

What are we defending?

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Westminster's new "common sense" says defence spending must rise and that the price must be paid in cuts to care, public services, and social security.

But that isn't realism. It is ideology dressed up as prudence because if we hollow out the state to fund missiles and weapon systems, we don't strengthen national security, we undermine it. A society built on insecurity, collapsing services, and rising poverty is not a society people will defend.

In this video, I ask the most important question in the entire debate: what exactly are we defending, and for whom?

And I explain why Modern Monetary Theory (MMT) shows this supposed trade-off between defence and care is a political choice, not an economic necessity.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7Yqd7i2WX48?si=WcDjAAv6F00_lw-5

This is the audio version:

https://www.podbean.com/player-v2/?i=st75i-1a1a657-pb&from=pb6admin&share=1&download=1&rtl=0&fonts=Arial&skin=f6f6f6&font-color=auto&logo_link=episode_page&btn-skin=c73a3a

This is the transcript:

What are we defending? That's a question I want to ask because everywhere I hear the story that more defence spending is unavoidable now, and the people who are claiming it are telling us it must be paid for by cutting care, public services and social security. All over the weekend, in the commentary that was on the media, in the newspapers and everywhere, this was the claim that was being made, but I wanted to ask one simple question. What exactly are we defending if we destroy society to pay for it?

The new "common sense" in Westminster is that defence spending must rise, and cuts elsewhere must inevitably follow as a consequence. It's treated as if this is like night following day, and that everyone must just accept it.

Interviewers nod along as if this is realism, but let me assure you, it isn't. This isn't realism at all; it's ideology dressed up as prudence.

And the fact is that if defence spending requires austerity, the first question we have to ask is not economic. It is moral, because if we are being asked to trade care, security, dignity, and public services for missiles and weapon systems, I'll ask again, what exactly are we defending in that case?

A society that is hollowed out is not worth fighting for, is my point. A country where services collapse, and poverty rises, and insecurity becomes normal, is not a society built on shared purpose. It is not a society built on care, and if the wealthy are protected at the same time, as appears to be the implication of everything that I am hearing, then the message is unmistakable. What is being proposed is not a defence of our collective security; it is a defence of the unequal status quo that we already know in our society, and which is already unacceptable to most of us.

People do not, in fact, fight for abstractions. There's a brutal truth here. People don't want to fight for increased GDP, and they definitely don't fight for national competitiveness. They fight, if they want to fight at all, and it's a good question whether many want to, for places where life is worth living, where citizenship means something, and where burdens are shared.

If we hollow out the state, we are not strengthening it. We are, in fact, destroying the foundations of legitimacy, and this creates a real paradox. The claim is that defence spending is our security, but if it requires worse housing, worse healthcare, worse education, more poverty, and more fear, then it undermines the very thing we call security. In fact, it makes the country weaker, and not stronger, and that is most definitely counterproductive to any form of defence policy that anybody can ever have imagined.

There is then a false either-or equation in here. Politicians are claiming, "We can't afford both social security and defence. We have to choose between the two." They say, "Care cannot be afforded if we are to protect the country," but that claim on their part rests on one core assumption, and that is that the government has a fixed pool of money and

a fixed pool of capacity to command resources available to it. They are therefore saying that if we want more defence, we must spend less on everything else, but what we know is that this is fundamentally false.

We saw it during the Second World War. We saw it in the logic that Lord Keynes used to organise the defence of this country economically, when we were at our greatest peril. We did change the use of resources. It isn't true that there is a fixed use. And anyway, let's just stand back for a moment and just appraise the facts.

What we all know is that the UK economy is not fully used at present. We do have 5% unemployment in this country; 10% amongst the young. Now, I'm not saying they should all now be enlisted in the armed forces and suddenly be marched around in khaki with rifles over their shoulders, that's the last thing I'm saying. But the point is, we do have underutilised resources. It isn't, therefore, the case that we have to live in a world of either-or.

