

The Leader of the Opposition's Military Covenant Commission

Launch Document

**They're doing their duty.
Are we doing ours?**

**MILITARY
COVENANT
COMMISSION**



Foreword by David Cameron

Whenever I visit our men and women serving in Iraq and Afghanistan, I am filled with admiration. Their bravery, commitment, dedication, and professionalism are things that we should all celebrate and applaud. They do an incredible job in what can only be described as exceptional conditions. From dealing with the Taliban in Helmand Province, to providing humanitarian relief and reconstruction: they are simply the best. We should all be immensely proud of them.

We ask our service personnel to do extraordinary things. In doing so, they make many sacrifices, including in some cases their lives. So it is only right that we do all that we can to ensure that they are well looked after and that their families are cared for. It is not much to ask from us in return for what they do for us. This is principle that underpins the Military Covenant.

Are we as a society doing enough to fulfil this Covenant today? I doubt it. When I receive first-hand accounts of how service families have to put up with conditions that would be simply unacceptable in civilian life, I feel ashamed that we as a country can ask so much but give so little.

So I have asked Frederick Forsyth to lead a Commission that will look at how the Military Covenant can be restored. The Commissioners are all experts in defence matters and together are well placed to examine the many issues that have been neglected for so long – housing, healthcare, support for service families and their children, and improving the quality of life for veterans. It will take a look at how Government and society can improve their attitude towards our Armed Forces and mend the Military Covenant.

But expert though the Commissioners are, I also want views from a broad section of public opinion. Therefore, I hope that everyone with an interest will contribute through our website.

Over the decades, our Armed Forces have fully honoured their part in the Military Covenant. It is time that we as a nation think about how we can better fulfil our side of the deal.



David Cameron,

Leader of the Conservative Party

Background – What is the Military Covenant?

The Military Covenant is a special agreement between the Armed Forces and the Nation (Government and Society). The main principle underlying the Covenant is that because service personnel make sacrifices and ultimately risk their lives in the service of their country, it is incumbent on the Nation, including the Government and Society, to ensure that they and their families are well cared for. The Military Covenant can be found in Chapter 1 of the Army Doctrine Publication. It reads:

'Soldiers will be called upon to make personal sacrifices - including the ultimate sacrifice - in the service of the Nation. In putting the needs of the nation and the Army before their own, they forgo some of the rights enjoyed by those outside the Armed Forces. In return, British soldiers must always be able to expect fair treatment, to be valued and respected as individuals, and that they (and their families) will be sustained and rewarded by commensurate terms and conditions of service. In the same way, the unique nature of military land operations means that the Army differs from all other institutions, and must be sustained and provided for accordingly by the nation. This mutual obligation forms the Military Covenant between the nation, the Army and each individual soldier; an unbreakable common bond of identity, loyalty and responsibility which has sustained the Army and its soldiers throughout its history. It has perhaps its greatest manifestation in the annual commemoration of Armistice Day, when the nation keeps covenant with those who have made the ultimate sacrifice, giving their lives in action'.¹

Within the document, under the Loyalty part of the 'Army Core Values' Chapter (Chapter 3), is another reference to the Covenant.

'The Nation, the Army and the chain of command rely on the continuing allegiance, commitment and support of all who serve: on their loyalty. Conversely, soldiers of all ranks, and their families, must be certain that the Army and the Nation will treat them with loyalty as well as justice. The system's loyalty to the individual - its obligation in the Military Covenant - is manifested in justice, fair rewards, and life-long support to all who have soldiered'.²

What Does this Mean?

For hundreds of years there has been an agreement, now known as the Covenant. It is seldom read, more rarely referred to. But it is crucial because it is the bond between this country's Crown, Government, and People on the one hand and her Armed Forces on the other. What it says, in layman's language, is this:

- You, the serving personnel, have volunteered to serve in this country's Armed Forces and to wear her uniform. You have sworn to us all an oath of allegiance and loyalty. It may

happen that we, the civil power, representing the Crown and the People, will have to require you to go into harm's way on our behalf. While you may have to fight, suffer or even die, in exchange, we pledge the following...

- You will always be given the best training and the best equipment that money can buy, and enough of them.
- If you are hurt you will have the fastest casualty evacuation facilities possible. In hospital you will have the best clinical and surgical services known to medicine. And then convalescence, rehabilitation and compensation for your hurts.
- While you are away we will look after your families with decent housing, schooling and ever-present support. You will have adequate family time and leave. And you will have generous and fair payment, clothing and provisions.
- And above all, we will never ignore or abandon you.

History

An early example of society's obligations to those who have served in the Armed Forces can be found in the reign of Elizabeth I in the *Act for the Necessary Relief of Soldiers and Necessary Relief of Soldiers and Mariners*. Passed in 1593, the law laid down that each parish should contribute some money to help sick and wounded veterans. An updated version of the Act in 1601 makes very clear society's obligations towards those who have served in war:

'And forasmuch as it is found more needful than it was in the making of the said Acts, to provide Relief and Maintenance to Soldiers and Mariners that have lost their limbs, and disabled their Bodies in the Defence and Service of her Majesty and the State, in respect the Number of the said Soldiers is so much the greater, by how much her Majesty's just and honourable defensive Wars are increased.

