

Tory Lord Hague urges a pro-war Starmer Labour government to back national service

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UK Prime Minister Rishi Sunak's surprise announcement that a Conservative government if elected on July 4 would bring in national service for 18-year-olds was met with derision two days later in a keynote speech by Labour leader Sir Keir Starmer.

In his own response centred on national security, Starmer derided Sunak's policy as "desperation" and a proposal for "teenage dad's army"—a reference to a popular British comedy centred on hapless and ageing members of the Home Guard during the Second World War unfit for military service.

Starmer's criticism was part of Labour's effort to prove itself the most serious and competent guardian British imperialist interests. An earlier Labour response had branded the policy a "headline-grabbing gimmick", an "unfunded commitment" and "not a plan" but a "review which could cost billions and is only needed because the Tories hollowed out the armed forces to their smallest size since Napoleon."

Shadow defence secretary John Healey lambasted "an undeliverable plan and a distraction from their failures in defence over the last 14 years ... It's time for change. Britain will be better defended with Labour."

Labour's counter-offensive echoes public statements by leading figures in the armed forces. Lord Alan West, a former chief of the naval staff and adviser to Gordon Brown's Labour government, stated, "I'm delighted if more young people become aware of defence and are involved ... but this idea is basically bonkers... We need to spend more on defence, and—by doing what he's suggesting [Sunak]—money will be sucked out of defence."

Sir Richard Dannatt, former chief of the general staff, called the scheme "electoral opportunism", adding, "This task cannot just be imposed on the Armed Forces as an extra thing to do."

But amid these bitter exchanges, a significantly different response came from former Tory Party leader and foreign secretary under David Cameron William Hague—now in the House of Lords. Writing in *The Times*, Hague cautioned, "Labour's foolish to rule out national service".

Hague has the status of a grandee in British politics, with his horizons broader than the immediate electoral interests of his Conservative Party. He published a column a week ago all but openly accepting Starmer as the next prime minister and urging him to face up to the demands of power: "the crucial choice of what to do when there is no spare money" and, above all, how to respond to "the totally unexpected crisis: war, pandemic, social disorder, financial meltdown."

His revealing examples include "the lonely moment when MacDonald decides to break with his party, Wilson to devalue the pound, Thatcher to send a task force to the Falklands, Blair to join an invasion of Iraq".

In his most recent article, Hague maintains his constructive tone with the Labour leader. Under the strap headline, "During an election it's easy to trash the opponent, but creating a reserve army and forging a common identity will be vital", he acknowledges that attacks on Sunak's national service policy are "fair game in the heat of the election battle," before advising that the Labour Party "since it expects to form the government in a few weeks' time, would make a great mistake if it were to rule out the idea altogether."

Hague urges Labour to not make the mistake of contrasting the need for greater military spending and an enlarged army with the proposal to bring in national service. Both, he insists, are needed and are complementary.

He cites the experience of Norway, where "The 18-year-olds who serve in their armed forces are not a 'teenage army' but become a trained reserve in their twenties and thirties, able to expand the army several times over when needed. If 30,000 young British people served for 12 months of training each year, there would be up to 300,000 of them with military skills after a decade."

This "flow of personnel through the armed forces" would help remedy the armed forces' "rising demand for skills... including cyber, engineering, nuclear, digital, logistics, aviation and medical", making it able to "fill those gaps in times of national danger" and to meet "circumstances, by the end of the decade, in which many more trained soldiers

are needed.”

Hague urges Labour to “consider how likely it is that there will be no need for a sudden enlargement of the British military in the coming years,” asking, “Does European security look set fair? Is Russia going to transform itself into a peace-loving democracy? Unless he is thinking of a much larger army or reserve force by some other means, he [Starmer] is going to need national service in some shape or form.”

His final argument is for “the critical importance of rebuilding a common national identity, with a sense of mutual obligation,” by which he means creating the political climate necessary to carry forward the militarisation of society.

As another clear appeal to Labour, he cites approvingly Starmer’s Shadow Foreign Secretary David Lammy as an “eloquent advocate” of “a form of compulsory [non-military] national service” that would “allow us to break down the divides that are entrenched in modern society.”

Hague also links to his January 29 *Times* article making a more explicit link between national service and the need to fight wars all over the world, “As missiles fly across the Red Sea”, “the war in Gaza defies diplomatic efforts to resolve it”, “Ukraine is digging in for a long, hard year of war” and “Tensions ebb and flow in the South China Sea”.

He cited then Donald Trump’s statement that we are “on the brink of World War Three” and Tory Defence Secretary Grant Shapps’ comment that we have “moved to a ‘prewar’ phase.” He also referenced the head of the army, General Sir Patrick Sanders, urging the introduction of conscription: “In General Sanders’ words, ‘regular armies start wars; citizen armies win them.’”

That the author of Sunak’s proposal comes forward almost immediately as a friendly advisor to Starmer confirms the fundamental concerns that led the Tory leader to declare the snap general election without even informing his own ministers and to then do the same in announcing his national service policy.

Only days before, Tory Defence Minister Andrew Murrison had told Parliament “there are no current plans for the restoration of any form of national service,” setting out quite extensive reasons why such a policy would be a bad idea. His colleague Steve Baker commented after Sunak’s announcement, “This proposal was developed by a political adviser or advisers and sprung on candidates, some of whom are relevant ministers.”

But as the *World Socialist Web Site* wrote of Sunak’s May 22 announcement of a July 4 election:

Sunak’s decision and the speed and secrecy of its

implementation are bound up with calculations of the British ruling class and its imperialist allies in the US that snap elections are needed to pre-empt growing opposition to war and create a political framework for a massive escalation of the conflict with Russia...

Sunak was therefore forced to go to the country, even if this meant almost certain defeat for his government.

The national service announcement was similarly motivated. It was, in Hague’s words, intended to start the argument more than to win the Tories votes, as preparation for its implementation by a future government, most likely headed by Starmer.

In response to Sunak, Labour has pledged a “national security sprint” if elected, having spent the last years declaring themselves “the party of NATO” and the past months backing Israel’s “right to defend itself”. Hague’s caution to Labour is not to get carried away with electioneering at the cost of rubbishing a policy whose purposes they are equally committed to: military escalation and the suppression of social opposition.

Labour will not make a pledge on national service at this stage—caught between the promise of fiscal responsibility and the need not to let on to the population the implications for social services of more military spending with no tax rises. But Starmer et al can be counted on to find the money for national service *and* the expanded regular force demanded by West and Dannatt when the time comes.



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