

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT

First Delegated Legislation Committee

DRAFT ARMED FORCES ACT 2006
(CONTINUATION) ORDER 2024

Tuesday 15 October 2024

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Saturday 19 October 2024

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The Committee consisted of the following Members:

Chair: DAME SIOBHAIN McDONAGH

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| † Asser, James (<i>West Ham and Beckton</i>) (Lab) | † Murphy, Luke (<i>Basingstoke</i>) (Lab) |
| † Beales, Danny (<i>Uxbridge and South Ruislip</i>) (Lab) | † Nash, Pamela (<i>Motherwell, Wishaw and Carlisle</i>) (Lab) |
| † Blake, Rachel (<i>Cities of London and Westminster</i>) (Lab/Co-op) | † Obese-Jecty, Ben (<i>Huntingdon</i>) (Con) |
| † Carns, Al (<i>Minister for Veterans and People</i>) | † Paffey, Darren (<i>Southampton Itchen</i>) (Lab) |
| † Griffiths, Alison (<i>Bognor Regis and Littlehampton</i>) (Con) | † Race, Steve (<i>Exeter</i>) (Lab) |
| † Kitchen, Gen (<i>Wellingborough and Rushden</i>) (Lab) | † Roca, Tim (<i>Macclesfield</i>) (Lab) |
| † Kruger, Danny (<i>East Wiltshire</i>) (Con) | † Roome, Ian (<i>North Devon</i>) (LD) |
| † Maguire, Helen (<i>Epsom and Ewell</i>) (LD) | † Snell, Gareth (<i>Stoke-on-Trent Central</i>) (Lab/Co-op) |
| † Mohindra, Mr Gagan (<i>South West Hertfordshire</i>) (Con) | George James, <i>Committee Clerk</i> |
| | † attended the Committee |

The following also attended (Standing Order No. 118(2)):

Hopkins, Rachel (*Luton South and South Bedfordshire*) (Lab)

First Delegated Legislation Committee

Tuesday 15 October 2024

[DAME SIOBHAIN McDONAGH *in the Chair*]

Draft Armed Forces Act 2006 (Continuation) Order 2024

9.25 am

The Minister for Veterans and People (Al Carns): I beg to move,

That the Committee has considered the draft Armed Forces Act 2006 (Continuation) Order 2024.

I am pleased to see you in the Chair, Dame Siobhain. The purpose of the draft order is to extend for a further year the legislation governing the armed forces. That reflects a constitutional requirement under the Bill of Rights 1688 that a standing Army, and now by extension the Royal Navy and the Royal Air Force, cannot be maintained without the consent of Parliament.

In our increasingly dangerous and disordered world, I need not remind hon. Members of the importance of our consent today. From the frontline in Ukraine, where there are more than 1,000 casualties a day, to the hundreds of attacks on the UK in cyberspace, our allies, our democracy and our international rules-based system are under daily attack, threatening our physical and economic security and our hard-won freedoms, and undermining national cohesion. In the face of that, the dedicated men and women of our armed forces selflessly and courageously step forward day and night, making great personal sacrifice, to deliver on the Government's first and most important duty: to keep this nation safe and to protect our citizens.

But it is not just about safety; it is about security and stability. We cannot have prosperity without a safe, secure and stable nation. We cannot be safe at home and strong abroad without our armed forces. They are a critical security, diplomatic and humanitarian national asset. Whether they are exercising with NATO allies, training Ukrainians and getting military aid into their hands, delivering lifesaving food and aid to families in Gaza, or supporting flood victims in Poland, we must collectively renew our consent for that important work every five years by an Act of Parliament.

The draft order will keep the Armed Forces Act 2006 in force for a further year, until December 2025. That will ensure that our armed forces can continue to serve, and it will maintain the provisions that underpin the system of command, justice and discipline. It is a privilege to seek cross-party support from the Committee for the order, and in doing so I pay tribute to those who have served, those who are serving and the wider armed forces community. By defending our country, they give the ultimate in public service.

9.27 am

Danny Kruger (East Wiltshire) (Con): I start by paying tribute to the Minister and welcoming him to his place. The Labour Front Bench, and indeed the whole House,

is greatly enhanced by his presence, and I pay tribute to him and to his speech. I look forward to working with him on the important matters in the brief that we share.

The previous Government renewed the Armed Forces Act 2006, including through the Armed Forces Act 2021 and the Armed Forces Act 2006 (Continuation) Order 2023. Of course, we support today's draft order. As the Minister mentioned, it reflects the constitutional principle that goes back many hundreds of years to the Bill of Rights in the 17th century, when Parliament insisted on its own right to approve the presence of a standing Army. That was in the days when the rest of Europe suffered under absolute monarchy; who knew our Parliament could insist on the rights and liberties of British subjects on its own? I am pleased to be standing in the tradition set all those years ago.

