

## Speech

# Minister Pollard speech at DSEI

DSEI is a showcase for British industry and British ingenuity

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Good morning, all

Thank you very much for having us here. And it is great seeing so many people at DSEI and expanded DSEI. It really is a superb showcase, not just for British

industry, British ingenuity, but how as an alliance of nations that stand together against the threat, we can see how one country's innovation can support others, how we can work together to deliver a better war fighting deterrence against those people that would seek to do us harm.

I was honoured to be asked by the Prime Minister a few days ago to step up from my role as the Minister for the Armed Forces that I had been doing for the past year, to take on a new role looking not just at procurement, as industry, as the title behind me suggests, but as at readiness as well.

And that is what I'm going to be talking about today to make sure that the sense that you can leave with is that we have a government determined to make defence an engine for growth, determined to move faster than we have been at the moment, and also being clear, as some of you, if you have had the misfortune of listening to one of my speeches when I was the minister of the Armed Forces, to give you some homework as well.

So, you all know that our Armed Forces are only as strong as the industry that stands behind them. We've seen that vividly in Ukraine, with those brave friends fighting not just for their freedom and sovereignty, but for our security as well. The work of British Industry, of European industry, of allied industry in helping keep Ukraine in the fight should be illustration for every one of the importance of having a fast, efficient, agile defence industry standing behind our Armed Forces, and that is precisely what we sought to deliver in the defence industrial strategy that I launched on Monday in the House of Commons.

Now our financial commitment to defence is only possible thanks to the unprecedented defence uplift that the Prime Minister and the Chancellor have given us. We have £5 billion extra in our defence budget this year. By April 2027 we'll be spending 2.5% on defence, 2.6% of qualifying NATO spend 3% in the next parliament and 3.5% of our GDP as part of that 5% NATO security pledge by 2035, that's an enormous uplift in defence spending, the biggest since the end of the Cold War.

But that is also a challenge to us as well. Spending more means we have to spend it wiser than we have done in the past, and to deliver that vision, we need to be smarter in how we invest.

So it is not just that we are spending more money on defence, we have to reform defence, both in the way our Armed Forces work, but especially in the way that we procure and that's why on Monday in the defence industrial strategy, I announced £773 million of money to make the UK the best place in the world to start and grow a defence business.

It is a strategy designed to make unapologetically the defence and engine for

growth. And I will say that phrase quite a lot, not just because the MoD press team incentivised me to do so when I was on the media round from HMS Mersey on Monday morning by giving me a cake every time I said engine for growth, which for those who know me, is quite an incentive as well. But because we have not been saying it clearly enough for far too long, we as an industry, people who care about Defence, have been comfortable behind our walls, comfortable not telling the story of the economic contribution that we can make to our communities, of how defence helps not just keep our country safe, but is the backbone of our economic growth.

So one of the challenges I am going to give you is how you can tell your story that makes defence an engine for growth across the country, whether you are a prime a startup, whether you're in academia, a trade union, all of us can tell that story better than we have done over the last decade. And if we do that, we can fuel export and innovation faster, delivering on the vision set out in the Strategic Defence Review and the defence industrial strategy to provide greater resilience to our Armed Forces, to back industry and workers, and importantly, to increase our deterrence and war fighting resilience.

Because when the Prime Minister appointed me a few days ago, he didn't do so as a like for like replacement to my predecessor, and I want to thank Maria (Eagles) for her work, we did so as a stepping up of this portfolio. So technically, the job title is minister for defence readiness and industry. Defence readiness matters because it's not just about buying stuff, It's about being able to use it, being able to be faster in what we are doing, and that's why we need to build a new partnership between the Ministry of Defence and industry, that not only makes defence an engine for growth, but further spreads the industry's positive impact in the communities in which we operate. And in order to do that, we need to change. And so, the homework that I mentioned earlier, and if I can be blunt, to do so, this is a call for action, not just for my MoD colleagues, our colleagues in uniform, but also those in industry and beyond.

The objective from this Strategic Defence Review is clear, we need to be ready for war fighting in a way that we have not done for many years, not expeditionary war fighting, but securing our own backyard, a NATO first approach that looks at the Euro Atlantic area as our primary area of operations, that is NATO first, but not NATO only, because we have a significant role supporting our allies around the world.

