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Written Statements

Wednesday 29 October 2008

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Armed Forces: National Recognition Study

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, Ministry of Defence >
(Baroness Taylor of Bolton)

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My right honourable friend the Minister of State for Defence (Bob Ainsworth) has made the following Written Ministerial Statement.

I wish to announce the publication today of the Government response to the independent inquiry into the national recognition of the Armed Forces carried out by my honourable friend the Member for Grantham. My honourable friend was invited by the Government last December to examine ways of improving the nation’s understanding and appreciation of the Armed Forces and his report was published on 19 May.

As I said when it was published, the Government warmly welcome this report, which is comprehensive in its coverage and based on extensive consultation.

The Government are acutely aware of the debt owed to our Armed Forces. Our gratitude for the work they do in the service of our country is reflected in a raft of recent initiatives with the service personnel Command Paper the central plank. This unprecedented piece of work set out to achieve two things: first, to end any disadvantage associated with service life and, secondly, to apply, where appropriate, special treatment, particularly for those injured in the course of their service. Complementing this, it is also vital for our serving men and women, especially those engaged in difficult and dangerous overseas campaigns, to know that the whole of Britain understands and appreciates the work that they do in our name. That is why the Prime Minister set up the national recognition inquiry.

The report made many recommendations, the majority of which have been accepted. We have been considering how we might implement them and I am pleased to announce that the Government have already taken action to bring a number of measures into effect, including on the wider wearing of uniforms in public, a more systematic approach to homecoming parades and new rules on dealing with Members of Parliament. However, we are also conscious of the need to avoid placing additional burdens on our hard-pressed Armed Forces, especially given

the present level of commitment to operations, which must remain our top priority. Nevertheless, we welcome the study’s objective to create more opportunities for contact between the Armed Forces and the society they serve and for the public to be able to express their support. Where we have not fully accepted recommendations, we are confident in most cases that we can give meaning to the intent behind the recommendation. Our detailed response to each of the recommendations is set out in the response that we are publishing today.

Copies of the response to the report are being placed in the Library of the House and will also be available from the Vote Office and the Printed Paper Office.

Armed Forces: Protected Mobility

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, Ministry of Defence >

(Baroness Taylor of Bolton)

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My right honourable friend the Secretary of State for Defence (John Hutton) has made the following Written Ministerial Statement.

The provision of protected vehicles to our forces in Iraq and Afghanistan has attracted considerable interest amongst honourable Members and the British public. I therefore felt it would be helpful to set out, following the Prime Minister’s announcements and within the constraints of operational security, the current position on protected mobility, and our future intentions. This Statement will touch on both Operations TELIC and HERRICK, but will mostly focus on Afghanistan.

We have already achieved a great deal in improving the protected mobility options available to commanders on operations. Mastiff is unquestionably a success story. For its role, Mastiff is delivering the very highest levels of protection available anywhere in the world. Where it can be used, and its size and weight mean that it has its limitations, it is clearly the vehicle of choice. That is why the Prime Minister announced a further order of these vehicles last year. The deliveries of Mastiff tranche two, which will begin in a month’s time, will bring the Mastiff fleet we have available to support operations to over 280.

It is not only through Mastiff that we are delivering a world-class protected-vehicle capability; we are also delivering Ridgback. Using the smaller Cougar 4x4 chassis, and innovative, cutting-edge UK armour technologies, we will be able to deliver protection levels close to that of Mastiff in a package that is able to better access urban areas, increasing the survivability of troops in these roles. We have also recently procured 30 base Cougar vehicles, a mixture of 4x4 and 6x6, to augment our training fleet. By taking this action, we will ensure delivery of the right numbers of both vehicles into theatre as soon as is practicable.

In recent months, the nature of threat against our troops on the ground in Afghanistan has evolved significantly. It is vital that we respond urgently to these new threats to ensure that we continue to provide the best possible protection to our people. But delivering better protection for our troops is not just about heavy vehicles such as Mastiff and Ridgback. In the hierarchy of force protection one should first seek not to be detected, if detected then seek not to be hit, and if hit not to be destroyed. On the more predictable and vulnerable operations we focus, rightly, on the latter part of that hierarchy, however for many of our roles we need to take a different approach, balancing the requirements of protection and agility.

Viking, Land Rover WMIK (weapon mount installation kit) and Jackal are all agile vehicles with high levels of off-road mobility which enable us to get off tracks and trails and to be unpredictable. The Land Rover WMIK and Jackal both allow us to operate in open desert and mountainous terrain, taking the fight to the enemy away from ground of their choosing. Jackal in particular is proving a significant success, delivering excellent protection, mobility, range and firepower. It is for this reason that we are procuring over 100 additional Jackal, costing around

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£75 million, to augment our current fleet, bringing the total to over 300.

