

In Defence of the Oil Industry

Abstract: *The modern British state was built on a colonial empire that circled the globe, and retains territories and semi-colonial relationships with regimes along the world's main maritime trade routes, which it primarily uses to protect the global flow of oil. To some, it would make perfect sense that the country's military should be deeply involved in defending these overseas interests, and securing the supply of fossil fuels. But deeper investigation reveals that it would be more accurate to describe the British state as being the bulwark that the oil industry uses to defend itself. Indeed, while BP and Shell pay almost no tax to the British treasury, the taxpayer is supporting the Ministry of Defence to the cost of multi-millions of pounds so these companies - and others like them - can continue to do business. The crisis of climate breakdown means this is not simply a conflict of interest but instead an existential threat. The recent increases in energy prices for households across Britain also means that this is not simply about geopolitics, but also about the fact ordinary people are gold plating the oil industry when many can barely afford cooking oil. Adam Ramsay, the veteran investigative journalist and editor of the Abolish Westminster newsletter, reveals the true cost of Britain's dependence on fossil fuels. This is the second in his series of essays on big oil and the British state, published in The Ecologist and Abolish Westminster during 2026.*

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Donald Trump has blown up the security strategy of every major western country. Debates around what to do about his threats to Greenland and semi-annexing of Venezuela have forced a focus on some fundamental questions about international security, many of which we should have been asking ourselves long ago. For Britain, one such question is: why do we spend billions of pounds of taxpayers' money on working hand in hand with the Pentagon to prop up the global oil industry?

Clive Lewis is a Labour MP, a former shadow defence secretary and former soldier. When I put this question to him, he was exasperated.

"There needs to be an emergency review about what we are doing. What are our priorities?" he said. "This feels like a pivot point now – an opportunity for Europe to think about what its own defence looks like. There will be people in the MoD burying their heads in their hands and in the sand because this is too big to think about. But think about it, we must."

Let's rewind a bit. For the last few months, I've been investigating the complex of relationships between the oil industry and the British state. In December, I looked at how a web of British trade deals across the planet is used to guard oil and gas reserves everywhere from

environmental legislation, making it much harder for governments to act on climate change. I showed how oil and gas interests have infiltrated the Department for Business and Trade, helping ensure that it continues to work in their favour. I argued that the democratic paucity at the heart of the Westminster system means that civil servants end up being more accountable to Shell and BP than they are to you and me. The result of this is that British trade deals are responsible for nearly as much of the world's carbon emissions as the UK's domestic economy is.

For this essay, I've been looking at the Ministry of Defence (MoD), and how British defence strategy is influenced by and works on behalf of the oil industry. And it's hard not to conclude that a vast portion of British military activity is focused not so much on keeping the British people safe, but on defending big oil. With climate breakdown presenting a profound threat to our safety, this has always been a problem. As Donald Trump rips up the rule book of the world order, it is, as Lewis says, an absurd allocation of military resources.

To understand this, let's start on an island in South East Asia that, despite having no hydrocarbons of its own, is as important to the global oil trade as Saudi Arabia or Venezuela. Singapore sits at the bottom of the Strait of Malacca, the narrow channel of sea between the Malay peninsula and the Indonesian island of Sumatra, which is the most important choke point in global shipping. About a quarter of the world's oil supply passes through here on the journey from the Middle East to markets in East and South East Asia.

The island state is consistently ranked as the world's top maritime capital, and has one of the busiest ports on Earth. It is the world's largest bunkering port – when prices dip, and oil companies want to slow the flow, it is in Singapore that they stack their barrels. Buying and selling oil barrels, or financial products derived from them, is the most profitable part of the oil industry, and Singapore hosts one of the world's top oil markets – a primary node for oil trading in, and into, Asia. The country's three oil refineries have a capacity of 1.3 million barrels a day, making it the fifth largest refiner on the planet. It is a major exporter of oil-derived products: the plastic that becomes tat often starts life here. It is also a vital petrol station for international shipping.

