

BBC Newscast 11:00am Friday 12th June 2026
Chris Mason interviews Sir Keir Starmer
10 Downing Street

CM: Prime Minister, your now former Defence Secretary said that your plans that you wanted him to sign up to could leave the country unsafe. There's no more devastating a critique is there of a prime minister by a former Defence Secretary than to say that you couldn't convince him that he was wrong. How would you try to convince our audience that he was?

KS: Let me do that, firstly, by setting briefly the context. Obviously we're living in a very volatile world. We've got the conflict in Ukraine now in its fifth year, and we've got conflict in the Middle East, specifically Iran, that is as dangerous and volatile a world as any of us have lived in. And we absolutely have to step up to that. That requires me as Prime Minister to make hard edged decisions, hard edged decisions. And I've taken two, because Defence and security are my number one priority. The first of those decisions was to increase Defence spending from 2.3% to 2.6% by 2027.

That was a very important decision. That's the biggest sustained increase in Defence spending since the 1980s. So, a very significant uplift in Defence spending. Our manifesto only two years ago committed us to doing that by the end of the Parliament. I brought it forward within the first year because it was my number one priority. Hard edged because a Labour prime minister, I, had to take the decision to take that money from overseas development aid. So, step number one was very significant. That means we're going to spend in this Parliament about £270bn on Defence. That is the biggest amount that has ever been spent. So that is step number one.

Step number two is the Defence Investment Plan, which we're discussing. That is an additional increase on top of the increase I've already put in place. Again, a really important decision, significant uplift in Defence spending this time particularly focused on the capabilities that we need for the future, the next generation of fighter jets, what we need with drones and what we need in terms of the next generation for the Navy and particularly long-range missiles, that sort of thing. The wherewithal to allow us to fight. It comes with the condition that every pound spent has to be double in the sense it goes into the spend, but it also goes into jobs in this country.

Now that's hard-edged because in order to take that decision, which I have, I have reallocated resources from other departments to Defence outside the spending review. So, when it comes to Defence, it's my number one priority and I have taken the difficult decisions to make sure that we are safe as a country because that is my number one priority.

CM: Let's unpack then this Defence Investment Plan. Albeit obviously clearly a document that we've not seen yet publicly, because the critique is that the words are there, but the numbers are not. So the argument is clear, isn't it, from critics that in the last few years of this decade, the planned increase would amount to 0.08% at just the point that you set out in your Munich Security Conference speech of a couple of months ago, that the warning from NATO is that Russia could be ready to use military force against the alliance. In other words, the critique is the money's not there when the risk is.

KS: Well, the money is considerable, as I say this first step I took...

CM: ...but not enough is the critique...

KS: That increase of Defence spending from 2.3 to 2.6%.

CM: But it's beyond that. That's the question isn't it?

KS: This is now further money on top of that. The important question is, is that going to give us the capability for the future? We had a Strategic Defence Review. The question there was what have we got now? What do we need for the future? That's why we're investing in things like next generation fighter planes, the long-range missiles. And of course, this has to be seen in the context of the commitment that I've made and I keep to get to 3% in the next Parliament. That will be carried out through spending reviews and the process and the funding and I can tell you now that Defence will be the number one priority at every spending review, including the next spending review. There's the additional commitment that I made at NATO last year, which was to get to 3.5% by 2035. So, they're the commitments I've made. And I think if you look at the steps along the way, what you should see is these are important steps to get us where we need to be on 3%. And then they're 3.5% in 2035. And there are two ways. I mean some people will talk about how they're going to do it. I am evidencing how I am doing it.

CM: So, what do you say then to some of the senior military figures who have been critical? So General Sir Richard Barron's, co-author of the Strategic Defence Review "This makes this country unsafe. This government's led by the current Prime Minister has actively decided not to fund its own Defence review because it much prefers to spend money on other things." General Sir James Everard, former NATO Deputy Supreme Allied Commander for Europe: "The UK standing in NATO is at an all-time low." These are people who know what they're talking about.

KS: Well look, I, I have the highest respect for the individuals that you have quoted...

CM: And they're saying there's not enough money.

KS: But I don't agree. These are hard edged decisions. There are decisions that have been taken and we are seen as a leading member of NATO.

CM: Really?

