

Be realistic about what our armed forces can do

Twice in the twentieth century government and Parliament sent the professional but small British army onto the continent to fight against German militarism and expansion. In 1914 around 100,000 men were sent as the British Expeditionary Force. They fought bravely at Mons, on the Marne and later at Ypres. They retreated a long way but helped the French slow and turn the rapid German advance, stopping them capturing Paris. Most of that force was killed and by year end the UK was embarked on recruiting a far mightier citizens army capable of measuring up to the scale of Germany's forces.

In 1939 a larger expeditionary force was sent, expanding to around 400,000. This army with our French allies was heavily outnumbered and outgunned by German forces. It had to be rescued from the beaches at Dunkirk, whilst the German forces went on to conquer France. Around 60,000 of the force did not return in the rescue.

On both occasions the UK had been aware of the threat for some time. On both occasions the UK sent an army that was far too small, and inappropriately equipped to stand up to the forces ranged against it. The original British army of 1914 did not have the equipment needed to fight a trench based war, with insufficient machine guns, grenades and artillery. The army of 1939 was better equipped, but lost most of it in the retreat that resulted from the far stronger forces ranged against it.

In 1914 the army command had not thought through tactics in the machine age. As the war got bogged down towards the end of 1914, more thinking was needed over how you defended men in trenches, and how you could mount an attack at such well defended positions. The answer was not clear until the invention of the tank sought to inject some mobility and pace into the static battlefield. Several years were spent whilst at war experimenting with mining, with more intense artillery bombardments on trench lines and in seeking an alternative front in the Dardenelles. Gas also found its cruel way into the repertoire of torture at the front. Most of this failed to produce a breakthrough, and was pursued in battle in ways which allowed far too many casualties for no good purpose.

It is difficult not to be angry to read of the many times armies of men were asked to undertake a frontal assault of a kind which had failed many times before, only to fail again. Wellington sought to conserve his troops and keep them out of danger as much as possible, knowing replacements were hard to come by. In 1914-18 there was a wanton approach to the loss of life, brought on by the huge numbers of volunteers followed by conscription and by a stubborn refusal to see that killing so many was not advancing the cause of victory.

So what can we learn from this for today? Our current army is not large enough to fight a major war against a substantial hostile power. We need the

NATO alliance and the engagement of the USA to help keep our peace. The army has been used to fighting asymmetric wars against terrorist groups in splintered countries and neighbourhoods. In some of these Middle Eastern conflicts our force committed has been small, and has not always had the equipment it needed. Were we to be drawn into a wider war we would need time to expand our military numbers and to produce many more vehicles and weapons.

There is a need for more thought over what kind of weapons we might need and what we might face at a time of rapid technological change. Our professional army would become the core of an expanded army we need to arise, which we trust it does not. We need above all to ensure that home defence is strong, which as always depends on our ability at sea and in the air to control approaches to our coast. We also need to ensure that we can sustain our weapons and maintain military production on these islands if our supplies from abroad are disrupted as they were in both major wars of the twentieth century. Our island position makes it so much easier militarily to defend ourselves. It also requires plenty of sea power to ensure supply from abroad, and plenty of flexibility to produce more of what we need at home.

[More money for roads maintenance](#)

The Minister for Roads has written to me and other MPs today to tell us how he intends to divide up the £420 m of money this year announced in the Budget for additional highways maintenance.

He tells me that Wokingham will receive an extra £1,177,000 and West Berkshire an extra £1,913,000. I look forward to our Councils bringing forward more schemes to fill more potholes, mean more road edges and improve surfaces. This money is on top of existing maintenance budgets.

[My contribution to the debate on the Centenary of the Armistice, 7 November 2018](#)

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): A hundred years ago on Sunday, a deafening silence broke out over the vast battlefields of Europe. Then, as now, there must have been very mixed emotions.

There would have been that great sense of loss and remorse that so many

people had been slaughtered, and so many people maimed and incapacitated. I guess that for those in the trenches there was apprehension. Was this for real? Could they trust the enemy? Would this truce hold? Could they stumble out of those muddy dungeons that had been their safe houses over all those long weeks and months of toil into a more open and free world where they could behave more normally? But they were, and we are, also permitted some joy that at last this murderous, bestial war was over. After four years of mass industrial slaughter, with millions of individual tragedies between the men and the families of the different combative nations, at last the slaughter was over. There was a chance to build something better.