And it's a sort-of police station: the Changi naval base, in the south-east of the island, is a centre not just for Singapore's own navy, but also for the US navy's seventh fleet, which periodically patrols the Malacca Straits on behalf, primarily, of the oil industry, seeing off threats of piracy, terrorism, and more. On the island's north is a small British base, which since 2021 has served as the primary logistics hub for HMS Spey and HMS Tamar, the first Royal Navy ships stationed in the region since the UK handed Hong Kong back in 1997. When the two vessels were deployed there as part of Britain's post-Brexit 'Indo-Pacific tilt', First Sea Lord Admiral Sir Ben Key, the head of the Royal Navy, said their presence was crucial to the prosperity and security of the UK.

These activities are facilitated by the island's authoritarian, pro-western government, which has been dominated by the same political party – and the same family – since before the country gained independence from Britain in 1965. This government is propped up by a praetorian guard of political police: British-trained, British-recruited Gurkhas, who are overseen by a British commanding officer. In 2023, the two countries signed an agreement to further deepen this relationship. In other words, in a world where it's increasingly common to talk about 'spheres of influence', a remnant British imperial relationship is used to ensure a western foothold in South East Asia, one primary function of which is to

support the oil industry as it ships climate-breakdown-driving fuels to the Asian market.

It's not just Singapore. The next-most important pinch point in the global oil trade is the Strait of Hormuz, which has about 20 per cent of global oil and gas supplies passing through it every day. Here Britain has a major naval base on either side: one in Bahrain, and one in Oman. Both are former British colonies. In both countries, the British presence relies on a symbiotic relationship with a despotic royal family that has continued to be propped up by the British state and wider British establishment since official independence, and continues to rely on Britain's security world for logistical and training support, shielding the governments from demands for democracy.

Bahrain's King Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa described the relationship between the British state and his family's despotic dynasty in 2013: "The first Treaty of Friendship was signed in 1820, nearly 200 years ago, and it remained until replaced by a new one in 1971 on Britain's withdrawal from the Gulf – a unilateral decision of which my father said – 'Why? No one asked you to go!' In fact for all practical and strategic purposes the British presence has not changed and it remains such that we believe we shall never be without it." Bahrain's royal family has been keen on Britain remaining, but the people of Bahrain were never as enthusiastic.

The head of Bahrain's secret police from 1968 to 1998 was a Scottish police officer called Ian Henderson. He defended the ruling family from persistent demands for democracy, largely so that Britain could use their territory to protect its oil interests. His tactics included maiming, rape and torture of thousands of anti-government activists, as well as rounding up the children in villages that protested, murdering them all and leaving their bodies, months later, on their parents' doorsteps. For this work, he was awarded a CBE in 1984 for "services to British interests in Bahrain". When he retired, Henderson was replaced by British ex-serviceman colonel Thomas Bryan. After Metropolitan Police assistant commissioner John Yates resigned in 2011 in connection with a royal phone-hacking scandal as Britain's top counter-terrorism officer, he, too, went to work for the Bahraini government, for six months. While there, Yates dismissed some criticism of Bahrain's police as "malicious propaganda", but he failed to respond to my questions for this piece. His posting came as part of a wider process: after pro-democracy protests in 2011, Britain's Foreign Office spent millions training Bahrain's security services, who used their new skills to round up, torture and kill the activists responsible, ensuring the continuance of a royal family friendly to British (oil) interests. Natalie Bennett, a Green party member of the House of Lords, commented on how common it is to see Bahraini 'businessmen' being hosted in the dining room of the upper chamber by other peers, when I interviewed her there in 2024. As well as hosting a major British naval base, Bahrain is the home of the United States Naval Forces Central Command, which oversees the US navy's fifth fleet and other task forces in the area. The Bahraini embassy did not respond to my offer to provide a comment for this piece.