KS: There are two very important coalitions that have been formed. The first of them is to put in place the security guarantees for Ukraine. The leaders of that coalition are the UK and I'm very proud about that alongside France and Germany. A second coalition, which is to allow safe passage through the Straits of Hormuz, a coalition again led by the UK and I'm very proud of that and by France alongside us. So we are a country that makes a huge contribution to NATO, not least our nuclear deterrent, which of course is totally committed to NATO for the benefit of all, the right thing to do, but also we are seen as a leading member of NATO, particularly when it comes to this ability to put together coalitions for particular issues arising in those particular conflicts.

CM: Okay. How on earth is it credible that you can get to 3.5% by the middle of the next decade when the uptick towards the end of this decade is 0.08%? That's the central critique of John Healey, that the numbers are fanciful.

KS: Let me just take you on that, or at least answer, if I may. We have another spending review coming up before the end of this Parliament and Defence will be the number one priority in that spending review,

CM: Is that not jam tomorrow though?

KS: No, it is very important that when I make commitments on something as important as Defence, that I'm able to point to what the funding is. This particular Defence Investment Plan is outside of a spending review, that makes conditions difficult because the Strategic Defence Review that was carried out was intended to provide an answer to the capability within the 2.5% that we had risen to on Defence spending. When the Defence Investment Plan came back, it came with a much bigger price tag than that. Now rather than leave it to the next spending review, I've tackled it head on and I have taken the decision to reallocate from other departments. That's not an easy thing to do, but it's the right thing to do.

CM: Yeah, I wanted to ask you about that...

KS: But just to push back slightly, there will be another spending review before the end of this Parliament and I'll be very clear with you and through you with your viewers, Defence will be the number one priority in that spending review and spending reviews beyond that, because it's important to this Government and it's important to me.

CM: Let's unpack that thought about the hard-edged, as you put it, trade-offs, as you that come with these decisions. Did you manage to secure cuts from every member of your Cabinet in their respective departments to help pay for Defence?

KS: Yes. Everybody is contributing to this.

CM: Every single one?

KS: It's very important that they do. What I'm not doing is taking out day-to-day spending, because I'm not prepared to cut our public services, but every department is contributing to this. It is a collective effort if you like, towards a really important priority of the Government and that is why, you know I say the first uplift was a decision to cut overseas development aid, a hard-edge decision. The second is the one taken by me in recent weeks, which is to do that reallocation within the government departments outside of a spending review. And that has been done. That is the decision and the Defence Investment Plan will now be published before NATO, as I've always said and I've been discussing with the new Defence Secretary and the Chief of the Defence Staff this morning.

CM: Let's just broaden things out in our remaining minutes. Are you decisive?

KS: Well, I've taken the decision in recent weeks to reallocate resources from other government departments.

CM: Sure. But it has been rejected by your former Defence Secretary. Actually, the reason I asked...

KS: ...just let me push back on that a little bit. Because when I, as Prime Minister have taken the decision to increase Defence spending in a way which has not been done since the 1980s, that is decisive. It is evidence and it is hard-edged. Those decisions have been taken by me because the defence and security of our country is my number one priority.

CM: Let me put a few things to you. John Healy said, you have been unable to commit resources that the nation needs. Al Carns said decisions that should take days, take months. Wes Streeting said where we need vision, we have a vacuum. Jess Phillips said I know you care deeply, but deeds not words are what matter. There's an overlap here, isn't there? They're diagnosing paralysis.

KS: Well, let me first, if I may, just record my thanks and gratitude to John and Al for the service that they provided in government. I respect both of them and it's important that I record my thanks.

CM: Sure, but it sounds like collectively they're on to something.

KS: In terms of their comments. I'm afraid to say I disagree, because it is decisive to increase Defence spending to 2.6% by 2027...

CM: But it's not enough. They're saying that's the thing, isn't it?

KS: Well, it is decisive to take the decision outside of a spending review to reallocate resources from government departments to the Defence Investment Plan. That is what has happened here. That is the evidence of the decisions that I've taken. And as I say, I remain committed to the 3.0% and the 3.5% in the way I've set out.

CM: It's not just them, is it with these observations? It was suggested your former Chief of Staff described governing as advance, buckle, advance, buckle as a recurring theme.

KS: Let me, because very many people very often sitting outside of government give the impression that there are lots of easy decisions that can be taken.

CM: Well, these are often people who worked in government with you!

KS: Yeah. There are no easy decisions. For every decision there has to be the question: what are you *not* going to do? So, every time somebody says this is what, there will always be people who will say, spend more on Defence. I get that. There will, there will never be a day when that isn't a criticism. There will always be people in that camp. There will always be people saying I would do this, I would do that, I'd do the other. The question back to them is, what is it you *wouldn't* do? Because government is about trade-offs. It's about priorities and it's about making the right decisions, the decisions to increase Defence to 2.6% by 2027 and now to add to that with Defence Investment Plan, they're the right decisions for this country and that's why I've taken them.

