

By Guy Birks

The proposed trial and creation of a National Citizen Service in the UK marks a bold attempt by the Coalition government to try and implement a form of national service. The stated intention is to introduce young people to the concept of civic responsibility through a kind of non-military national service. For some, however, this proposal does not go far enough. In the UK a significant section of the press and a large number of people frequently call for a military national service. In particular, it is believed that a national service scheme carried out within the military will help tackle anti-social behaviour and youth disaffection. The problems with this view can be highlighted by looking at national service elsewhere in other European countries.

The underlying view for many of those who call for military national service within the UK is to focus on the potential affect it would have on the behaviour of disaffected youth. It would thus be a form of social engineering. However, this view neglects to consider whether the UK armed forces would gain military utility from such a scheme. The injection of raw recruits, for short term periods, into an armed force which is highly technologically sophisticated, would not ultimately serve to benefit the military. The rationale for military national service within the UK would need to be stronger – it would need to address how the military would benefit from a large number of conscripts. It is difficult to perceive how this could be effectively achieved.

The examples provided by the Nordic countries – Finland, Sweden, Norway, and Denmark, show that the rationale for national service, which varies from country to country, determines its strength. When sentiments such as notions of civic responsibility are the determining basis for military participation, national service frequently declines and loses its utility. When national service provides a genuine military utility and purpose, it is likely to remain stronger.

Previously, the Nordic countries of continental Europe offered some of the strongest examples of democratic nations with national military service. In Sweden, Norway, and Denmark, national service has rapidly declined. In Norway, only 25% of men complete military service each year, a figure that is similar to the percentage for Denmark. On July 1st 2010, Sweden officially terminated national service. Although not part of NATO, Sweden maintained an active reserve of conscripts as a means by which to check any possible Soviet advance. However, with the end of the Cold War, the number of conscripts was cut after 1989 from 49,000 to 21,400 in 1998. Sweden recognised that control of technology by the military organisation was more essential than the number of conscripts. Sweden wanted a more efficient and integrated military at the expense of reduced civil involvement in the military. When the threat posed by the Soviet Union disappeared, the rationale for national service no longer remained strong.

The rationale for Norwegian conscription was Norway's involvement in NATO and the threat posed by the Soviet Union. However, with its fall, Norway has increasingly invoked democratic reasons for national service. It has also sought to keep the cost of military expenditure down. Although part of NATO, Norway does not participate in as many UN, NATO, and OSCE

missions as Denmark. The decline in the number of men that it actively seeks to involve in national service has thus declined – due to both decreased demand for men and the limited amount of resources available. This indicates a declining importance of national service and its military utility for Norway.

For Denmark, national service does serve a military/political purpose. Denmark moved away from its Soviet dominated threat perception rationale in the 1970s and recognised that challenges could arise further afield. A large proportion of conscripts enter the Army, which is then used as a springboard to move men into the International Brigade, which has played a key role in Afghanistan. However, due to increased technological sophistication and army restructuring, the demand for short-term conscripts has dropped. Consequently the percentage intake of conscripts has dropped to around a quarter of the notionally required amount.

In Finland national service remains strong. The chief reason for this is that the perceived threat of Russia still remains. The original and continuing rationale for Finnish conscription draws heavily upon historical examples which illustrate Finland's susceptibility to invasion from Russia. The Russian invasion of Finland and the Winter War of 1939-1940 remains a key source of historical pride and solemnity that helps to direct some of the emotive aspects that underlie the rationale for contemporary national service. The threat of the Soviet Union and the potential turbulence of the Russian Federation within the last twenty years have further exacerbated contemporary Finnish concerns. The role of national service is thus to train and equip an army of conscripts who would be able potentially to engage Russian forces in a defensive, guerrilla-based rear guard action in Finland.

The Finnish example does point to the sense of civic responsibility that can be gained from national service. The shared obligation of conscription arguably strengthens the commitment of citizens to national defence and it does enhance the will to defend the country and to work for it in peacetime. Conscript service is seen as a kind of 'social university' and a great equaliser, where all male citizens, regardless of their wealth, or social status, are treated equally. The Finnish Defence Forces permanently employ over 16,000 people. Soldiers number about 8,800 and civilians about 7,200. The Defence Forces train about 25,000 conscripts annually, and as of 2008 there were 25,000 reservists.

Finland has also felt the need to increase the proportion of professional personnel in the most important wartime formations, units, and command structures. A large quantity of its professional forces are used for international missions. More than 45,000 Finns have served in operations led by the UN, NATO and the OSCE. 2000 conscripts at a time can engage in some of these missions. 120 men are with Regional Command North, Afghanistan.

The increasingly technical nature of defence equipment has forced a change towards more long-term professional forces – a factor that has contributed towards the weakening of national service models in Denmark and Norway. In combination with its international role and the need for professional forces, this could suggest that national service in Finland may be weakening. However, the rationale underlying national service – the challenge of Russia and its potential motivations – remains. Thus, national service continues to thrive.

In Facts about National Defence – the Finnish Defence Forces document the perceived challenge posed by Russia is evident. The document outlines Finland's security environment. The first line reads, "Our security environment is crucially influenced by Russia and the fact that it is such a close neighbour of ours". It further shows that "the renewed interests of Russia in the Baltic Sea raise tension through among other things increased shipping and the distribution of energy". The 'social and military development of Russia' is also a key factor. There are other areas and challenges outlined in the Document, but the challenge posed by Russia is the most evident and recurring.

Overall therefore, if the UK did ever choose to adopt a national service with a military element it should seriously consider what advantage the Military would receive from such a scheme. The examples of the Nordic countries show that the varying rationales for conscription determine the longevity and strength of military national service. Finland, with its contemporary concerns, historical grievances, and its shared land border with Russia retains the strongest military rationale for national service. In Sweden, national service is no more; and in Denmark and Norway, the need for increasingly professional, technically-skilled forces, increased cost concerns, and the decline of an over-arching threat has meant that numbers of conscripts have dropped to around a quarter of their potential capacity.

The UK doesn't have a threat assessment that directly recognises an external state as an immediate threat to its territorial defence. The UK's armed forces operate even more advanced technology than the Nordic countries and its professional forces are far more active. An influx of short-term conscripts would further serve to increase costs at a time when finances are tight. Furthermore, the intention of instilling an ethic of civic responsibility in disaffected youths would not necessarily prove evidential.

For many recruits, national service could prove to be less of a service and more an example of forcible servitude, if they were forced to operate in an armed force that saw no great military utility in having short-term conscripted troops and thus potentially didn't want them there.