



With apologies to Nick Watts for the delay in publishing this.

Commentary 20 March 2026 - Primus inter Pares

In the UK's unwritten constitution the head of the government is called the prime minister. This office reflects the role of the current holder as the leader of a government that commands a majority in the House of Commons. As the leader of the cabinet, this office is frequently described as being 'primus inter pares' first among equals.

This constitutional confection has come under strain recently as the current incumbent seems to be struggling a bit. Commentary does not take a party-political position, other than to keep the debate about defence and security in the public eye. Nor will there be a repetition of other comments which have been made about the present situation.

First Lord of the Treasury

More formally the inhabitant of No. 10 Downing Street is known as the First Lord of the Treasury. Recent pronouncements by the prime minister, after an ear bashing at the Munich Security Conference from his allies, that the UK must speed up its defence spending, were followed by – inaction. Only a threat from Leonardo to close its factory in Yeovil resulted in the long expected order for 23 Medium Lift Helicopters.

Interestingly, the Chancellor lauded this decision as 'supporting UK jobs'. Correct, but isn't defence meant to be one of the engines of growth for the government's economic recovery plans? So why the hesitancy? The government was criticised by the Unite trade union for

putting 3,000 jobs at risk in Yeovil. Alongside this the Management Consultancies Association (MCA) noted that the slow roll out of the SDSR was putting at risk the ability of the defence sector to undertake the important research and development needed to maintain its innovative edge.

The spring statement – 2 March 26

The Chancellors Spring Statement on 2nd March was notable for the weak growth in the economy. Aside from its being overtaken by the outbreak of conflict in the Middle East and the knock-on effects on oil and gas prices. The prime minister needs to have a conversation with his colleague and direct her to consider how the funds needed for an urgent increase in defence expenditure may be obtained. This will be a hugely popular move amongst most of the population. It may be the UK getting involved in the proposed Defence and Security Resilience bank or accelerating negotiations to join the EU's SAFE programme. But something. If it means that a new Chancellor must be found – so be it. The tail cannot wag the dog.

IISS Military Balance 2026

The London based International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) released its latest Military Balance on 24th February. It noted that the level of defence expenditure in Europe is 21% of the global amount, up from 17% in 2022. Most of this increase is driven by Germany, but other uplifts are also seen in other European countries. This in turn is driven by the outcome of the NATO Hague summit in February 2025 where members of the Alliance agreed to increase defence spending to 5% of GDP by 2035. Of this 3.5% will be directed towards core defence spending with the remaining 1.5% coming from other security related matters.

All of which shines an unflattering light on matters in the UK. Once happy to boast of its 'leading role' in NATO, recent events have shown up the unpreparedness of the UK government to respond to fast moving events. The credibility of the UK as a reliable partner has been called into question.

Events

The situation in the Middle East was eminently predictable, and to be fair to the government, it did deploy fighters to provide some air cover in the region. Again, Downing Street seemed to be paralysed. There is plenty of opinion about the spat between Trump and Starmer, but the lesson is that readiness is key in these turbulent times and the government doesn't appear to be ready. Downing street needs to remember the old maxim 'get there fastest with the mostest'.

After four years, the conflict in Ukraine continues. The UK has announced that as part of NATO's Prioritized Ukrainian Requirements List (PURL), it will purchase additional air defence missiles for Ukraine, at a cost of £500 million. This capability should also be deployed to defend RAF Akrotiri, as well as other key UK assets around the globe, not forgetting the homeland. This should not be a choice of either or, the government needs to do both.

The unpleasant truth for Downing Street is that the incumbent is a wartime prime minister. It is true that the government must fix the economy and public services, but it should be remembered that the armed forces are a public service. Money invested in buying defence equipment goes, mostly, into the UK economy and supports jobs and investment.

Exports

It is worth remembering that the UK's defence exports are worth £13.2 bn to the economy. It must be hoped that now the MOD has regained control over defence export sales, it will remember that the reliability of the UK as a credible ally extends to its continuing to supply equipment to our allies, even if they are involved in a conflict. There could be nothing more damaging to the UK's reputation than an on – off supply just when our allies need us most.

Select Committees

Another part of our constitutional machinery needs to do its job of scrutinising the government; Departmental Select Committees in the Houses of parliament. In the Commons, the chairs of both the Defence Select Committee and the Public Accounts Committee wrote to the Permanent Secretary of the MOD on 28th January, to request that he: "set out, without delay, the timetable for publishing the [Defence Investment Plan] and confirm an agreed date for our committees to take evidence on it in public."

On 3rd March, the Chairman of the Defence Select Committee wrote to the Chancellor to reiterate the invitation, originally sent in February, to appear before the committee. The initial reply stated that it was for Defence ministers to account for MOD financing. This is disingenuous, and the Chancellor knows it. It is H M Treasury that is at the root cause of delays in the publication of the DIP and the consequent impact on the UK's defence sector, and it would seem, its operational readiness.

The chairman of the HCDC must pursue this matter, using the opportunity to question the prime minister at the weekly PMQs in the Commons. The purpose of the legislature is to hold the executive (government) to account.

The Buck stops here

The prime minister seems to inhabit a world where he is beset with a flurry of events, domestic and international, all of which seems just out of reach. Being prime minister often means having to take difficult decisions. A wicked problem is a complex social or cultural issue that is difficult or impossible to solve due to incomplete, contradictory, and constantly changing requirements. We now live in a world of wicked problems. Not deciding can also have consequences. Ultimately advisers advise and ministers decide. That includes the prime minister.

Feedback welcome via nwatts@nwatts.co.uk

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