CM: One of the central trade-offs put to you by some of your political opponents, but also those who want to see you succeed, is the whole question of Welfare as a trade-off against Defence. We cannot defend Britain with an ever-expanding Welfare budget. Not

the words of the Conservatives, not the words of Reform, although they do agree with that, but the words of Lord Robertson, former Defence Secretary, former Secretary-General of NATO. That's the crux of all of this, isn't it? That you lost credibility with your own side in that Welfare vote a year ago and you've not been able to recover since. Maybe money from that vast and expanding welfare budget could solve the issues that John Healy's talking about?

KS: Let me take that head on because I know that's a point that's made. The answer to that is we are reforming Welfare, we are doing this...

CM: but it's still going up.

KS: The Youth Guarantee is in place. We've taken steps to rebalance Universal Credit and we've introduced the rights

CM: ...but it's still going up, isn't it?

KS: but the important thing about that is they are all measures to get people into work, because the question shouldn't be: how much Benefit is someone getting? The question should be: what's the Government doing to help them get into work? That then frees up resources. So, we are doing that reform, we've got the Alan Milburn review coming, which is the next phase of reform. So, we are doing that, that will free up resource. But what the question I've answered is: how do you fund the uplift that was put in place a year ago to 2.6%? How do you today fund the Defence Investment Plan? Which I've answered by reallocating amongst other things, funds from departments into Defence, both of them important decisions, the right decisions for our country.

CM: I take your point and many people will share the idea that of course the Welfare system is about providing people with opportunities. But alongside that comes the bill. Can you get to a point in the years ahead where that bill is coming down and then you can entertain that trade-off, that that money could be spent on Defence?

KS: I do want to free up more resources from Welfare.

CM: So down, not just slowing down the rates of increase.

KS: But the question is: how you do that? I think the right way to do that is to put in place the support to get people into work. I believe that that is the right approach. It's the values that we bring actually Labour values. We believe in getting people into work, which is why we've already put those measures into place that will free up resources. It's the right way to do it, but it is important alongside that for me to answer the question today: how are you going to fund the Defence Investment Plan? Amongst the measures I've taken are the measures to reallocate resources from other departments outside of a spending review, because you normally, these things are done in a spending review, or in a fiscal event. This exercise has been taken against the backdrop of no spending review and that is why these decisions are hard-edged decisions taken by me, because that's the right thing to do in the interest of our country.

CM: So, this Defence Investment Plan is not dead. It still sees the light of day – when? Next week?

KS: As I've said a number of times, it will be published before the NATO summit, which is a matter of a few weeks away. I discussed it with the Defence Secretary and the Chief of the Defence Staff this morning. We were looking at the capabilities and the priorities in the plan, because it's very important to appreciate this is a plan now to make sure we have the capability for the future, the wherewithal. Look, we know from Ukraine and Iran that the nature of conflict is changing. Therefore, the next generation of fighter plane is very important. Autonomous naval capabilities are very, very important. Long range missiles is something that across Europe we've been talking about how we collaborate in relation to that. These are the questions that we're answering in the Defence Investment Plan – the right questions and answers for the country. But alongside that, I have made it a condition that this must translate into jobs, well-paid jobs in every community across the country. Every pound has to be spent in a double way. One, the spend on Defence. Two, the investment in jobs in this country.

CM: Let me ask before we conclude about your leadership, because that's obviously key to delivering what you want to achieve. Let me read you a quote. It's a quote from you in December, 2021 talking about the then Prime Minister, Boris Johnson: "The Prime Minister has lost the authority to lead. He's so weak, his party is so divided, he can't provide the leadership we need at this crucial time. He can't discharge the basic functions of government anymore." I put it to you, that is an accurate description of your predicament right now...

KS: I put it to you that that is wrong. Let me just explain why. We've had incredible prevailing winds in the two years we've been in government in terms of the international volatility and the impact on our economy. Notwithstanding that we've had two very significant increases in Defence spend and we've just rehearsed that. Secondly, we've stabilized the economy. The Spring Statement showed that inflation was down, interest rates were down, we had good headroom. Now we're seeing growth predictions. The biggest growth, or the highest growth in the G7 predicted. Immigration is down. So, the, the economic data, that's the second thing. The third thing is we have invested heavily in our public services and in recent weeks we've seen record drops in NHS waiting lists. So, Defence of the country, the number one priority, stabilizing the economy, investing in our public services, they are the basics of government, just to borrow your phrase and we have made significant progress on all three of those. And I would just gently say this, that whoever is Prime Minister is going to face the same prevailing winds as I am facing. None of that is going to change.