***To the End therefore that the said Soldiers may reap the Fruits of their good Deservings** and others may be encouraged to perform the like Endeavours.*

Be it enacted... That from and after the said Feast of Easter next, every Parish within this Realm of England and Wales shall be charged to pay a weekly Sum of Money towards the Relief of Sick, Hurt and Maimed Soldiers and Mariners'.³

Even back then, there was a recognition that more must be done to care for injured veterans, particularly when the commitments of the Armed Forces had been increased.

A Broken Covenant?

Over recent years, there has been a growing concern that the Nation is not fulfilling its part of this agreement and that the Covenant is being broken. Below are just a few examples of notable figures expressing this concern:

- **Lord Guthrie (Former Chief of the Defence Staff).** ‘There is now a feeling—probably stronger than I can ever recall—that the Government are not keeping their side of the bargain and honouring the Military Covenant’.⁴
- **General Sir Richard Dannatt (Chief of the General Staff).** ‘My firm aim is to restore the balance of the Military Covenant – it is **clearly out of kilter** at the moment’.⁵
- **Demos.** Their recent report said that the Military Covenant has been **‘damaged almost beyond repair’** and that a new civil-military compact must be established.⁶

Six Examples of the Broken Covenant

1. **The Appointment of a Part-time Defence Secretary.** When Gordon Brown became Prime Minister, he appointed Des Browne as the Secretary of State for both Defence and Scotland. This has sparked outrage among the defence community. Former Chief of the Defence Staff Lord Craig said that ‘a part-time Minister signals a part-time interest in the forces’.⁷
2. **Our Armed Forces are Overstretched.** Over the past decade, the Armed Forces’ commitments have been increased whilst their front-line resources have been cut. The human impact of this pressure was recently highlighted in a report from the Chief of the General Staff’s Briefing Team. It stated that the current tempo of operations is putting ‘great pressures’ on soldiers and their families and that the long-term impact of operating above what was initially planned for is ‘damaging’ and is ‘mortgaging the goodwill of our people’.⁸ The latest Armed Forces Pay Review Body Report showed that exit rates for officers have increased in each of the last four years with the highest rate since 2001-2 during the 2006-7 financial year.⁹ In January 2008, the Defence Select Committee expressed its concern about these trends.¹⁰
3. **Failing to Protect our Personnel.** Over the past few weeks a series of inquests has been held which have highlighted the Government’s failure to equip our service personnel on operations properly. The Oxfordshire Coroner, Andrew Walker, said, ‘to send soldiers into a combat zone without basic equipment is unforgivable, inexcusable and a breach of trust between the soldiers and those who govern them’.¹¹
4. **Poor Accommodation Standards.** There has been widespread concern about the current state of some Armed Forces’ accommodation. Last November, the Public Accounts Committee stated that more than half of the 110,000 single living accommodation bedspaces in the UK, and 40 per cent of family accommodation, do not meet the Ministry of Defence’s definition of high quality accommodation and is therefore substandard.¹² The Defence Select Committee also described the condition of some housing as ‘disgraceful’ and ‘were told that soldiers from 1 R ANGLIAN [1st Battalion, The Royal Anglian Regiment] on deployment to Afghanistan had more comfortable accommodation than their comrades left behind in Pirbright’.¹³

New figures show that 45 per cent of single living accommodation in the UK and 64 per cent of single living accommodation overseas are in the bottom grade on a four-point scale.¹⁴
5. **Service Families and their Children Need More Support.** There are many areas in which the support for service parents and children needs to be improved. Childcare is one example. The recent Chief of the General Staff’s Briefing Team report concluded that, ‘more needs to be done to provide pre-school childcare and After School Clubs in order to assist working wives and single parent servicewomen’.¹⁵
6. **Veterans’ Healthcare Needs Improving.** On 18 February 2008, the Defence Select Committee published a report on medical care for the Armed Forces. The report expressed concern about the failure to track and identify veterans when they have left the service to help them obtain the priority access to NHS treatment to which they are entitled. It went on to say that ‘the identification and treatment of veterans with mental health needs relies as much on good intentions and good luck as on robust tracking’.¹⁶ The report also said, ‘simply to rely on the individual to bring his or her status as a veteran to the attention of the clinician...is inadequate and an abdication of responsibility’.¹⁷

The Commission

The Commission is a Standing Commission whose role will be to give advice to the Leader of the Opposition about the state of the Military Covenant. Its membership comprises experts and former serving personnel. This Commission is unique in that its members are drawn from a wide range of ranks – which will enable a better analysis of the problems which face serving personnel, non-commissioned officers, and officers. It will also look at *both* the Government’s and society’s role in fulfilling the Military Covenant. In addition, it will seek to get the wider public involved by means of participation through our website www.militarycovenantcommission.com.

