very heart of the safety of our troops in carrying out the increasingly dangerous tasks they are being

asked to do. It is depressing, and certainly to be deprecated, but the current recently reported rate of desertions from our armed forces serves only to underline this point.

The Government has been able to get away with this deteriorating situation because the growing challenges to our armed forces are not headline news. The stark realities are not uppermost in the public mind. It is therefore not surprising that this same public – other than the immediate relatives of serving military – are blissfully unaware of the shortfalls in support to our armed forces as they meet these increasing challenges. In particular there is little or no public appreciation of the very specific strains imposed by a combination of peace support, peace keeping and peacemaking all coming together (as today in southern Afghanistan) with insufficient equipment and a growing dearth of vital training. Furthermore, because so many of today's challenges are overseas there is a distinct absence of any real sense of being threatened here at home. It is a serious absence when, by the very nature of them, many of today's threats to our domestic security increasingly require overseas actions to deter them.

Of course it is not easy or immediately popular, but it should be a prime priority for government to educate and alert the public consciousness to the realities of those threats and then to take the actions necessary properly to meet them. This quite simply is not being done, and we have finally reached the point of crisis. The endemic loss of morale in our armed forces, however hard efforts are made to disguise it, is a practical illustration of the true reaction to this crisis.

The Fork in the Road

In defence terms we have finally reached a clear and unavoidable fork in the road. We can no longer go on pretending. Either we scale down our international security role or we commit significantly greater resources to maintaining and strengthening our armed forces. At stake is our effective leadership of the European dimension of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation, our ability to influence international action by our effective participation in it, our practical leadership of the Commonwealth and our leverage within the European Union. We must not fool ourselves that we will be admired for our past strengths or our current intellectual abilities. We live today, as we always have, in a world where strength matters. We can be strong and influential, or we can be weak and ultimately ordered around. The choice is ours.

The Prime Minister currently lectures the world on the importance of our international influence working alongside America. The aspiration is in my view a laudable one. I still believe that properly directed, which recently it has not always been, that influence can be 'for good'. Our influence with and alongside the US depends on us being able to bring in military terms 'added value'. We are still behaving as if we can. Yet our military strength has never been so compromised and our national determination to do anything about it has never been so weak.

We have the worst of all worlds; ambitious commitments unmatched by resources, armed services undermined by falling recruitment and morale at an all time low. The cynical self-serving way in which the Government has increasingly abandoned serving soldiers to the legal wolves applying civilian legal standards to battlefield situations has added insult to injury. We simply cannot afford to underestimate the devastating effect on morale that current legal proceedings arising from the conflict zone of Iraq are having, not just on those immediately affected but the whole way down the chain of command. It is not only unfair, but it demonstrates beyond equivocation to our troops on the frontline that the Government which has sent them into action simply does not understand what it has asked them to undertake on behalf of their country.

The crisis is however deeper than that. Today we cannot even be sure

that we would have the resources effectively to defend our own homeland if it was seriously under threat. We almost certainly can no longer defend many of our essential interests overseas. The idea of pursuing an 'activist approach' internationallyⁱ is becoming increasingly laughable.

Before I am accused of overstatement, let me set out the facts.

The Bare Facts

Our Senior Service is increasingly being beached.

Discounting submarines, since 1997 the Royal Navy has been reduced by two fifths. Only one out of three aircraft carriers is currently operational. We had 12 Destroyers; we now have 9. We had 23 Frigates; we now have 17. Other surface ships have been cut from 68 to 44. In the last year alone the total number of naval vessels including submarines has dropped from 94 to 78.

We now have a Navy which is smaller than the French! It is unthinkable that we could ever mount another Falklands exercise were we to need to do so. It was difficult enough in 1981. Indeed it came about because Argentina did not believe that we had the will or capability to respond to their aggression. At least immediately after that war our success acted as a deterrent against further such aggression. Today our clearly diminished capability could once again encourage potential aggressors against our interests to have a go. We are having to choose between flexible warships and aircraft platforms when we need both. The irony of the Carrier programme is that it is designed to support flexible rapid deployment overseas, but at the expense of the defensive capability of our Navy nearer to home. On top of that our Sea Harriers were withdrawn in March leaving our fleet dependent on US air defence.

