

At a time when the country's armed forces are engaged on operations in Afghanistan, and are operating a no fly zone over Libya, the MOD has announced additional redundancies among service personnel. The SDSR requires the armed forces to down size by some 17,000 personnel by 2015. Today's announcement is of 1,600 redundancies in the Royal Navy and 1,000 in the army. The RAF has already announced its first tranche of redundancies and this announcement is part of the same process. Overall there will be four tranches of redundancies. To manage a reduction of 17,000 in one go would be a big effort for any organization, especially one that is fighting a war.

The decision to choose those to be made redundant is a reflection of the downsizing of the forces as a result of the SDSR. Those people who are in areas which the MOD deems to be essential will not be made redundant. Reductions will be achieved by a combination of natural wastage, and by diminished recruiting effort. For example in this tranche nobody in either the infantry or the Royal Marines will be asked to leave. The larger number of naval personnel being let go is a reflection of the reduction in the numbers of ships and aircraft. Of 59 serving fast jet pilots some 15 will be asked to leave. Those most affected will be in the engineering, medical, warfare and logistics branches.

In the army the Brigade of Gurkhas will lose 150 personnel across the various branches of the service, including infantrymen. Others will be from the support services; the army has identified 150 branches and trades where it will have surplus personnel. Naval redundancies are expected to result in 121 officers, 274 senior ratings and 1,211 ratings leaving the service, in addition to the aviators. This affects ratings up to the rank of Captain. In the army redundancies affect all ranks up to Brigadier.

At the end of this exercise the strength of the Royal Navy will be 30,000; while the army will be at a strength of 94,350. It has to be wondered whether the UK's armed forces will retain a critical mass for unforeseen contingencies. Already the Chief of the Air Staff has said that he would like to see an up-rating of resources in the next spending round in 2014. This must reflect the effect of the no fly zone in Libya on top of the operation in Afghanistan, which is beginning to pinch the RAF's capability. Withdrawing ships from service must also add to the stretch factor which the navy will have to manage. Perhaps now the real victor of the SDSR is becoming apparent; all of the inter-service rivalry only served to strengthen the hand of the Treasury and the Cabinet Office.

A group of Cabinet ministers, including Liam Fox, William Hague and Andrew Mitchell appeared before the House of Commons Select Committee of defence on 9th March, to discuss the SDSR and the National Security Strategy. They were joined by Oliver Letwin of the Cabinet Office. There was no doubt who was in charge among the witnesses; it wasn't the Cabinet ministers, it was the Cabinet office. It must be wondered at as to why a government which is meant to be so media savvy would not see how ridiculous it would look to be dismissing servicemen and withdrawing front line equipment from service, while not addressing savings in the rear echelon first.

The Defence Reform Unit (DRU) under the leadership of Lord Levene is still considering what size and shape the headquarters element of the MOD will look like in the new era. In opposition Liam Fox was of the view that MOD was part of the problem; it seems that it still is. The DRU will report in July, meanwhile it seems easier to dismiss the elements of the MOD that are the war fighting part.

Secretary of State for Defence Dr Liam Fox MP later told Parliament : "While it is too early to know who will be selected for redundancy, the principles set out in the 1 March statement will be followed. First, both Services will ask for volunteers although all personnel in the relevant areas will be considered. Secondly, the redundancy scheme will not impact adversely on the current operations in Afghanistan and Libya, where our Armed Forces are fighting so bravely on this country's behalf. No-one who is preparing for combat operations, deployed on combat operations where they will receive the Operational Allowance or on post-operational tour leave on the day redundancy notices are issued will be made redundant unless they have volunteered."