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Fit for the future? The UK government's plans for a reserve army

Robert Dover

THE GOVERNMENT'S PLANS for an enhanced role for a reserve army, as a complement to a smaller standing army, are radical in as much as they are clear breaches from historical precedent, the organisational structure of the forces and from the army's current way of doing business. But ultimately this organisational radicalism is being proffered to preserve something quite conservative: the desire to continue militarily in the way that we have for the last forty or so years. The plans and consultations around *Future Reserves 2020*¹ are not seeking to recast Britain's role in the world, or to cut the cloth of our strategic ambition to meet our fiscal suit, but aim to keep the UK as a medium sized power, 'punching above its weight', as a force able to say 'yes' to the interventionist whims of its political masters and to be as 'full-spectrum' as possible. So, a truly radical approach (which may arrive in 2015 in any event) might have turned its attentions to these fundamentals, rather than simply muddling through, albeit a radical muddling. Whilst this is the context to the paper, the content here focuses upon the government's suggestions for the reserve army (and does not consider the naval or air picture in any detail) and where the opportunities lay for recasting the relationship between society and military on the one hand, and for substantial cost-saving synergies in training and accommodation exist on the other, whilst also identifying the challenges that face the implementation of these reforms.

The political backdrop

The core motivation of the current British government is the eradication of the country's structural deficit and in finding ways to deliver comparable levels of public service on less money than the generous funding settlements of the late 1990s and mid-2000s. In defence terms, the successive reductions in defence budgets from 1990 onwards (and from before, in reality) continually raised the same questions around how to square the circle of maintaining full-spectrum capabilities and sufficient quantities of materiel and personnel to secure Britain's national interests. In the MoD's own words:

To deliver battle-winning Armed Forces, a smaller, more professional MOD, and a hard headed approach to what we can afford.²

At the time of the 2010 Strategic Defence and Security Review (and the other government spending reviews of that moment) the focus

moved onto the appropriate number of standing forces required to deliver the desired amount of security.

The reserve forces have declined from a high in 1990 of 72,500, to a low currently of 25,430. This number is made up of the Regular Reserve, which is made up of personnel who have left the standing army and remain liable to be recalled in times of exceptional need, and the Territorial Army which is a volunteer force made up of civilians who agree to give up a certain number of days a year to be trained in readiness for mobilisation. This declining figure of both territorials and reserves combined is set within the wider context of the MOD reducing the Armed Forces by 33,000 (19%) by 2020 (5,500 RN, 19,500 Army, 8,000 RAF). The civilian workforce is also being reduced by some 32,000 (38%) by 2020. In order to improve the impact being made by the Reserve Army (which is a reworking of the territorial and reservist proposition to put this new force on a highly trained and more involved state of readiness with the standing army) it is the government's plan to increase their numbers by 2020 from the 25,430 now to 38,000 (with 30,000 of these being fully trained). To achieve this it has suggested that it will invest £1.8bn in measures that are aimed to meet the raw numbers and the quality threshold. In reality, it will need to find ways of successfully retaining current regulars via the reserve force where they are made redundant from the standing army, of incentivising regulars to transition voluntarily to the reserve force, of encouraging employers to support reservists, and to find new ways of achieving levels of pastoral care over potentially diffuse groups. The government says it recognises that in making greater use of the reserve it will need to further advance its welfare proposition for them, and their families and support structures, outside of deployment situations. In short the MoD will probably need to equalise its arrangements for standing and reserve army personnel to accommodate this 'whole force' perspective.

In the reflection period between 2010 and 2012, standing forces have rightly been described as being 'expensive' and 'necessary', and whilst much of the focus of the 2010 process was on equipment lines and technological capability the intervening two years has caused officials and planners to reconsider how best to deliver human capability into the field. Part of the logic surrounding standing forces was applied to hospital beds in the 1990s: unused capacity is 'waste' and therefore sensible efficiencies can be derived from reducing those periods of inactivity. In the case of hospital beds

1. UK Ministry of Defence, *Future Reserves 2020: Delivering the Nation's Security Together*, November 2012, London: The Stationery Office.

2. UK Ministry of Defence, *2020 Vision: CDS looks ahead to the future of Defence*, 11 September 2012, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/2020-vision-cds-looks-ahead-to-the-future-of-defence> accessed 19 December 2012.

this logic led to the reduction in the spare capacity in wards. What is proposed in defence is something analogous: the reduction in the numbers of standing forces to 82,000 by the end of the decade, and the integration of 30,000 'Army Reserves' in to the 'whole force across the complete gamut of military activities. This would allow – in fallow periods – the reserve force to be mostly engaged in their civilian activities (in addition to maintaining military training and expertise levels), whilst in intense periods to be utilised operationally. In both cases, the real danger comes from needing to manage the peaks of activity where demand for resource outstrips the ability to supply (and at sufficient pace). In this regard the plans for the reserve army are quite risk acceptant.