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Viking has provided an excellent capability in Afghanistan, giving us unparalleled access to areas around the Helmand River. But, although we are providing some further enhancements to its protection, we have reached the limit of its ability to carry extra weight and protection. This is why we intend to replace Viking in Afghanistan with an alternative, better protected, high-mobility vehicle, to be known as Warthog; work is under way to identify the right vehicle to fulfil this role. We will procure over 100 new vehicles with deliveries starting at the end of next year.

We are also planning to modify Panther with a few theatre-specific alterations in order to field it to Afghanistan. Bought through the defence equipment programme as a command and liaison vehicle for the conventional battlefield, Panther offers excellent mobility and impressive levels of protection for its size. With a full communications capability, it will offer a capable addition to the options available in certain roles.

Inevitably any statement on protected mobility must address the role of Snatch Land Rover, a vehicle which has received considerable criticism. First, to be absolutely clear, I can inform the House that—in addition to the regular reviews that are conducted into protected mobility—senior operational commanders were asked to specifically consider the requirement for Snatch Land Rover and its importance to operations. The response was clear: commanders need a vehicle of the size, weight and profile of Snatch Land Rover, capable of transporting men, to fulfil their tasks in theatre. Further, the availability of such a vehicle is considered mission critical.

This does not mean that no action can be taken on Snatch. We have set in train a programme to apply the lessons we have learned from the development of Mastiff and Ridgback to Snatch. We have modified Snatch's running gear, chassis, engine, and other automotive components to give the vehicle more power and the ability to carry a greater load. The extra power and payload allow us to carry out a series of modifications, details of which honourable Members will understand I am unable to share, to enhance its mobility and protection. This effectively generates a new variant, especially configured for Afghanistan, the Snatch Vixen. We have already fielded a small number of these vehicles, and we will be substantially increasing the size of the fleet over the coming year.

We cannot make Snatch invulnerable; any vehicle can be overmatched if faced with an overwhelming attack. But these modifications mean that Snatch Vixen will offer the highest levels of protection for its size and weight class.

The need to protect our people to the highest possible standards does not stop with the patrol and fighting vehicles. We need to look closely at the vehicles which are providing the integral logistic and engineering support in this hostile environment. We have already announced the fielding of the newly procured support vehicle (SV) to Afghanistan and Iraq replacing our existing fleet of 4, 8 and 14-tonne cargo vehicles with a modern and better-protected logistic vehicle. We have also used a number of SV chassis to develop a new enhanced palletised load system (EPLS) which is replacing the deployed DROPS capability.

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But we believe there is still more we can do. In Afghanistan we have a number of units who are sometimes required to operate outside the wire who are equipped with light utility 'B' Vehicles such as the Pinzgauer 4x4 and the General Service Land Rover. In the context of the evolving threat, we have therefore decided to procure over 400 new light, medium and heavy protected utility vehicles, to be known respectively as Coyote, Husky and Wolfhound. The tactical support vehicles (TSV), delivering from June 2009, will ensure that all our troops are operating in an appropriately protected vehicle.

Training plays a crucial part in the success of our troops in theatre. The protected mobility package includes sufficient numbers of each of the vehicles to ensure that all troops are fully trained; vehicles will not be deployed to theatre until the appropriate levels of training have been conducted.

Funding of £500 million has been allocated from the reserve towards this protected mobility package, which is expected to cost over £600 million in total. Defence will fund a part of the package in acknowledgement of the longer-term benefit to core defence capability these vehicles offer beyond our current commitments.

Vehicles, of course, are only part of the answer; honourable Members are well aware of the crucial role played by tactics, techniques and procedures in protecting our troops from harm. Equally, our world-leading electronic countermeasures provide an extra, crucial, layer of force protection. We will also investigate new ways of approaching force protection where we can; this is why we are working on the development of a route proving and clearing capability, known as TALISMAN. This capability, which has been allocated £96 million from the reserve, and uses specialist vehicles such as the Buffalo mine-protected vehicle, aims to deliver a system which allows us to mitigate the risks faced by our forces in a proactive way by applying technology to the challenge of transiting routes and dealing with high-risk areas.

We owe a great debt to the men and women of the Armed Forces who operate in hostile environments, risking their lives to secure the freedom that has been hard won for the people of Iraq and Afghanistan and to ensure that international terrorism, which threatens us all, far beyond those two countries, is not allowed to take hold. It is beholden on us to ensure that they receive the very best support and the very best equipment for the roles they are undertaking. In this Statement today, I have outlined a road map which will deliver nearly 700 new vehicles at a cost of over £700 million, and enable us to remove some 400 lesser protected vehicles from operations. I firmly believe that this plan, once implemented, will give our Armed Forces the protection and mobility they need and deserve to do their jobs as safely and effectively as modern technology can provide.

