

News story: NATO must improve agility and spend, Defence Secretary urges

Sir Michael Fallon is pressing NATO members to step up defence spending during a two-day defence ministerial at NATO's HQ in Brussels, following his first meeting with US Defense Secretary James Mattis.

Reflecting the strength of the UK-US Defence relationship, Sir Michael was the first minister Secretary Mattis called after his appointment and their hour-long meeting at NATO's HQ was the first bilateral working session today.

During their recent phone call, shortly after Secretary Mattis' confirmation, both ministers agreed on the need for NATO to be more agile and responsive so it can respond faster to new threats including cyber and terrorism.

In July NATO confirmed that the UK meets the two per cent spending target, which includes a £178bn equipment plan and rising defence spending every year of this parliament.

The Defence Secretary spoke to fellow ministers to call for other states to spend both 2% overall and to spend 20% of that on new equipment to help tackle threats.

In his face-to-face meetings with Secretary Mattis Sir Michael reassured him that the UK stands shoulder to shoulder with the US in calling for NATO to be more agile to meet new threats in the fields of cyber warfare and counter terrorism.

Defence Secretary Sir Michael Fallon said:

NATO has been a guarantee of mutual security for more than half a century. Britain is now calling for our partners to step up and share burdens on spending and help it become more agile in dealing with new threats including cyber and terrorism.

As leading player in the Alliance we recognise the importance of backing up our operational and exercise commitments with investment in new equipment to deal with threats to our security.

Sir Michael is discussing the UK's leadership in NATO. The UK's Enhanced Forward Presence deployment to Estonia is gathering momentum, seen this week in a 600-strong exercise in Sennelager in Germany which features British personnel from the Battle Group for 5 RIFLES. Hundreds of British troops including 5 RIFLES personnel from Salisbury Plain in Wiltshire have spent the last week exercising with four Challenger II tanks, Warrior Armoured Fighting Vehicles and Jackals – alongside Estonian, French and Danish troops.

The deployment of 800 British personnel to Estonia under EFP is part of a

package of measures that the UK is leading in NATO this year. These include leading the land element of NATO's Very High Readiness Joint Task Force with 3,000 British troops ready to deploy rapidly to threats wherever they arise in the Alliance, and committing RAF Typhoon aircraft to the NATO Southern Air Policing mission to offer reassurance to in the Black Sea region.

Over the two-day ministerial, defence leaders will discuss issues such as protecting NATO's southern border, developing NATO's deterrence and defence posture, and strengthening the transatlantic bond.

[Hard-pressed businesses urged to appeal unfair rates rise](#)

- [Home](#)
- [All News](#)
- Hard-pressed businesses urged to appeal unfair rates rise

15 Feb 2017



Businesses facing massive rates rises in Scotland have been urged to lodge appeals following a controversial revaluation.

The Scottish Conservatives said any business which feels it can't afford the increase should make those views known to ministers by formally objecting.

The more firms which do so, shadow finance secretary Murdo Fraser said, the more likely it would be for the SNP to have a change of heart.

Businesses right across the country have warned they will go to the wall if the rates hike is applied, with some facing increases of more than double.

They say the system for revaluation is flawed and needs to be reviewed.

It comes as new figures revealed Scotland continues to lag behind the rest of the UK when it comes to employment, with the jobless number rising by 6000 in the last quarter.

And that will only get worse, the party said, if more businesses are forced to close as a result of the punitive changes.

Scottish Conservative shadow finance secretary Murdo Fraser said:

"Businesses facing these extortionate increases could send a very clear message to the SNP on this.

"By formally appealing these increases, finance secretary Derek Mackay would soon realise just how severe a problem this is.

"He's refusing to listen to opposition parties and experts, but he might listen to the individuals affected.

"Latest employment figures again show Scotland is trailing behind the rest of the UK, and this is becoming a stubborn and worrying trend.

"If the Scottish Government doesn't heed warnings about firms going out of business as a result of these rises, the unemployment queues are only going to get longer north of the border.

"Derek Mackay seemed able to find tens of millions squirreled away for budget negotiations, so perhaps he could find some extra cash for hard-up businesses too."