CM: So, if it's Andy Burnham in that chair, if it's Wes Streeting, the fundamentals are the same.

KS: None of those things are going to change. For every answer that is being suggested, the question has to be when you are in government, which is about trade-offs, what is it then that you *wouldn't* do? OK? Because easy answers are by their nature easy. Decisions in government involve trade-offs. So, they always have to come with that second question. Well, if you're going to do that, what is it you *wouldn't* do?

CM: You described Liz Truss, when she was Prime Minister at one point, as being lost in denial about the turmoil she was causing. Again, I put it to you, that's an accurate description of you now, isn't it?

KS: Well, look, I think If you look at the NHS and the work we've done, that is a significant improvement on where we are.

CM: Wouldn't Keir Starmer as an Opposition leader be saying exactly these things about Kier Starmer the Prime Minister now?

KS: Well, look: Liz Truss lost control of the economy and it spiralled out of control and we are still paying the price.

CM: But you've lost control of your party, haven't you?

KS: We have taken control of the economy, we've stabilized the economy. I wouldn't just gloss over that, Chris. It's very important. We inherited a broken economy, but within two years with Rachel Reeves' decisions at the budgets and spending reviews, we've got to a position where the economy is stable in a volatile world. That is incredible. We've got to a position where our public services are already improving in two short years and we've made two significant uplifts in Defence spending. That is a million miles away from where Liz Truss left this country. And we're still paying the price in relation to her failures.

CM: And if there's a leadership contest, you're sounding determined. I hear you say you're in it to win it.

KS: Look, I'm not going to walk away. I don't think we should plunge the country into the chaos of a leadership election.

CM: But if that happens, wouldn't you be a contributor to that chaos?

KS: I don't think it should happen, but if it, it does,

CM: pretty likely...

KS: But if it does I will fight and let me just be clear with you, that's not about personal vanity, it's not about stubbornness. It's out of a very deep sense of duty. I was elected to serve this country notwithstanding the difficult circumstances. That is what I am doing. In the last few weeks others have made their own case. I've been concentrating on the job I was elected to do, which is to deliver for this country. This is about a sense of service and duty. It's not vanity, it's not stubbornness, it's duty.

CM: You and I have had conversations like this for many years going back to your time in Opposition. One consistent thread that you have always argued is hating the soap opera of politics and your argument that that chaos doesn't help in the capacity to govern the country well. In a scenario - and I appreciate it hasn't happened yet - but in a scenario where there is a leadership contest, it may be that your decision to stand, or not ,determines whether there actually is a contest. And in that scenario, you deciding to run makes you the author of chaos, doesn't it?

KS: Chris, that's a strange way of analysing that. A contest only arises if somebody gets 81 MPs to back them and says "I'm now going to challenge." So...

CM: ...and then you deciding that you are going to take them on, because if, at that point, you folded, then there wouldn't be a contest and maybe the absence of a contest is in the interest of the country to avoid chaos?

KS: Chris, we have invested heavily in Defence. We have stabilized the economy and we have invested heavily in our public services and we're seeing the yields of that in the NHS. That is a very sound platform. I want to complete the work I was elected in to Government to do. Therefore, that's why I've always said I'm not going to walk away from the commitment that I made in 2024 to serve my country and the mandate that I won from the British public in order to do so. That was a mandate we won in 2024 with me then leading my party and me now as Prime Minister. I'm not going to walk away from that. I think it's very important that we carry on ensuring that we do the right thing on Defence and Security. It's the number one priority as for me as Prime Minister, that we carry on doing what we're doing to stabilize the economy. That requires us to do the work with other international partners on Ukraine and the Strait of Hormuz where we are seen as a leading country across the world, particularly in Europe. And it requires us to do what I fundamentally believe in, which is investing in our public services...

CM: You will lead Labour into the next general election?

KS: Well, that's what I want to do. I recognize that, you know, I've got to turn things around. We had a very bad set of elections.

CM: That wasn't quite a yes though. You're acknowledging the jeopardy you're in?

KS: I've been always clear that that's what I want to do, but look, I recognize that given where we are, I need to turn that around and that's what I intend to do.

CM: Prime Minister, thank you.

KS: Thank you.