When China for the first time in generations is building a 'Blue Water Fleet' to protect their supply routes we are moving in the opposite direction. We are now seeing the deliberate dismantling by stealth of the Royal Navy. It is worth reminding ourselves that the traditional role of the Navy is to patrol around our shores and further afield. That capability is now increasingly compromised.

The Few are getting fewer and our skies are no longer safe.

With the ending of the Cold war and of set piece front lines it was inevitable that the number of aircraft required by Nato would substantially diminish. But the government has gone well beyond that. It has forgotten

the traditional and essential role of fighter aircraft in providing home defence.

Since 1997, long after the ending of the Cold War, the number of RAF squadrons has been cut by almost a quarter from 41 to 32. Frontline aircrews are to be reduced from 210 to 170, and the Jaguar force will be drawn down two years earlier than planned. Our frontline air capability defence force will be reduced from 80 to 55. Rapier anti-aircraft missile launchers will be reduced by half from 48 to 24 fire units. Fast jet training flying time has been reduced. Airfields are closing, total battlefield helicopter spending has been reduced by a quarter since 2000 and cannibalisation of the helicopter fleets has increased threefold. On top of that 8 brand new Chinook helicopters are grounded because the software is considered dodgy. No wonder RAF morale is at rock bottom. And on top of that there will be a resounding gap between the withdrawal of Jaguars by 2007 and the introduction into service of the Eurofighter Typhoon by 2010. And Lift capability is now seriously hampered by clapped-out transport aircraft.

Our Army is melting away.

Manpower is being reduced from 108,500 to 102,000. Infantry battalions are being reduced by 4 from 40 to 36.

Recruitment is in crisis. In the army recruitment has fallen from 16,610 in 2002-03 to 11,609 in 2004-05. In the Navy and the Marines it has fallen from 5220 in 2002-03 to 3690 in 2004-05. In the RAF it has fallen from 4450 in 2002-03 to 2180 in 2004-05.

Training, so vital to effective and responsible soldiering, is under increasing pressure. Due to the increasing tempo of operations and budget constraints 20% of training exercises were cancelled during 2004-2005. The types of training that have been suffering include all-arms urban warfare training and aspects of Joint Operations, especially Air-Land integration.ⁱⁱ Indeed we now learn that many members of the Parachute Regiment cannot jump because there are no longer an adequate number of serviceable planes available to train them.

Our reservists are knackered.

More than a quarter of the reserve force - 13,400 - has resigned since April 2003. From a strength of 56,200 in 1998 it now stands at some 36,200. Every branch of the reserve forces are currently below strength. The TA numbers 31,260 out of a requirement of 38,430, the Naval Reserve musters 2,460 when the requirement is 3,400, the Royal Marine Reserve strength is 240 below its requirement of 990, whilst the Auxiliary Air Force can only draw on 1,390 out of a requirement of some 2,120. At its peak the Reserves provided some 18% of the total of UK forces in Iraq, even today the average stands at 11%.ⁱⁱⁱ These reduced numbers and increased levels deployment create a dangerous combination.

Our equipment is a shambles.

25% of the Armed Forces helicopter fleet is grounded. Much of it needs lengthy overhauls. Out of a fleet of 569 helicopters 121 are in repair and 79 have been classified as unrepairable. One third of new Merlin helicopters are in repair. Half of the Sea King helicopters are undergoing refits or have been written off. And never have they been so badly needed as currently in both Iraq and Afghanistan where movement by air is becoming increasingly essential.

More than 50% of our armoured vehicle fleet is not fit for service because of mechanical problems. Less than half of the Army's 328 Scimitar combat reconnaissance vehicles are in working order. Only half of the Army's Samaritan armoured ambulances could currently be deployed on operations. Units equipped with Sturgeon or Salamander combat reconnaissance vehicles have none in working order. Only 169 out of 622 Saxon vehicles are working. The overall picture is a scandalous one of deliberate over-commitment and under-resourcing, under-manning and under- equipping. In a less cynical age it would be a scandal.

Breaking through the Conspiracy of Silence

It is hard to imagine a blacker picture, yet the false propaganda that everything in the garden is rosy continues.