Notes to editors:

For more information on how businesses can appeal, visit:

<https://www.mygov.scot/business-rates-appeals/>

Today, it emerged Scotland continues to lag behind the rest of the UK on employment:

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-scotland-scotland-business-38979937>

Greens warn Brexit is no escape from toxic trade deals as CETA gets the green-light



15 February 2017

Keith Taylor MEP: 'CETA is a bad deal for the people of Britain, Europe, and even Canada, but a great deal for multinational corporations keen to escape the democratic oversight of national parliaments.'

Jean Lambert MEP: 'To believe that CETA will bring more and better jobs to those who need them is pure wishful thinking.'

Molly Scott Cato MEP: 'Conservatives in the European and UK Parliaments have been the biggest cheerleaders for CETA, and they are hoping the deal will still apply to Britain post-Brexit, and, most concerningly, the Minister for Trade, Liam Fox, has even put CETA forward as a model for future UK trade

deals.'

Green MEPs are warning that Brexit will not free the UK from toxic trade deals as the European Parliament votes to [green-light CETA](#), the controversial EU-Canada trade deal.

The deal, which has been long opposed by trade justice campaigners, trade unions, European Green Parties and millions of citizens in the EU and Canada, was voted through by a majority of MEPs during a plenary session in Strasbourg today.

Greens/EFA MEPs were among the only UK representatives to vote against the deal. Conservative and Lib Dem MEPs are expected to have voted to support CETA* with a number of Labour MEPs expected to have joined them* despite pressure from [trade unions](#), the [Shadow Minister for International Trade](#), and even the Party's own [Head of Trade Policy](#).

Opposition to CETA has focused primarily on the provision to allow multinational corporations to sue democratically elected governments in ['extrajudicial' and 'secretive' courts](#) if they feel their financial interests are threatened by any policies enacted by those governments.

Greens have also argued that the trade deal will be bad for workers' rights, climate action, animal welfare, and chemical and product safety.

Keith Taylor, Green MEP for the South East and a member of the European Parliament's Environment committee, said:

"CETA is a bad deal for the people of Britain, Europe, and even Canada, but a great deal for multinational corporations keen to escape the democratic oversight of national parliaments. It is little wonder that it is citizens across Europe and in North America that are the loudest and more determined opponents of this toxic trade deal."

"Canada has a long track record of taking legal action against European countries' environmental laws and is fundamentally opposed to high chemical and pesticide safety legislation. Canada is also home to more than half of the world's mining companies and pursues an active policy of exporting fuels derived from highly polluting tar sands. In that context, it is extremely worrying that CETA's 'commitments' on environmental standards remain unenforceable. Greens will continue to oppose any agreements that lock us into fossil fuel dependence and damage our climate goals."

Jean Lambert, Green MEP for London and a member of the European Parliament's Employment and Social Affairs committee, said:

"To believe that CETA will bring more and better jobs to those who need them is pure wishful thinking. Research shows this proposed trade agreement is more likely to continue widening the gap between low and high-paid workers and offers no safeguards for existing labour standards. Many trade unions oppose CETA and so did the European Parliament's Employment Committee, of

which I'm a member. We need to invest in quality jobs, not widening the gaps."

"There are many other problems too, which is why Green MEPs highlighted [12 Reasons to oppose CETA](#), and why we voted against it today in the European Parliament. It's extremely regrettable that a majority of MEPs didn't heed our concerns, and have instead today voted for CETA to go ahead. It's now up to national parliaments across Europe to take action to block this damaging deal."

Molly Scott Cato, Green MEP for the South West and the Green Party's Brexit Spokesperson, drew attention to divisions within Labour, an issue she highlighted in a News Statesman [article today](#). She said

"With trade, as with Brexit, Labour are exposing how weak they are as an opposition. The Party is hopelessly split between backing the citizens of Europe and caving into corporate power.

"Their long-time Trade coordinator in the European Parliament, David Martin, has been a forceful supporter of CETA and has strenuously opposed the Greens for their opposition to the anti-democratic aspects of this treaty. No wonder their shadow trade minister can only persuade half his MPs to vote against this toxic deal."

"The weakness of socialists across Europe to protect citizens against the worst aspects of corporate globalisation is driving people towards the forces of the Right, thereby fanning the flames of fascism."