In utilising the reserve army in this way, the government is seeking to make a quite radical change in the relationship between the military community and wider society, as well as changing the way in which the British Army discharges its duties. The proposals for the reserve army are far closer to the non-interventionist backdrop established by the SDSR, which was seen to have been temporarily overturned by Operation Ellamy in Libya. This is a more limited military proposition (not by a great magnitude of difference though), that is focussing on multi-national and multi-agency partnerships and which vests the nation's defence and security not a community of 'them' sat behind some razor wire, but by a community of 'us' doing ordinary jobs with an additional role. It is a very astute way of securing some of the 'big society' legacy: binding the country into common defence.

Military effectiveness

The government mentions several times in its consultation paperwork³ that it is vitally important that the reserve army is capable of operating fully alongside the standing army and that there is not a slither of difference in the capabilities between the two: this is embodied by the language used by the Secretary of State, Phillip Hammond, of a 'whole force'. Part of this is based on a cliché of the reservists being some kind of 'Dad's army', whilst the reality is of a part-time professionalised force which has engaged in some serious endeavour during the Iraq and Afghan campaigns. It is also based upon a reality that the part-time nature of the roles have not been adequate enough to train for particularly difficult operational environments. It is clear, though, that the reserve army will be asked to perform tasks that extend its contemporary remit, which has seen call-ups as being the exception rather than the rule. Despite the stipulation of the 1996 Reserve Forces Act which gives the impression of more regular call-ups than has been the case, and the practice of the Labour government to include a force mix of 10% reservists in its operational configurations, the reserves have not been easy to use – it was the difficulty of calling out reservists under the Reserve Forces Act which undermined and ultimately led to the collapse of the Civil Contingency Reaction Forces concept introduced in the New Chapter to the Strategic Defence Review following 9/11. Under the proposed new system reserve

army involvement in military activities in the UK and abroad would become the norm, and so the way that news is disseminated and received will need to adapt to this new reality. So, the reservists would be expected to take on some of the standing commitments of the army, such as the defence of the Falkland Islands (which they do not do at the moment) or to be part of multi-national and multi-agency stabilisation teams in unstable environments abroad, or to take on tasks such as guarding major events (an example of which would have been the summer 2012 London Olympics). Being an integrated part of the whole force will place a greater emphasis on a systematised and on-going training, as well as regularized deployments, rather than the more ad-hoc arrangements that exist today. There is also a balance to be struck between using the reserve force as a sticking-plaster over gaps in skills or numbers, but the typical reservist enjoys a diversified experience and so the experience of the reservist in the new whole force must be one in which there continues to be a plurality of experiences and tasks on offer: the retention of good soldiers depends upon it.

Trying to achieve regularized deployments will be one of the significant challenges posed by these new arrangements. The models for the deployment of standing forces have become substantially stretched since 1997, and the danger would be that if the UK retained an active interest in many different unstable regions of the world that a reserve army integrated into a 'whole force' would in effect become a standing army – somewhat defeating the point of the distinction in the first place. Similarly, the pledge to give as much notice as possible for mobilisation of a reservists is laudable, but history tells us that contingencies and the fluidity of the international system will often provide for very short notice periods. If this became an established pattern it would once again point to the need for an enlarged standing army, rather than a blended whole force, but only time will tell how this will actually play out. It is, however, a core part of the picture as to whether this radical reform will work in practice.

Another element of the culture of doing the same with less, or perhaps doing more with less is the realisation this reinvigoration of the reserve army might not be enough is evident from the Chief of Defence Staff's speech to the Royal United Services Institute in December 2012 which argued for strategic alliances with militaries in the Middle East and Africa as a means by which to multiply the effect that a shrunken British military might be able to act as a 'regional ally across all the spectrum'. This is a keen attempt at retaining the UK's position as a medium sized power punching above its weight in troubled regions. The core MoD message is though around the reserve army for 2020, and with this the switch in the emphasis to a greater reliance on reservists and civilian skills to provide security. So, within the development of a fully functional reserve army is the enlistment of computer technologists to guard and work against cyber threats. This move, which was signalled by the Cabinet Office on 3 December 2012, has its antecedents in the UK Cyber Security Strategy (2011) and the SDSR (2010), but shows a nimble response to an ever growing shopping list of diverse and serious threats.

3. UK Ministry of Defence, *Future Reserves 2020*, op. cit; UK Ministry of Defence, FR20 Consultation – What does this mean for Reservists? What is the proposition?, London: Ministry of Defence, November 2012; UK Ministry of Defence, *Future Reserves 2020 (FR20) – Defence relationship with employers*, London: Ministry of Defence, November 2012.