You need to look at the carrier strike group in the Indo Pacific to see the contribution that the UK lead can have sailing alongside our allies, especially from Norway, with a frigate throughout the entirety of our deployment, but that means we need to be more honest and blunt about what we are doing.

So first of all, we are too slow. The Ministry of Defence is too slow, and as a result, industry is reflecting that back. We need to speed up our procurements, and to do

that, we need to speed up our contracting and decision making. Procurements that take five years need to take two years. Those that take two, need to take one. Those need to take six, need to go to two to three months. Now that is not just a target from the Strategic Defence Review. That is a mandate for culture change to be able to deliver it, that is a change on the second area that I want to challenge you on is how we take risk. Because the Ministry of Defence is all about risk management, how we manage the risk to our nation, how we manage the risk to our allies.

But importantly, we have our risk ratios, about how we contract in a different place than we need them today, because peacetime procurement was fine when we were in a peacetime, but you all know that we are not at war, but nor are we at peace any longer. So our procurement system needs to adapt, and that means we need a different approach to how we look at risk, and a cultural shift about how we do that, and that means shifting our focus to readiness and growth to war fighting readiness for our industry to be ready to meet the growing challenges, procurement that isn't just about buying things, but understands it has a bigger contribution, about equipping our people to be able to be ready to fight, and we know that those who work in this sector already feel that.

In opposition and over the past year in government, I've seen the workers of the defence industry the enormous sense of pride that they have in what they do. I've seen the workers in the shipyards of Scotland, both in Govan, Scotland and Rosyth, building the next generation of frigates, not just for the UK Royal Navy, but for many of our allies further afield, and hopefully many more soon as well.

The armoured vehicles in Telford, the missiles that we're manufacturing in Belfast, Stevenage and Bolton, the UAVs in west Wales. There's enormous industry across the country, but I want us to think bolder about how we do this but also tell the story about how we are still proudly a nation of makers. When people say we don't build things anymore, show that to be the lie it is. Show them the first-class production facilities that we have. Show them the energy and ingenuity of our workforces, show them the bright young things, the new apprentices that are so eager to learn, eager to grow those new skills, and those people that are coming to the end of their careers, that are eager to pass on their experience the next generation.

We are a nation of makers and defence can lead the way in asserting that to the wider public as well. The final challenge I want to give you as part of homework is I want to know what are the stupid rules that are getting in the way of you doing your job. And the reason I want to challenge you on stupid rules is because I know that there are far too many of them. I know there are far too many of them because over the past year, I've been removing them from recruitment.

In the past year, we have removed 100 outdated medical requirements that stopped people joining our Armed Forces. We removed the stupid rule that said if

you had an inhaler when you were three years old and haven't used one since then you were medically unfit to join the Armed Forces, that was a stupid rule that is gone. We removed the stupid rule about acne and spots, because if we're mainly recruiting people in their teenage years, perhaps we should have some awareness that a perfect complexion is not necessary for war fighting readiness.

These are examples of stupid rules. We had them for far too long, and we have them in every part of defence innovation and we can't see that they are stupid rules, not because people that were interacting with them don't recognise that they're stupid rules, but because we had a system that deprived people of the agency to remove them, that is our challenge about how we implement the Defence Industrial Strategy, how we become more efficient, how we take more risk, how we risk share more between the MoD and industry, and in particular, how we bring more small businesses to understand how they can contract with the MOD with our new business growth defence SME hub, which will allow small businesses, for the first time to have a one stop shop about how they access MoD contracts, how they can understand how they can sell their ingenuity innovation, and not spend hours upon hours banging their head against a wall, unable to access the procurement systems, because we need their technologies, their innovation, their agility in defence.

So, I know that you all have a stupid rule in mind. I know you also have stupid processes in mind. I think of myself recently as the MP for Devonport, as a proud Janner, and for our international visitors, that is someone from Plymouth. I was visiting one of our defence companies in the constituency I represent, and they were explaining to me about how this cutting-edge facility doing amazing things for our military was powered not by the electricity from the grid, but by diesel generators.

