

By our special correspondent

Bob Ainsworth said today at a UK Labour Party conference fringe meeting that recognition of the importance of defence spending was increasing among the British public. Arguing that defence was not the driving reason for people entering politics, he said that recognition of the needs of defence was nevertheless increasing. It was a relatively recent phenomenon caused by Britain's engagement in two enduring conflicts, he said

Mr Ainsworth stated that the "Britain in the World" document did overemphasise the "softer" issues and suggested that ordinary Labour members had been bringing the debate back to defence. Accepting that engagement in two conflicts had created military stretch, Mr Ainsworth said that it was important to acknowledge that there was no party that wanted to massively increase the defence budget. He said that there had been real terms increases in the defence budget since 1997. The Government did spend an awful lot and was the second highest spender in the world in cash terms, he stressed.

It was right to prioritise the current operations while not letting go of the other threats, Mr Ainsworth asserted, stating that this had caused the military stretch. He said that they had brought things forward in a way that the MoD had said was impossible. Des Browne had been told that taking Mastiff trucks to Afghanistan was impossible by the MoD, but it was done within nine months, Mr Ainsworth stated.

Mr Ainsworth also emphasised the "importance of people". The idea that technology was king had been disproved in Afghanistan, and it was not possible to replace "intelligent boots on the ground", Mr Ainsworth said, emphasising the need for decent pay, improvements in the welfare package and making family life easier.

Discussing a recent Government command paper, the Minister for the Armed Forces said that nobody had previously done a cross-departmental evaluation of how the armed forces were treated in education and healthcare. This had enabled some inadvertent discrimination against members of the armed forces to be halted.

Stephen Fidler of the Financial Times explained that the army had last down-sized in 2004 on the assumption that future operations would be low intensity peace-keeping operations. He said that, given British failure in Southern Iraq and the high intensity conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan, these assumptions now looked optimistic. In addition, these assumptions had led to the military being sent to Afghanistan without the right kit, he asserted.

Mr Fidler identified a lack of strategic thinking at the MoD. He argued that this pre-dated the current Government but had been exacerbated by it, and said that in some regions of the world Britain had lost importance, such as Latin America. He called for another strategic defence review and said that the 1998 review had never been properly funded.

On spending, Mr Fidler asserted that the Chief of the General Staff General Sir Richard Dannat had emphasised the need to be ready for conventional state to state conflict. Explaining why there was a problem at the MoD, Mr Fidler said that spending objectives had become confused. He wondered whether it was considered a national security or a social welfare tool.

Health was up 30 per cent, police were up 13 whereas the armed forces, despite fighting in two conflicts, had shrunk by 10 per cent since 2003 making the entire armed forces smaller than the US Marines, he stated.

Describing the armed forces as suffering from a "boiled frog syndrome", Mr Fidler said that the armed forces were managing decline. This undermined morale and also meant that the ambitions were being reduced, he contended.

Bob Keen of BAE Systems said that the threats to the armed forces were more immediate and uncertain than at any time in recent years. He described the key challenge for the defence industry as ensuring that the capability needed by the armed forces was delivered. This ranges over both current operations and a more long term perspective.

On current operations, he welcomed the Government's efforts to acquire the capabilities for the armed forces. Mr Keen stressed that decisions needed to be made about what the UK wanted its armed forces to do in the future. For example, the need for projecting long range force had led to the decision to build two new carriers. He said that because the nature of threats was uncertain the equipment needed to be constantly updated, and that Typhoon needed to continue to address a range of multi-role capabilities.

A strategy for the defence industry was also required. He argued that it was not about social benefits; rather it was about the right balance in national security.

The aircraft carriers being built by a consortium including BAE Systems would provide a truly world class capability, he added. The relationship between the defence industry and the MoD drove advancement in logistic support and delivered significant savings. The key challenge was delivering a strategic approach to delivering a world-class capability. He stressed that while BAE Systems was a major economic driver for the UK economy the important thing was being able to deliver for the armed forces.

Eric Joyce MP said that he had a couple of thoughts about the national policy forum document. He said that he found it worrisome that the Labour Party membership was retreating into a way of seeing things as they had before 1997. In 1992-4 the shadow defence team's great success was neutralising defence as a weak spot for the Labour party, he argued. The emphasis on international development suggested that the party was returning to stressing the "cuddlier" aspects of defence.

He asserted that in order able to do the international development aspects it was important to have a properly equipped armed forces and he worried that people were forgetting this. He also said that if a party became unstable on defence then the public would not vote for them.

The meeting was opened up to contributions from the audience.

An audience member asked about the lack of military experience in the Labour Government.

From a ministerial point of view the Labour Government had strong ministers, said Eric Joyce. But, he suggested that the lack of Labour MPs with experience had an impact on the internal debates as compared with the Conservative party who had a number of MPs with military experience.

The Chair said that the best Secretary of State he worked for had no military experience.

Answering a question about a lack of debate about Trident in the Labour Party, Mr Ainsworth said that the Labour Party could debate what it wanted. He said that the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament needed to engage and bring forward some arguments so a proper discussion could be had (note: CND has a stand at the conference. Kate Hudson, its chair, is responding to a request from Defence Viewpoints to make a future contribution).

A further question asked about service personnel and the panels' hopes for the outcome from the next strategic defence review.

It was important to think about returning service personnel, Mr Ainsworth replied. He described new programmes such as helping to pay for degrees for former armed forces personnel. On mental health, he said that it was important to consider the long term impacts and to ensure that the UK stayed on the cutting edge.

Stephen Fidler said that he wanted to see an open discussion of what Britain's role in the world was. He said that Britain could be a force for good and could punch above its weight, but he stressed that the current budget did not sit with these ambitions.

Another audience member said that the UK had not yet come to terms with the challenge of nation building.

Lord Guthrie said that he was critical of the Government because the funding had fallen behind. He said that the strategic defence review in 1998 had been not followed through.

Mr Ainsworth said that more needed to be done for military personnel and said that aircraft carriers were essential because of their expeditionary capability.

Tom Griffin from General Dynamics asked what the defence industry could do better.

Responding first, Bob Keen said that over the last three years the industry had done a remarkable job in addressing the operational demands.

On what could be done better, he said that it was important to do better at delivering equipment on time and to cost. He stressed that defence programmes were the most complex for industry anywhere.

In addition, BAE's relationship with the air force gave an intimate understanding of the environment they operated in and could be expanded, he said.

Bob Ainsworth described "phenomenal" improvements in efficiency. He also said that long term procurement activities could become difficult to control.

Asked about coordination with Europe, Bob Keen said that the challenge of harmonising capabilities across nations was huge.

He said that within the defence industry there was a possibility of consolidation within Europe which could drive common defence and industrial capabilities.

Stephen Fidler added that defence procurement within the UK was already very complicated and the idea of a European wide procurement strategy would never work. He contended, however, that there was an opportunity for more bilateral efforts and described Sarkozy's vision for defence as an opportunity for the UK.

An audience member then described support for International multilateral nuclear disarmament in the U.S.

In reply, Lord Guthrie said that the first step was to reduce the amount of nuclear weapons.

Bob Ainsworth said that the Government had considerably cut the number of warheads. The other thing that needed to be done was to put in place the mechanisms for monitoring that people actually did what they agreed to do, he concluded