

DEFENCE OF THE REALM



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by Ralph Berry

One of the few heartening signs to emerge from the UK 'Autumn Statement' (Budget) is that Defence, which the upper military yearned to raise to 3% of GDP, is now held to 2%. That too will be diminished by inflation. Good.

Lord Salisbury, the last conservative Prime Minister of Britain—his full-length portrait can be seen at the foot of the stairs in the Carlton Club, at the top of which the Duke of Wellington awaits the visitor—spoke a famous anathema against all experts. 'You never should trust experts' was his theme, a truth currently validated by the UK lockdown which a junta of epidemiologists enforced upon the nation. The real costs, human and financial, are immeasurable. An expert is someone who disagree with other experts, as in the common experience of courts when expert witnesses are paid to rubbish

other expert witnesses. In Lord Salisbury's list of dud experts comes this:

'If you believe soldiers nothing is safe'. The military, at one in their vivid apprehensions of troubles to come, are equally at one with their prescriptions for safety. All, generals and admirals alike, believe that we should stave off an enemy's preventive war with a preventive rise in defence spending. That should fix the problem, and it will certainly fix the standing, numbers, and prospects of the military thinkers, plus their appearances on TV for which they have the Ukrainian war to thank. Retired military have an afterlife to look forward to, and it is called defence spending.

Some cautions arise from experience, as they would. The military, having had their way with previous spending programmes, now stand in dock for failures so gross they are not mentioned in dispatches. I cite a few. Tanks were the favoured toy of the Army for many years.

The Soviets won WW2 with developments of the T-36, of which Hitler is said to have remarked that if he had known about their tanks, he would not have launched his invasion. The initial 'T' stands for 'Tank', and the Russians had more than anyone else. The Germans had better but fewer tanks. The Tank cult, and the tank boom, ended with the longest traffic jam in history. As the Ukrainians demonstrated, 'T' stood also for 'Target'. The British contribution to the boom ended on the Ajax (ineptly named after Shakespeare's 'mongrel beef-witted lord'). You will never see the Ajax. It turned out to be completely unserviceable, being prone to noise and vibration problems that sicken the crew and reduce its speed. 26 Ajax tanks have been delivered but none is operational. This turkey cost £6 billion.

The Royal Navy stands alongside the Army. It has two aircraft carriers. One is still under construction, no doubt with the specifications being changed at irregular intervals. The

other set off recently on its maiden voyage to the US but had technical problems that soon obliged it to turn back to Gosport, solicitously tended by tugs. Another Falklands would finish the Navy. There is apparently a running dispute of theological proportions as to whether the aircraft carrier should have helicopter facilities or rely on aircraft. Years pass while these issues are thrashed out at the Ministry of Defence, which is notorious for the incompetence of its procurement record. Present-day thinking leans towards small ships, more of them. On such strategic issues rests the future of the defence budget and the livelihoods of the officers concerned. We have seen it all before—Admiral Fisher and the move to an oil-fired Navy against vested interests led by Lord Charles Beresford. I take no side in these disputes but I admit to consolation that the financial difficulties of the Government force it to call time on the quarrelsome disputants. They can still argue but with less on the board.

‘Defence’ is a relative newcomer to a nation’s vocabulary of war.

Until the 1950s, all nations had a Ministry for War. John Profumo was the last Minister for War in Britain. Governments had come to realize that ‘war’ was unpopular, for good reasons, but ‘defence’ could occupy the vacated space. Also you could put up taxes for ‘defence’, without too much trouble from dedicated peaceniks. So ‘defence’ ruled till the present day, when people began to realize that ‘defence’ was a scam that kept civil servants and military planners in business while they invented, improved, changed and discarded the latest toy of the virtuosi. If something really useful came through they could sell it to valued customers, or give it away to Ukraine for nothing, thus earning the gratitude of Volodymyr Zelensky. Eisenhower’s ‘military-industrial complex’ was and is the only game in town. Not too much thought is given to the soldiers who do the actual fighting, who, in John Masefield’s words of an earlier conflict, are

'the lads who carried the koppie and who cannot be known.'