Over the past ten years, the Government has acted in such a cavalier manner towards our Armed Forces that the Military Covenant is now broken.

The aim of this Commission is to study all of the pertinent aspects of what has gone wrong and devise a policy, feasible and affordable, which will be presented to David Cameron and the Shadow Cabinet to consider. This will enable the Military Covenant to be fully restored and recreated.

List of Commissioners

Chairman:
Frederick Forsyth CBE

Commissioners:
Major Dan Byles (Retd)
Joe Fairbairn MBE
Rear Admiral Iain Henderson CB CBE DL
Sir John Keegan OBE
Air Commodore Allan Vaughan OBE (Retd)
Simon Weston OBE
Captain Ellie Whyte (Retd)

Secretariat

Secretary:
Chris Newton

Parliamentary Adviser:
Dr Andrew Murrison MP

The Commission’s First Report

The Commission will report in due course. It will look at four broad areas. Within each area, the Commission will examine the following questions:¹⁸

1. The Health of the Covenant

- What impact are current Government policies having on the lives of our service personnel?
- Is there a ‘gulf’ between the military and society, and if so how can the gap be bridged?

2. The Armed Forces and the Public Services

- How can healthcare provision in the UK be improved for service personnel and veterans?
- What is the current condition of Armed Forces accommodation?
- What level of emotional and educational support is needed for the children of service personnel?
- How can support for service parents be improved?

3. Respecting Veterans

- What could be done to help ease the transition from service to civilian life?
- Are there failures in providing veterans with information about the additional entitlements they have?
- What could be done to enhance society’s recognition of veterans?

4. Care of Bereaved Families

- What can be done to better support the families of those who have been killed or injured?

Annex – The Commission’s Terms of Reference

1. The Commission will be constituted as a Standing Commission that will offer advice to the Leader of the Opposition on the health of the Military Covenant.
2. The Commission will have no fewer than six members appointed for renewable terms of twelve months. A Chairman will be appointed by the Leader and there will be a secretariat provided by the Conservative Party. It will have representation from the three Services and from commissioned and non-commissioned ranks. Appointments will be unpaid.
3. The Commission will focus on the following areas:
 - *The overall health of the Military Covenant* – how to ensure that the Armed Forces are treated with the respect and gratitude they deserve for the unique role they play in society.
 - *Armed Forces and public services* – how the provision of housing, health and education services for Armed Forces personnel and their families can be improved.
 - *Respecting veterans* – how to improve the treatment of those who have served in our Armed Forces and fought for their country.
 - *Care of bereaved families* – how to ensure that the Government and its agencies can provide suitable services for the families of those who have lost their lives serving our country.
4. Any recommendations made by the Commission must be paid for within existing and planned defence budgets.

1 Ministry of Defence, *Army Doctrine Publication*, Chapter 1.
<http://www.army.mod.uk/servingsoldier/usefulinfo/valuesgeneral/adp5milcov/ss_hrpers_values_adp5_1_w.html#milcov>

2 Ministry of Defence, *Army Doctrine Publication*, Chapter 3.
http://www.army.mod.uk/servingsoldier/usefulinfo/valuesgeneral/adp5milcov/ss_hrpers_values_adp5_3_w.html#loyalty

3 *An Act for the Necessary Relief of Soldiers and Mariners*, 43 Elizabeth C.A.P. III, 1601.

4 *House of Lords Hansard*, 15 March 2007.

5 *Chief of the General Staff’s Briefing Team Report*, 30 July 2007, emphasis added.

6 Timothy Edmunds and Andrew Forster, *Out of Step: the case for Change in the British Armed Forces*, Demos, 2007, p.13

7 *House of Lords Hansard*, 22 November 2007, Col. 938.

8 *Chief of the General Staff’s Briefing Team Report*, 2007, p.1.

9 Armed Forces’ Pay Review Body, *Thirty-Seventh Report*, February 2008, para 2.29.

10 House of Commons Defence Committee, *Ministry of Defence Annual Report and Accounts 2006-7*, 28 January 2008, Session 2007-8, HC 61, para 36.

11 *BBC News Online*, 15 February 2008.

12 House of Commons Committee of Public Accounts, *Managing the Defence Estate: Quality and Sustainability*, 29 November 2007, Session 2006-7, HC 537, Conclusion para 1.

13 House of Commons Defence Committee, *The Work of Defence Estates*, 14 September 2007, Session 2006-07, HC 535, para 40.

14 *Hansard*, 20 February 2008, Cols 697-8WA.

15 *Chief of the General Staff’s Briefing Team Report*, 30 July 2007, p.25.

16 House of Commons Defence Committee, *Medical Care for the Armed Forces*, 18 February 2008, Session 2007-08, HC 327, para 110.

17 *Ibid* para 76.

18 See the terms of reference, p.6.