

We are spending too much on defence

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Simon Jenkins wrote an amusing article in [The Guardian](#) yesterday. It was amusing in the sense that it said something entirely unacceptable in British political debate at present. To be precise, he said:

Britain should spend less on defence. It is a waste of money and should be reduced so more could be spent on supporting employment, welfare and growth.

It is impossible to disagree. We are spending too much money on defence precisely because we do not know what we are defending, why, or what it is necessary to spend on to ensure we have the capability to defend whatever we think is important.

Are we defending wealth? Are we defending our institutions? Are we defending the City of London? Are we defending the people of this country? Or its borders? Are we defending our infrastructure? Are we defending our capacity to defend (and that matters)? What is it precisely? Do we know?

A defence strategy is not, and never can be, in isolation, about buying weaponry, employing armed forces, or even deploying them, because those things only happen in extremis, which means the strategy has failed.

Defence strategy begins by defining what is valuable, how we might need to preserve it, and the full range of actions necessary to ensure these assets are secure.

If we have such a strategy in the UK at present, it is unspecified. Our politicians appear to have only one goal, whoever they might be and whatever party they might represent, and that is economic growth. They cannot explain why this is their priority, what they value about it, or the benefits of prioritising it. By implication, we can, however, presume that what they think is of value is the accumulation of financial wealth.

Ask people what is important to them, and they will stress something entirely different. They will talk about relationships. They will talk about their memories, which is why the first things most people grab when exiting a burning building are their photographs. It is

these things centred on people and place that matter most.

Understand that, and Simon Jenkins is right. We are spending too much on defence because we do not know what we are defending against, from whom, and why, and without that understanding, no defence strategy can work.

Will Burnham have an answer to this? I doubt it. And so the farce will go on.