4. Robert Dover, John Gearson, et al, *Harnessing Efficiencies Rethinking Outcomes: The HERO Review*, London: Morgan Sindall, http://construction.morgansindall.com/assets/m/s/ms3370_hero_kcl-final.pdf

Blended employments

The HERO Review⁴ into the future of the defence estates and its governance, written out of Kings College London by this author, and the editor of this journal, John Gearson, in 2011 made the suggestion of blended employments as a way of encouraging an enlarged reserve force, as a way of widening and reinvigorating the traditional notion of an apprenticeship, as a way of improving the post-service opportunities for service personnel and to find different blends and intensities of skill mixes in the defence community. The proposals put forward in the November 2012 Future Reserves 2020 consultation paper extends this core idea with some carefully thought-through protections.

The hindrances to increasing the reserve army and to blending employments in this way are many, and involve the disjuncture between an employment culture that privileges stable full-time employment over the many disruptions that will be felt by employees rotating out for training or deployments. The HERO Review suggested – for a number of reasons – that the construction and building industries were particularly apt for this kind of arrangement due to the inherent flexibility of the trade and the absence of barriers for service personnel returning from operations. For other industries, and in general, the MoD recognises that there will need to be a tailored approach to ‘reflect the different opportunities and impacts of reserve service for different employers, public and private, large medium and small, as well as by sector.’ The MoD also wants to try to balance out the financial incentives for being in the standing or reserve armies, so that pro-rata a reservist engaged in regular high-end training is paid essentially the same as a member of the standing army. This is an important psychological barrier of equalising the reward for being a reservist, something that is commensurate with the proposed ‘whole force’ approach, which includes common readiness and training standards. The government also proposes to put in place an anti-discrimination mechanism (a voluntary charter), if it is proven to be needed, to remove any disincentives to joining the reserve army. The consultation document suggests that public sector employers and large private sector employers are the best placed to provide the flexibility to see this kind of blended employment work well, although in a time of recession it is open to question how flexible private employers, who are managing (and guarding) budgets of their own, will want to be. The proposal to effectively off-set some employer training costs via the defence budget will be open to the interpretation of how these off-balance-sheet amounts are viewed by the various finance offices: the offer of an additional ‘Kite-mark’ is unlikely to yield significant extra revenue and might be seen merely a nice corporate social responsibility bauble. The anti-discrimination laws as they relate to maternity rights are honoured by large employers, but anecdotally there are unofficial ways around these for smaller employers in recruitment practices – which could be used to discriminate against potential or actual reservists.

The secondary hindrances, which will only be felt once the policy is in operation, concern the ever-growing incidence (of perhaps recognition) of mental health problems that result from periods in high-intensity operations. The expectation that reservists will be able to seamlessly transition back into their civilian lives (even after taking the end of operations leave entitlement) seems to run at odds with

the observable reality of the last twenty years that post-traumatic stress episodes (to name but one) are present in many people who have experienced war fighting, and is something that can present during operations, or as far out as five years after active service.⁵ Adequately monitoring, capturing and treating service personnel suffering from this range of mental health issues will be an essential part of managing the sorts of blended employment being contemplated in the November 2012 proposals. To neglect these issues will transfer this burden of military service onto the families of reservists, their civilian employers and local NHS provision.

The notion of apprenticeships and with them trades and vocations, through-life learning (and it is important to play up the possible connections between further and higher education establishments and the reserve army) are laudable aspects of the government’s proposed plans. Bringing the armed forces closer to the communities they are drawn from, and serve, is good for the community and good for the armed forces. There is very little to be gained from a bunkered or silo mentality, beyond what is necessary for operational cohesion. The closer mesh between the two communities will also have positive impacts on support, education and employment for all service families, and will also help the MoD solve some of its accommodation problems as it will regularise service accommodation in the civilian sector.

Conclusion

Future Reserves 2020 is a radical set of proposals that has the potential to change the relationship between the armed forces (especially the army) and society fundamentally. It brings the defence of the realm and national interests far closer to the ordinary citizen. In doing so it also opens up some instrumental opportunities for the MoD to divest itself of some accommodation costs associated with full-time service personnel, to find synergies in training and education with civilian sectors, and to make greater indirect use of local communities as support structures for active soldiers.

Greater use of reserves in a whole force approach offers the potential for a greater number of skills to enter military service, and to also make much better use of those able and talented individuals who are unable (for whatever reason) to make a commitment to a fulltime military career. It may take twenty years’ to see if this initiative radically improved the quality of the British army from the position of relative weakness of needing to reform in order to respond to yet more budgetary pressures. There are, however, a great number of challenges in front of these proposals, and most of them exist in the minutiae of the implementation: of how to manage army-employer relations, of how to manage mobilisations in times of peace and conflict, of how to implement complex processes across a diverse and complex series of organisations. But it is a worthy initiative, particularly in the absence of serious initiatives to recast Britain’s military future in line with its interests and financial capabilities. ■

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5. For example see: Harriet J Forbes, Nicola T Fear, Amy Iversen and Christopher Dandeker, *The Mental Health of UK Armed Forces Personnel: the impact of Iraq and Afghanistan*, RUSI Journal, April/May 2011, 156 No 2, pp 14-20.