By Roger Green, Principal Reviewer, U K Defence Forum

A Military Covenant Commission was established by the UK's Conservative Opposition, and arose out of a widespread concern that the Military Covenant is not being upheld by the nation. The paper offers comprehensive views on a wide range of aspects of the relationship between military personnel, society and the government. It argues that the Military Covenant is under serious and unprecedented strain. It may come as a surprise to many that the Military Covenant is only codified within Army doctrine, although it is recognised as being equally applicable to the RN and the RAF. The existing covenant has 3 main purposes. Strategic and cultural, to ensure harmonious civil-military relations; moral and compassionate in recognition that there is a moral obligation on society to ensure that service personnel get a fair deal in recognition of the risks they run; and practical in that it recognises that the armed forces must be treated well so that they can recruit and retain people. Other than being stated only in Army doctrine, the covenant could be clearer in stating what is expected of the nation specifically. Further, it does not deal adequately with veterans. For these reasons the commission is in favour of a new and more specific covenant written as a tri-service Military Covenant document.

The paper looks at the social and military context of the 1957 decision to move to an all-volunteer force. The problem of sustainment of such a force was bedevilled by socio-economic changes, cultural changes, the evolution of a self-centred instead of a selfless society along with rises in living standards, all combining to bring more competition to recruitment. The situation was aggravated by the government's failure to ensure that a military career would be attractive to the country's youth. The Government sent an appalling message with regard to its commitment to the armed forces when it downgraded the role of the Defence Secretary. With regard to the health of the covenant, overstretch and under manning are probably the overriding and critical factors. Retention becomes an increasing problem during overstretch and unless this problem is resolved it is unlikely that the covenant will be repaired. The paper addresses issues concerning the funding of reservists training and their civil employment protection; the paucity of equipment; and the health care of individuals, families and veterans. It notes that the impact of service life on families and children and its direct effect on retention needs to be investigated in more depth. The poor standard of service accommodation has been well publicised by the media and the commission believes that the process of refurbishment should be accelerated. Although often overlooked, the commission has looked into the issue of bereaved families and the delays in inquests. There is an issue of equitability over legal representation whereby the MoD hires barristers to defend its position at inquests but insists that families do not need funding for legal representation.

The commission concluded that the public is generally supportive of the armed forces but that the work of the military will need to be promoted in a deliberate way to maintain that support. With regard to the relationship between the armed forces and the Government, the commission concluded that the MoD has been guilty of neglect and of poor stewardship. Its initiatives have

been too little, too late and they have failed to address fundamental problems of overstretch or to match commitments and resources.

The commission intends to publish a more definitive report in due course.

Armed forces personnel will doubtless expect a future military covenant that not only sets out their military role and commitment as well as the relationship between them and society, but one that defines clearly a mutually accountable relationship with government.