Education (Student Support) Regulations

The Minister of State, Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills >

(Lord Drayson)

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Today my right honourable friend the Secretary of State for Innovation, Universities and Skills (John Denham) has made the following Written Statement.

This Government believe that everyone with the talent and ambition to enter higher education should be able to benefit from the opportunity. Investment by this Government means that by the end of this Comprehensive Spending Review period in 2010-11, government funding will have risen by nearly 30 per cent in real terms since 1997. There are 287,000 more higher education students than in 1997 and the unit of funding has been maintained in real terms. We have also succeeded in raising aspirations—over 50 per cent of young people from every social background and every part of the country aspire to go to university.

Finance should not present a practical barrier to students wishing to study at university. In 2006, the Government introduced a new system of student financial support which offered a maximum grant of £2,700 and a minimum bursary of £300 annually for students from low income households. In July 2007 I announced that, from 2008-09, this scheme would be significantly enhanced by raising the family income thresholds for both full and partial grants. At the time, I told the House that our intention was for one-third of students to receive a full grant and a further third a partial grant. The new system came into effect this academic year.

It is now expected that about 40 per cent of students may receive the full grant. The total number of students receiving a full or partial grant will also exceed the original projections. I have decided to make extra money available in response to this higher demand for student support so that total spending on the student financial support system will rise above the levels set out in July 2007. Spending will increase by a further £100 million per annum when the revised system reaches steady state.

For students coming into university in 2009-10 student support—like the child tax credit—will focus help on families earning up to £50,000 who are doing the right thing by supporting their children to go to university:

the family income threshold for the full grant will remain at the enhanced level of £25,000, which we expect will provide around 40 per cent of students with a full grant, exceeding the intention announced last July for one-third of students to receive a full grant;

the family income threshold for a partial grant will be £50,020, which means that all students with household incomes of £18,360 to £50,020 will be eligible for higher levels of grant than in 2007-08;

all students with a household income of £18,360 to £57,708 will be eligible for a more generous package of grant and loan support than in 2007-08; and

consequently, we are maintaining the intention that two-thirds of students should receive either a full or a partial grant.

The new student support arrangements will be applicable only to new students entering higher education in 2009-10. Existing students will receive the same support as they were entitled to receive when they started university.

I propose to lay before Parliament amending regulations to adjust the eligibility for student grants and loans. Following approval by Parliament, they will take some weeks to implement. I have therefore asked the Student Loans Company to begin processing applications for student support in the New Year.

The full annual impact of these changes will reduce the cost pressure by £100 million. For the rest of this spending review period it will be necessary to make incremental adjustments to the DIUS budget, which totals over £20 billion. My department is well on the way to identifying £1.5 billion of cash-releasing efficiency savings over the period, and further reductions will be sought. I also plan to deploy some of the departmental unallocated provision.

In making changes, we will:

maintain the ring-fenced science budget;

maintain the unit of funding for students in higher education;

continue to increase HE student numbers annually towards our participation target; and

continue to increase investment in further education and skills, including expansion of the Train to Gain programme.

I am today asking HEFCE to allocate no more than 10,000 additional student numbers for 2009-10. This means that, in 2009-10, there will be 30,000 more funded students (full-time equivalent) compared to 2007-08.

Details of other budget changes will be made available at the appropriate time in the usual manner.

Secure Training Centres: Physical Restraint

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, Ministry of Justice >

(Lord Bach)

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My right honourable friend the Minister of State (David Hanson) has made the following Written Ministerial Statement.

On 24 June, the Minister of State for Children, Young People and Families, my right honourable

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friend the Member for Stretford and Urmston (Beverley Hughes), and I announced our intention of publishing the report prepared by Peter Smallridge and Andrew Williamson on the use of restraint in juvenile secure settings, together with the Government's response, by the end of October.

The report covers a wide range of issues and consideration of them has necessitated detailed exploration which is still in progress. We will publish the report, and our response, by 15 December.

Tibet

The Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office >

(Lord Malloch-Brown)

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My right honourable friend the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (David Miliband) has made the following Written Ministerial Statement.

A new round of talks on Tibet between the Chinese Government and representatives of the Dalai Lama is likely to take place shortly. These talks are hugely important for the future of Tibet. They provide the only forum in which there is any realistic possibility of progress to resolve the differences between the parties involved.