As is customary in these debates, I pay tribute to our armed forces. I have the great privilege of representing East Wiltshire. Thousands of serving personnel are stationed at the camps and garrisons at Tidworth, Netheravon, Bulford, Larkhill, Perham Down and Upavon. I was recently taken up on to Salisbury plain by the commander of the Army's south-west region, and he showed me with a sweep of his arm where 20,000 British service personnel and their families live. I represent what I call the home of the British Army, despite what it says outside Aldershot.

We have the best people in the world serving in our armed forces. They keep us safe in a world fraught with risk and threats, and we must give them the tools they need. Labour Members will not be surprised to hear me reiterate once again the absolute imperative for a clear pathway for increasing defence spending to 2.5% of GDP by 2030. That is a paramount requirement, and if the Government do not commit to it now or at the Budget in a few weeks, there is a real risk of defence cuts at the worst possible time for our armed forces, when countries around the world are doing the exact opposite—rearming and increasing defence spending in order to prevent escalation and keep their people safe. At oral questions yesterday, Ministers could not even commit that defence training or research and development will have their budgets protected in the upcoming Budget. We should not beat around the bush: cuts in these areas would undermine our armed forces and our security.

Our support for the draft order is total, but we are implacably opposed to any cuts in spending, including by delaying the increases that the Government have—at least in principle—committed to in due course. The real test of our commitment to the armed forces is whether we are prepared to make that spending commitment soon.

The Chair: Members should bob in the normal way if they would like to speak. Do I see anybody from the Liberal Democrats? I call Helen Maguire.

9.30 am

Helen Maguire (Epsom and Ewell) (LD): I want to express my support for the draft order. Ensuring the security of our country must be the foremost priority of any Government and we must take defence seriously and work with allies to protect all of our freedoms.

The Conservative Government's approach to defence was negligent, leaving our armed forces under-resourced and vulnerable. Reducing troop numbers by 10,000 was

reckless and delays in procurement have deprived our armed forces of the tools that they desperately need. Further, service personnel and veterans have been failed with insufficient mental health support, poor housing and inadequate care. Our military personnel deserve better.

Although the draft order is straightforward, its significance cannot be overstated. It allows us to honour our armed forces while also questioning what the Government are doing to ensure that they are well prepared and supported, including providing the necessary resources and procurement, ensuring equipment is adequate and free from health risks, offering sufficient accommodation, supporting their mental health and maintaining an adequate personnel level.

As a former member of the military police, I understand at first hand the importance of discipline in the military. It is discipline that binds every service member, ensures the chain of command functions and enables operational success. That is why the Armed Forces Act 2006 and its annual extensions through orders such as this one are so critical. The Act empowers commanding officers to maintain order and enforce discipline.

We must thank our brave armed forces for their continued work at home and overseas. We support the passage of the draft order and look forward to hearing what advances the Government will make with the strategic defence review.

9.32 am

Rachel Blake (Cities of London and Westminster) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the Minister for bringing the order forward and I welcome him to his place. I am grateful to him for joining me on a visit to see the innovation that is taking place at St Mary's hospital in my constituency. I particularly welcome the order as we approach Remembrance Sunday and that period of reflection about the service of our armed forces. I also welcome the progress that the Government are already making on housing for veterans. My constituency contains barracks but also some housing that has been left in a terrible state, and I look forward to working on that issue to support veterans.

The Chair: I see no other Members bobbing, so I call the Minister to sum up.

9.33 am

Al Carns: I am grateful for the cross-party collaboration on the draft order and for the support that the Committee has given it.

Let me provide a bit more detail on some of the points raised, first by the hon. Member for East Wiltshire. As a former serving member of the military, I understand the difficulties in balancing the budget. Over the last 24 years, including the 14 years in which his party were in government, I have been through different exercises that have been cut, chopped and changed because of those difficulties. That is not to say, in any way, shape or form, that we are going to cut training, but decisions are always made within the system to ensure that resources go in the right place at the right time for the required effect.

On the route towards 2.5%, as the Prime Minister has said, we absolutely have committed to that, but we must do it on a balanced trajectory, at the right time—not too early or, indeed, too late. It is about getting the timing exactly right, but there is no doubt that the commitment sits with this Government to move towards 2.5%.

To cover some of the points raised by the hon. Member for Epsom and Ewell, there are some excellent programmes that have been running for some time now, which we will absolutely continue to move forward, on mental health, physical health and housing. We are also looking at different methods to redesign some of our veterans support, and we will publish a veterans strategy next year, which will outline some of those projects.

Finally, let me say in response to my hon. Friend the Member for Cities of London and Westminster that support on housing, as mentioned by the Prime Minister in his conference speech, will absolutely move forward. We are looking at ways of making sure that every veteran across the country has access to housing, and that those who serve get the deal that they deserve.

I thank hon. Members for upholding the constitutional position of our armed forces.

Question put and agreed to.

9.35 am

Committee rose.

