

# The size of the Royal Navy

In 1804 there were 572 fighting ships in the Royal Navy. The UK was engaged in a series of wars at the time which encouraged government to keep the force strong. In 1939 as war broke out the UK navy had 332 naval vessels. During the war there was a large expansion in the fleet, with 553 new ships added both to replace lost ships and to expand the size of the force. 58 new aircraft carriers were produced during the war years, for example.

Today in a period of relative peace there are just 67 fighting ships in the navy, including 18 small patrol boats with guns.

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## Chiming our independence

At 11 pm on 31 October the UK becomes an independent nation again, promised by our likely next Prime Minister. Many of us will wish to celebrate this much heralded and delayed event.

You would expect national media to show the countdown to the moment through the movement of the hands on the clock on the Elizabeth Tower at Westminster, known as Big Ben. It is perhaps symbolic that this Parliament which has done so much to try to stop us becoming independent again, and so much to thwart the results of the referendum, should have decided the clock is unavailable on the stated date. We need to find a good alternative to look at.

There are many great public clocks around the UK. Should we turn to Big Brum on the Council House in Birmingham? Or to Manchester Town Hall clock, or Leeds Town Hall, or the Liver building? I invite your thoughts.

It is time for us to be confident as a nation, proud of our democratic traditions and keen to be an outward looking global influence for the good. We will regain our votes and voices on international bodies and be better able to shape our future as we wish.

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## Some questions to Mrs May and Mr Hunt

I wrote shortly after the Gibraltar authorities seized the Iranian oil tanker about the need for the UK to protect other vessels going through the Straits from retaliatory attack, and asked about the possible prosecution of the Captain and senior officers of the vessel who had been detained with

allegations of EU sanctions busting.

We now see a British flagged tanker has been detained by the Iranians with allegations of a collision with a fishing vessel which is denied by those on the tanker, and see that the Captain and officers of the Iranian tanker have been released on bail.

This gives rise to various questions for the UK government

1. Given the very public threat made by Iran to UK shipping in the area, what measures were taken to give protection to British flagged vessels?
2. It is said there are four minesweepers and an amphibious armed naval vessel as well as HMS Montrose in the area, with a destroyer on the way. What if anything can these vessels do to help?
3. What support will the UK receive from the carrier group and amphibious assault ship group the US navy has in the region?
4. When will the Captain and officers of the Iranian tanker be charged? What more can be published concerning the allegations against the Iranian tanker?
5. As we were told this seizure was made to enforce EU sanctions over oil to Syria, what support is the EU offering? Has the EU proposed a joint naval initiative to protect western shipping in the Straits?
6. Why is the advice now given to avoid the Straits for commercial shipping, when this advice was not given before the tanker seizure?

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## Wokingham Arts Society Summer Exhibition

Last night I opened the Wokingham Arts Society Summer Exhibition at St. Paul's parish room.

The Exhibition is full of joyful oil and water colour painting, with some great ceramics and wood carvings. There is a lot of local talent that has captured the wonders of nature and the beauty of many places. Wokingham's pubs jostle alongside castles, seaside scenes, birds and animals and holiday destinations in the paintings on display.

I talked about the contribution art can make to our lives and thanked all involved in setting up such a good exhibition which we can share. Paintings are for sale if you want to go along and visit.

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## Mrs May damages the Union

It is entirely in keeping with Mrs May's calamitous handling of government that her parting gift as PM should include Northern Ireland legislation which stokes up controversy between Leave and Remain and is disliked by the DUP, the representatives of the majority in Northern Ireland.

She claimed to be a committed supporter of the Union yet her words and actions gave heart to those who oppose the Union. In Scotland she seemed to encourage the SNP, out to use Brexit to weaken the Union. She rarely made the case that Brexit is a UK matter based on a UK wide referendum. She took SNP objections to Brexit more seriously than the many Scottish voices who support Brexit.

In Northern Ireland Mrs May accepted the Republic view that the border is a problem against the view of her own allies, the DUP. She almost lost her government by agreeing to the Irish backstop in the Withdrawal Treaty without their consent.

So here is the irony. Mrs May claimed to be the champion of the Union yet she sided with the Union's strongest critics, Sinn Fein and the SNP, on the EU question. Mrs May put her loyalty to the EU above her alleged love of the Union, just as she put her enthusiasm for the EU above her democratic promise to get us out