Conservative MEP Charles Tannock reiterated during the debate in Strasbourg that the UK Government sees CETA as a model for future UK trade deals. Molly continued:

"Conservatives in the European and UK Parliaments have been the biggest cheerleaders for CETA, and they are hoping the deal will still apply to Britain post-Brexit, and, most concerningly, the Minister for Trade, Liam Fox, has even put CETA forward as a model for future UK trade deals. It is clear that Brexit will not free Britain from toxic trade deals."

Notes

* Roll call vote results are yet to be published.

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Transport police involved in thousands of arrests each year

- [Home](#)
- [All News](#)
- Transport police involved in thousands of arrests each year

15 Feb 2017



The British Transport Police makes thousands of arrests every year, including hundreds for assault on staff and alcohol-related offences, new figures have shown.

A Freedom of Information request by the Scottish Conservatives revealed more than 13,000 arrests have been made since 2011 on trains and at stations in Scotland.

It comes as the SNP attempts to incorporate the BTP into Police Scotland, despite warnings from rail bosses this week that officers dealing with transport incidents could end up getting called away on other duties.

Now the Scottish Conservatives have questioned whether the single force is ready to deal with the dozens of additional incidents which occur on trains every week north of the border.

The FoI statistics showed the BTP made 2023 arrests last year, as well as 110 arrests in the first few weeks of 2017 alone.

Of the incidents in 2016, 221 related to alcohol, while 197 arrests followed allegations of verbal or physical assaults on a staff member.

In total, since 2011, there have been more than 1000 assaults on workers.

Last week, Scotrail said it feared a loss of expertise from the proposals, while officers themselves have pointed to a number of potential pitfalls that could occur as a result of the move.

The Scottish Conservatives have repeatedly questioned why ministers want to take one of the UK's most successful policing departments and merge it with one of the poorest-performing.

Scottish Conservative transport spokesman Liam Kerr said:

"The sheer numbers involved here show that taking away a dedicated service like the British Transport Police is a bad idea.

"What's more, these are serious cases involving physical assault on staff and the abuse of alcohol.

"Passengers and staff alike respect the BTP and the job they do.

"Many suspect the motivation behind this move is for the SNP to get rid of the word 'British' from Scotland's railways, and replace it with the word 'Scotland'.

"If this move jeopardises the safety of workers and passengers, as these statistics suggest it might, then it must be resisted."

Scottish Conservative shadow justice secretary Douglas Ross said:

"The move by the SNP to have Police Scotland take over the BTP's work is misguided and unpopular.

"It will cause all kinds of confusion, not least when it comes to cross-border services.

"The BTP itself has set out perfectly reasonable alternatives, but the Scottish Government doesn't want to listen.

"If this move results in trains being less safe for staff and passengers, it will be another mark against Police Scotland's name in the eyes of the public."

Notes to editors:

To see a copy of the FoI response, visit:

<http://www.scottishconservatives.com/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/FoI-Response-0080-17.pdf>

To read more on Scotrail's concerns, visit:

<http://www.scotsman.com/news/politics/scotrail-warns-transport-police-merger-plan-could-lead-to-delays-1-4362864>

Green Party: Employment figures don't mask job market built on sand



15 February 2017

*** Employment may be up but almost 4 million [1] people have insecure jobs which barely make ends meet**

The Green Party has said figures [1] which show employment is at the highest rate ever should not be allowed to mask the insecurity facing so many

families in Britain today as wage growth slows.

Jonathan Bartley, Green Party co-leader, said:

“These latest figures should not mask a job market built on sand. Wage growth has slowed just as the inflation rate hits its highest level in two years. Almost 4 million [2] people are still in insecure jobs which barely allow them to make ends meet. People need quality jobs they can build a life on.

“With the Government threatening to push Britain off the Brexit cliff-edge the endemic insecurity across the country risks getting much worse, as people’s livelihoods are sold down the river by a Prime Minister threatening to turn this country into an offshore tax haven.

“In this age of insecurity we should be thinking big about how we build an economy that works for everyone. That’s why the Government should follow the lead of countries like Finland which are investigating the merits of introducing a basic income, to stop people falling into poverty, while providing the choice, security and stability they need.”

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