The voices of the recently retired officers however begin to reveal the truth. Colonel Tim Collins, who played such a prominent role in the Iraq war, put it starkly. “In Iraq we have reached the milestone of [over 100] dead... This is no time to be cutting defence. The cuts that are being made, be in no doubt, aren’t to make anything better or fix anything that is broken, they are to produce money for the Treasury and that is not a good enough reason.” Even before he retired, the former First Sea Lord Admiral Sir Alan West opined that the Royal Navy was now too small to perform the tasks demanded by the Government. “We need 30 destroyers and frigates for what the Government wants us to do.” As we have already seen, we have far less than that.

This criticism is not new. Our former Chiefs of the Defence Staff have not minced their words since they hung up their boots. “The two immediate problems facing our Armed Forces are very significant under-funding and serious over-stretch, which are leading to the loss of some very important skilled people. The fundamental problem is that our Armed Forces are too small for the many operational tasks placed upon them.” The words of Lord Inge on 15 May 2002.^{iv} Since then the operational tasks have increased and our armed forces, as we have seen, have got even smaller.

Lord Guthrie in the same House of Lords debate was even blunter. “The level of commitments has continued to rise. The Armed Forces are now seriously under-funded for what they are being asked to do. The world seems to have become a more dangerous place and we cannot afford to be complacent about the levels of hollowing out within today’s forces. Recruiting targets are not being met; ships and regiments are not properly manned; training is being reduced; and equipment is ageing and often not available. So far as defence is concerned, there has been, in effect, disinvestment. All this has been happening at a time when to many of us it appears that the threats to our security are becoming ever greater.”^v

Then, perhaps, most trenchantly Lord Guthrie continued in that same debate “The Chancellor and the Treasury do not understand, do not listen, and show little or no interest in trying to understand one of the few institutions in this country which is still admired both at home and throughout the world. It may not be so admired for much longer if there is no increase in the defence budget.”^{vi}

Facing up to Reality

The stark and bitter truth is that in military terms we simply no longer have the wherewithal to fulfil the 'cure the world' aspirations of the Government. Indeed the reality is far graver than that. We currently argue about sensible exit strategies from Iraq and Afghanistan. Some of us argue that in Iraq we have done all that we can usefully do and that we should now withdraw with dignity and honour before we find ourselves in a situation where that sort of withdrawal is no longer an option. The growing possibility if not probability is that unless there is a dramatic change to meet the shortfalls I have outlined, we may have to pull out of Iraq and Afghanistan, not because the respective 'jobs are done', but because we will not have the resources and manpower effectively to stay in either of those challenging theatres!

This situation has not arisen overnight. It has been in the making for the last six years. It has ironically followed on the remarkably robust Strategic Defence Review carried out by this Government in 1998, which was a brave attempt to analyse the challenges we face and the resources we would need to meet them. I pay genuine tribute to that review and to its authors, George Robertson and John Reid. It is not only regrettable but astonishing how almost from its inception it was, through a mixture of deliberate Treasury engineered financial cuts and insufficiently thought-through new international commitments, savagely undermined by that same Government. For all Mr. Blair's love of foreign adventure, the will has never been matched by the resources, and the Treasury and Gordon Brown has finally won. The tragedy is that the losers are our armed forces who loyally and, up until recently trustingly, lay their lives on the line for what they are told is our national interest.

I have to confess that as an Opposition we did not condemn this systemic and deliberate failure loudly enough. At the last election we promised a little bit more money - £2.7 billion - not so much to strengthen our defence as to protect battalions and frigates which were under threat of disbandment and decommissioning. Our failure to win the subsequent general election in 2005 has meant that even these have now gone, or are in the process of going. With the benefit of hindsight, our extra spending commitment was no more than a somewhat wimpish finger in the dyke. It was not a real attempt to face up to our national and security

responsibilities. The truth is that we were wary of pledging the level of resources which our armed forces required because ‘there are no votes in defence’.

I do not look back on my own role in advancing that position with any pride.