If we actually have underemployment and insecurity in this country, and we have both as a consequence of that unemployment, the waste of human capacity is enormous. We have skills, unused labour, lying idle, and needs unmet. We don't, therefore, have a resource shortage; what we have is a policy failure, and this is the issue that isn't being talked about by those who are claiming we must cut the capacity to care if we want to defend ourselves.

The constraint that we are looking at is not money; in other words, when it comes to whether we are able to defend the country or not, the real constraint is people, skills, materials, and organisational capacity, and if we haven't got those, that's, firstly, our fault because we haven't trained them into existence. And secondly, if we have got them, but they're deliberately lying idle, and undoubtedly some of the people who could do these tasks are at present unemployed, then the fact is that the state could mobilise them, and that is an option available to them. In other words, there is no economic necessity to force a choice between defence and care.

This, of course, is exactly the point that modern monetary theory explains. A currency-issuing government of the sort that we have in the UK does never run out of money because it always creates it as a consequence of its spending: that's literally how it comes into existence. So it is not like a household because it can always fund whatever is required for public purpose. If we need care and we need defence, it is possible for the state to do this, but the question becomes not where does the money come from, but how will we organise the real resources of this country to meet our priorities? That is the question that we need to ask.

We can also say that if we do need more resources than we do at present have the capacity to pay for then we can still run a deficit to ensure that they're put to use for social benefit. We don't need to wait in other words. That is the message that MMT also supplies, because we may run a deficit.

We won't say we can't fight a war because we have no money. We didn't, in 1939. We didn't, throughout the history of humankind. We said, it's essential to do this thing because it matters to us as a country, and therefore, we'll do it.

So the argument that again, we cannot have defence and care is absurd. We can have defence if we need it, we just run a deficit if necessary to do so, or we do as Lord Keynes said again, and that was tax the wealthy, because that was the choice he made in World War II, and it was the right one.

The point is, this is all about politics. If we're trying to defend the country on the back of the poorest by saying we can't have care, what we are implicitly doing is saying, "We will protect the wealthy, but we won't make them pay for the privilege of us having done so." That is the implicit thing that we are hearing.

We have to, therefore, name that deception. It is not true that we have to make this choice between defence spending and welfare. There are, instead, things we can do. We can stop the pretence that the government is financially constrained, and we can stop the pretence that we cannot tax wealth more, and we can stop the pretence that there are no resources unused in our economy, which we could bring into use to cover the defence needs that we have. All of these things could be done. It is a narrative that we need to put into place, and instead, we're getting one which says austerity is necessary instead. Once more, I make the point: austerity is always a political choice; it isn't a necessity.

So, what should we actually be doing? Defence really means defending people, public services, community resilience, housing security, healthcare and shared purpose. That is what we would be defending if we went to war. Let's be honest, there is no other reason for defence but to preserve the well-being of the people of this country; that is what states exist for. Therefore, if we went to war and broke our own social contract by not doing those things, we couldn't command loyalty. We couldn't therefore defend the country, and in fact, any amount of defence spending would fail because people would not be willing to stand up and fight. So we have to make care the priority alongside defence.

I'll go back to the beginning. Right at the start of this video, I asked, what are we defending? And I asked it for a good reason because an economy that is rigged for the wealthy and that tolerates poverty, where services collapse by design, is one that is not worth defending. If we're defending an ideology by going to war, which is the threat that we face, then that is an ideology that is indefensible, and we should refuse that.

We should be putting in place a logic of care, and if we do, two consequences will follow. One, we probably won't need to go to war because it will be obvious that actually everything will be going okay, and others will want to copy what we are achieving. And secondly, people will actually willingly pay for the defence of the system that they believe is worthwhile because it will be.

We've got all our logics wrong, in other words. This claim that we have a choice, defence or care, is fundamentally wrong. What we need is an appropriate amount of defence, but also a very clear understanding of what it is that we are defending, and what we should be defending is a politics of care and a country that lives by that because it delivers care to everyone.

What do you think? There's a poll down below.

Poll

[poll id="292"]

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