When I lay a wreath in the morning in Burghfield and in the afternoon in Wokingham, I will be very conscious of two things. I will be conscious that there are war memorials in every other village and town in my constituency that time does not permit me to visit that day. As I look up at those lists of names on those two war memorials, I will be very conscious of how long those lists are and of how many brothers are together on the same list, with a double or treble tragedy for the family.

That scale of loss is difficult to comprehend and to wrestle with.

It reminds me of my two grandfathers. As is the case with most of us, our great grandfathers or our grandfathers were the survivors. They were young men who fought as young men and then tried to build a more normal life when they got back from the trenches. They had not had time to have girlfriends and to marry and produce children before they went off to war. My two grandfathers, like many others, went at the earliest possible opportunity, or may even have misled those involved about their age so keen were they to volunteer. Both fought on the western front.

One was badly injured, but, fortunately, recovered. I wanted to know from them, as a boy and as a teenager, more about these terrible events. Like many of their generation who had been through the war, they did not really want to share it with us. It was obviously so awful. They did not seek my praise and they did not seek my sympathy. They wanted to shield me from it. I wanted to know more about it, but I think that they took that view because it was so awful.

We have heard many moving remarks today, particularly about those who died, but let us think about those who survived. Let us think about what it must have been like to have four years of no normal life—as someone who was 17, 18, 19, 20 or whatever they were—where they had no normal social life and no normal family life apart from very rushed periods of leave, when they could not pursue their normal sports and leisure pursuits because space would not allow it, when they had no privacy, and when they had very repetitious food. The dreadful things they fought are obvious—the shells, the bombs, the rifle bullets, the snipers and the machine guns.

You can just about imagine how awful it must have been to have that fear that you were going to be asked to advance on barbed wire and machine guns, knowing that you had very little chance of surviving, but what about the boredom? What about the relentless discipline and the inability to know how

to fill the time while you were worrying about what was going to happen next? All of those things must have been dreadful.

So this is what I think we need to do. We owe it to them, to all those who directed the war, and to all those in this Parliament who sent our army to war—time does not permit this afternoon—to have a proper analysis and discussion about how we can do better in future. I am no pacifist. I think we have to arm ourselves well to protect ourselves and to preserve the peace.

We have fought too many wars and, too often, we sent our army into wars where they had limited chances of winning. We did not have a diplomatic and political strategy to follow the war. There is no use in winning a war, unless we win the peace as well. We know that the sequel to the first world war is the second world war—the tragedy that it all had to be done again on an even vaster scale with even bigger munitions and more terrifying bombs, eventually ending with the explosion of two atomic bombs to bring it to a very sad conclusion.

We need to ask ourselves how we can make sure that diplomacy and politics does not let people down so much again. How was it part of our strategy that, twice, this Parliament sent small highly professional British armies on to the continent to fight a war against a far bigger, better armed foe when they had no chance of winning because they had too little resource, the wrong weapons and the wrong tactics. In the first world war, it took four years to recruit a mighty citizens' army, to invent a lot of new weapons and to develop new tactics during the war. We were sadly unprepared. We asked them to do too much and it is amazing what they did.

Groundhog day propaganda

The Remain spinners have long since run out of new or vaguely credible lines. Yesterday the BBC Radio 4 Today programme did its best to keep their flag flying. The Business editor led the questioning on food shortages, when there isn't a scrap of evidence that any important continental exporter is about to cancel supplies or that the UK is about to place new barriers at our ports to keep the food out on March 30th. Instead of asking enough of his chosen expert and then of Sainsbury about the Argos acquisition, the possible tie up with Asda, the highly competitive state of the UK food market or about how they might source more UK produce to cut the food miles, we had to have the same old nonsense scares. There is a simple answer to all this. We don't believe them!

Agreement fever – time to cool down

The UK government is trying to get worked up about a possible EU agreement. Just remember this is not a possible future trading or partnership agreement. It is not anything the UK actually wants. They are talking about the EU's Withdrawal Agreement, which contains many things including £39bn that Leave voters do not agree with.

I just hope the Cabinet realises in time that trying to sign such a deal will go down badly with many voters, and would place the UK in a very weak position. There are plenty of Conservative MPs who have said they would not vote for it, and it will need primary legislation. The government cannot commit the UK to this. Only Parliament can.