Perhaps fortunately, that *de minimis* path is now no longer open to us. Our national defence is now seriously compromised. We can no longer just shout from the sidelines and hope that a sceptical and innately anti-military Treasury will come up with the goods. We have got to face realities and make hard decisions. We need to decide whether in the years ahead we are to abandon our leading military role to become a Belgium and leave the military leadership of Europe to France, and of NATO to America and Canada.

It must be said in passing that the concept of a discrete European defence capability is laughable. Current EU members’ defence budgets are lamentably inadequate and there is no indication that there is a political will significantly to increase them. It is a mirage, and a dangerous one at that because it seeks to offer strength without pain and power without responsibility when in reality neither are on offer. In fact it is a lesson of recent ‘multinational European military initiatives’ that without sufficient numbers and a clear chain of command the operation risks becoming fragmented and as a result the outcome dangerously uncertain.

The Fork

We have indeed reached the fork in the road. We now need to resolve which prong we should follow. We need to decide whether our days of world influence are over, both within NATO and beyond, or whether we still believe that we have a 'force for good' role or even a more restrained international task to play. We need to consider whether we still want our permanent place on the Security Council of the United Nations, a place which would be immediately at risk if we were to choose the 'Belgium' route. Above all we need to start playing fair by those who lay, often quite literally, their lives on the line for us, the loyal professional and courageous men and women of our armed forces whom we are increasingly letting down.

I still have faith in the self-respect of my country and my fellow countrymen. I cannot bring myself to believe that we will take the minimalist route; that we will turn our backs on our history, our moral responsibilities, our duty to defend this realm and its people, and our historic destiny. Let me say this clearly and without equivocation. If we do take that road, never let us again hear from the likes of Chancellor of the Exchequer Gordon Brown protestations of pride in our country and our Britishness when it is he and his acolytes who have manipulated the national purse strings which they control to strangle and eviscerate our armed forces!

If we believe in Britain, then we must provide her with the armed forces to do the job. And that means certain urgent and specific responses and actions. We must conduct an audit of our current and likely military commitments - not least the basic defence of our own country against direct aggression- and then pledge the necessary resources. We must understand that the current funding shortfall has not suddenly arisen, but is the result of serious underfunding of our armed forces over a long period of time - and certainly since the end of the Cold War. That understanding and recognition means for a start no more mealy-mouthed promises of marginal increases in defence expenditure. It means first identifying and agreeing the nature and requirements of our chosen role, and then a serious and properly costed financial proposal based on a realistic analysis of what we need in terms of manpower, equipment and backup to fulfil it.

And we must then show a clear determination to prise open the Treasury to provide the necessary resources. Let's not beat about the bush. That means big bucks, probably in the region of £10-15 billion more than is being spent on defence at the moment – exclusive of the cost of replacing Trident. Anything less is still the application of plasters! If we mean what we say on defence, and we accept our responsibility to those in the field to whom we will look to realise it for us, then we must bite this bullet and go out and sell it to a public whose interest it is designed to protect and serve. We have to put our money where our mouth is. I hope that the Conservative Party in opposition will have the courage to propose this, and that the Conservative Party in Government to provide it.

The Choice

It is an historic truth that the first responsibility of government is the defence of its citizens and their interests, from which it follows that if that basic defence is lacking or is compromised then little else will be of consequence. That is not an easy case to make publicly in an age of examining the entrails of public services and the wringing of hands at their shortcomings. History teaches us, or at least it should, that when nations in the face of international threats retreat into the examinations of their navels, they often find themselves on the losing side. I believe that if we are prepared to make the case for enhanced defence strongly enough, the people of this country will respond.

What is undeniable is that we are faced by this fork. The choice of route is not simple. One road leads to greater expenditure with all that that entails. The other leads to growing insecurity and potential national disaster. The choice can no longer be delayed. Procrastination is no longer an option.

In our history we have often chosen late, but we have always chosen right. Let us hope that in our generation we will do so again.

ⁱ Prime Minister Blair, 21 March 2006

ⁱⁱ Ministry of Defence, Annual Report 2004-2005, Paras 194-5.

ⁱⁱⁱ 'Reserve Forces' – National Audit Office Report, 31st March 2006.

^{iv} HoL OR Column 319

^v 15 May 2002 : HoL OR Column 311

^{vi} HoL OR Column 312

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