And the reason for that was that some of the connector cables that needs to be fixed were broken. It would cost £70,000 to fix those cables, but because they couldn't get the decision to spend £70,000 to fix those cables, over the past two years, they've spent £1.5 million on diesel to power that facility. That is an appalling use of taxpayer's money. It is precisely that which I want to empower our people about, and just as the principle I had when I was the Minister for the Armed Forces, trust our people.

We spend a fortune training them to be the very best in the world. Let's not constrain them with stupid rules.

So, let's do the same with procurement as well. Let's start trusting the people that know what they're doing. But part of that is about a trust that goes both ways, a trust that says, if we contract with you, we'll be able to spiral development faster, we'll be able to get good value. Everyone will be able to deliver what they need to and their objectives. It is a real challenge about how we do that, and if we do that,

we save money. We save money so I can spend more of it with defence companies giving our people the kit and equipment that they need. And look, I mentioned it earlier about pride in our sector. I'm a trade union member. I'm a Labour MP, so of course, I am as well, and that means I not only want to spend time with the senior bods at the top of industry, I want to spend time with the workforce. And when I do, I see this infectious pride in what they're making. Whether it is a missile, a frigate, a tank, some software, some AI, the enthusiasm and pride in their work is something that we need to tell a bigger story about.

Because I want more people to think of a career in the armed forces, in uniform, in defence industry, in academia, in research, in R&D. I want to make it easier for people to move between uniform and industry and back again, no longer having the cliff edges that you are having the binary hole, you are in or you're out, and that's pretty much it.

That's not the way that we're going to be able to get the best from our people. But I want to see that pride, and if we show that pride, if we tell the story in our communities, beyond the red line of defence production sites beyond the gated and fenced off military bases, then more people will want to join, more people will want to invest, more people will want to enable the work that we need to do as defence as a whole of society approach, because we don't have a whole of society approach if we draw our own red line around what we feel is defence, because I know the British people track us at the moment. They know we live in more uncertain times.

The people that work in defence are acutely aware of this.

So, let's tell our story better. Let's spend money wiser. Let's procure faster and let's do so that gives the amazing men and women of our armed forces and of our allies the kit and equipment they need to be ready for war fighting, because if we do that well, we will deter the aggression, so we do not need to use it, but if we do need to use it, I want to be absolutely certain that we can say to the prime minister that, yes, the Armed Forces are ready, and so is industry, and so are the communities that we operate in, all ready to stand behind a whole of society approach. Now that is a big challenge, and as we implement not just the Strategic Defence Review the Defence Industrial Strategy for Monday but look ahead to the defence Investment plan that we will publish later this year, setting out what we will be buying.

I want industry to be louder, not necessarily in their lobbying, public affairs. People have a great gig already. I'm sure they'll be doing their thing. I want you to be louder with your workforce, in your communities, with your supply chain, so everyone knows that they are making a difference. That is how we will maximize the benefit of the extra money in the defence budget.

It is how we will drive growth in all our communities. It is how we will take those

companies who don't feel that they are a defence company and help them become one. Equally, it will provide the skills that we need to be able to outperform our adversaries in the future. These are enormous challenges. They're not being made because it's good to get a political speech with some umph in it. I'm making these challenges to you because we will not have the war fighting readiness. If it is just ministers making speeches, we'll have war fighting readiness when industry feels empowered to be more efficient, to give it the stupid rules that we have put in place that constrain your ability to work, to make us attract and retain more people in our forces in industry and beyond.

These are huge challenges, but I know you're all up for it, and you've got a ministerial team that want to move at pace faster than we have done in the past. So, when I'm talking about war, fighting readiness, I don't just look to the men and women of our forces. I look to the whole of society approach. I want to thank you for what defence industry is doing to keep ourselves and our allies safe.

As a final point, at a point at the moment where our friends in Ukraine are carrying a fight for everyone that believes in freedom and democracy, when the full story of what British industry and our military can be told, We will have a nation enormously proud of that contribution, but we keep them in the fight with our ingenuity, our fast pace of production, and if we can do it for Ukraine, we can provide the same speed and agility for UK Armed Forces as well. Thank you for what you're doing.

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