

By Nick Watts, Great North News correspondent

To govern is to choose. Nobody said it was going to be easy given the economic climate, so choices have to be made. Speaking on the 25th June on board HMS Ark Royal the prime minister said that he wanted to "enshrine the military covenant in the law of the land". A good choice to make. Currently the Armed Forces Bill is making its way through parliament, which represents the perfect opportunity not just to make a gesture, but to do the right thing for our armed forces.

Well maybe. In a debate in the House of Commons on 16th February the government appeared to be wavering in its resolve. This has been noticed by ex-servicemen and by other MPs. The government set great store in Opposition in addressing the needs of the armed forces which appeared to have been left behind in all the arguments about equipment. Liam Fox is personally very committed to good medical treatment and rehabilitation of those injured while serving our country. The sad arithmetic of the economic situation the government has inherited means that those choices get harder and harder.

It is often said that the Treasury is the enemy the armed forces fear most. With good reason. The Treasury acts as a ministry of accounting, rather than anything to do with either investment or enterprise. To fight its corner the MOD has to go into bat just like all of the other departments of state. Defence, like Health care, is an expensive business. They both involve lots of personnel and expensive equipment. Both seem to be blighted by chronic funding shortages. Both involve life and death situations.

When service personnel speak of being in dangerous situations the first thing they will admit to is being afraid. But they realize that there is something more important than fear, which drives them on. It's called courage. Politicians too sometimes need courage and this is one of them. However they manage it, this government must overcome the bureaucrats and the bean counters and see to it that the prime minister's words ring true and not hollow. The military covenant must be enshrined into the law of the land, and the Armed Forces Bill is the place to do it.