The Chinese Government have said that they are serious about dialogue and that they hope for a positive outcome. They have set conditions for dialogue which we believe the Dalai Lama has met. The Dalai Lama has made clear that he is not seeking separation or independence. He has said repeatedly that he is seeking a resolution to the situation of Tibet within the framework of the Chinese constitution, a point he made explicitly in an interview with the *Financial Times* on 24 May during his visit to the United Kingdom. He said he was “not seeking separation, not seeking independence, but within the framework of the Chinese Constitution, meaningful realistic autonomy [for Tibetans]”. He has maintained a clear opposition to violence.

The British Government have a strong interest in the dialogue between the Chinese Government and the Dalai Lama's representatives, although we are not a party to it. No Government who are committed to promoting international respect for human rights can remain silent on the issue of Tibet, or disinterested in a solution to its problems.

Britain has been clear under this Government about our commitment to the people of Tibet. We remain deeply concerned about the human rights situation there. My right honourable friend the Prime Minister set out our concerns to Premier Wen during discussions in the spring and again when they met in Beijing during the Olympic Games. I have made the same point to Foreign Minister Yang on a number of occasions since the unrest in March this year in Tibet. We have consistently made clear that we want to see the human rights of the Tibetan people respected, including through respect for their distinct culture, language, traditions and religions. Our interest is not in restoring an order which existed 60 years ago and which the Dalai Lama himself has said he does not seek to restore.

We are also concerned at more immediate issues arising directly from the unrest of this spring, including the situation of those who remain in detention following the unrest, the increased constraints on religious activity, and the limitations on free access to the Tibetan Autonomous Region by diplomats and journalists. These issues reinforce long-held unease on the part of the Government about the underlying human rights situation in Tibet.

Other countries have made similar points. But our position is unusual for one reason of history that has been imported into the present: the anachronism of our formal position on whether Tibet is part of China, and whether in fact we harbour continued designs to see the break-up of China. We do not.

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Our ability to get our points across has sometimes been clouded by the position the UK took at the start of the 20th century on the status of Tibet, a position based on the geopolitics of the time. Our recognition of China's "special position" in Tibet developed from the outdated concept of suzerainty. Some have used this to cast doubt on the aims we are pursuing and to claim that we are denying Chinese sovereignty over a large part of its own territory. We have made clear to the Chinese Government, and publicly, that we do not support Tibetan independence. Like every other EU member state, and the United States, we regard Tibet as part of the People's Republic of China. Our interest is in long-term stability, which can only be achieved through respect for human rights and greater autonomy for the Tibetans.

We have noted recent comments by the Dalai Lama regretting the lack of progress in the dialogue so far. We are also aware of indications of growing frustration among some Tibetans about the dialogue process. We consider the position the Dalai Lama has stated publicly, including when he visited Britain this year, that he opposes violence and is seeking meaningful autonomy within the framework of the Chinese constitution, provides a basis for a negotiated settlement. Our strong view is that genuine progress at the next round of talks is essential to promote progress on such a settlement. Participation in these talks carries a weight of responsibility for both parties.

Transport: National Networks

The Minister of State, Department for Transport >

(Lord Adonis)

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My right honourable friend the Secretary of State for Transport (Geoff Hoon) has made the following Ministerial Statement.

I am today announcing a programme of work to ensure that we make best use of our national transport networks and accelerate the process of identifying where future expansion is needed.

Our national transport networks are essential for people going about their day-to-day lives. In order to stimulate Britain's economic growth and support our position as a leading world economy it is essential that we make the right long-term investments in our transport infrastructure today and that we plan for future growth, in a way which is consistent with reducing greenhouse gas emissions overall.

The work will build on the recommendations by Sir Rod Eddington and the Government's October 2007 response, *Towards a Sustainable Transport System*.

The Minister of State, Lord Adonis, will chair a National Networks Strategy Group, with senior partners from the Highways Agency, Network Rail, HM Treasury and other government departments as required. I have asked that the group focus on two issues. The first is how to make best use of the existing key networks, for example, by the selective extension of rail electrification or the wider implementation of hard shoulder running on our motorways to provide additional capacity for motorists and to give them greater reliability and choice.

Alongside this, the study will focus on longer-term solutions for the strategic corridors. This will include consideration of wholly new rail lines, including high-speed rail. We are committed to developing a modern sustainable rail system that supports economic growth, including housing development, and the climate change agenda. New lines have great potential and it is important that we start now to plan for future growth.

However, it is crucial that the case for such investment is underpinned by robust evidence on long-term demand projections and a clear understanding of the capacity of the existing networks, and takes full account of relevant geographical, technical and environmental considerations. The National Networks Strategy Group will build on the work on new lines being undertaken by Network Rail.

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This programme of work will be taken forward immediately. I have asked Lord Adonis to report on progress early in 2009.

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Terms of reference for the National Networks Strategy Group have been placed in the Libraries of both Houses.