The story in Oman is remarkably similar. In 1970, Britain organised a coup, replacing the sultan with his son, Qaboos bin Said Al Said, who had been educated at a British boarding school and the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst. He stayed in place until his death in 2021, when he was replaced by his chosen cousin. Qaboos had kept a secret 'privy council' of top advisers throughout his life, the journalist Phil Miller revealed in 2021. The council included "seven current and former heads of MI6 and the UK military, a foreign office minister, a British oil executive, the ex-governor of the Bank of

England, a special adviser to Princes William and Harry, and one of Queen Elizabeth's closest aides... Aside from Qaboos himself, only one other Omani would usually attend the privy council meetings, whose existence was concealed from the Sultan's subjects," Miller wrote. Miller also revealed that Britain loaned around 90 troops to the sultan, helping ensure his continued despotic rule, under which pro-democracy activists have been tortured. "Former senior MI6 officer Alec McDonald... was seconded from MI6 to run the Sultan's vast internal security service from 1985–93," Miller reported. It's not clear whether the current sultan maintains these arrangements, and the Omani embassy did not respond either to this question, or to the wider ones I put to them.

Alongside the fact that Oman grants Britain military bases next to the Gulf, there are two other obvious 'British' strategic interests in the country. The first is that Shell is the major shareholder in Oman's oil and gas, alongside the Omani national oil company, and owns between a third and a half of the various consortiums extracting fossilised phytoplankton from the Gulf state. Wael Sawan, Shell's current CEO, a Lebanese/Canadian citizen, began his career at Shell in 1997 as an engineer with Petroleum Development Oman. The second is that Britain had (and likely still has) three GCHQ bases in the country, tapping the undersea cables coming out of the Gulf, and thus internet communications from across the region – as the Edward Snowden leaks revealed.

How much of the intelligence gathered from these oil-rich countries through these methods is shared with Shell and BP isn't clear. Since 2011, the long-standing operation under which Britain has maintained a permanent naval presence in the Gulf – largely through its bases in Bahrain and Oman – has been called Operation Kipion. Its explicit aim is "to promote peace and stability in the region, as well as ensuring the safe flow of oil and international trade". Until early 2026, this has included a permanent counter-mine squadron whose role is "to seek out and destroy unexploded sea mines in order to ensure the safe transit of oil and global maritime trade". We're not allowed to know how much of our tax money is spent protecting the global oil industry in these ways. The MoD rejected my Freedom of Information Act request asking for the cost of Operation Kipion on the grounds that releasing the information "would provide adversaries with a clearer picture of the financial impact of their actions on the UK".

What we do know is that the additional cost of operations in the Middle East and Gulf in the 2024–25 financial year was £230m, which is about seven per cent of the department's operational spend and compares to the 85 per cent that went to Ukraine. This is on top of recurring costs like the regular maintenance of bases. The MoD justified this expenditure in its annual report: "The Middle East is significant to UK security and prosperity due to its position as an artery of global trade and its role in global energy supplies. The UK's footprint in the region and increased investment in strategic defence partnerships supports the Government's economic growth agenda." There appeared to be little consideration of the global need to transition away from such energy supplies in the report.

The third-biggest oil pinch point in the world is the Suez Canal, which carries nearly 10 per cent of global oil, and whose Mediterranean exit is watched over by Britain's military bases on the southern edge of Cyprus – Akrotiri and Dhekelia. The fourth-most important is the Bab el-Mandeb Strait, between Djibouti and Yemen. Djibouti, a former French colony whose authoritarian government maintains a close relationship with Paris, hosts France's biggest military base on mainland Africa. And the US's. And also

China's. And also Japan's. And also a permanent British presence. Not far behind, with around three per cent of the world's oil supply passing through it, is the Strait of Gibraltar, overseen by the British military base on Gibraltar.

The Indian Ocean isn't a pinch point, but it is a multi-lane motorway, a major passage in the global oil and gas trade. For the last 200 years, Britain has controlled an important hub at its centre: the Chagos Islands – also known as the British Indian Ocean Territory – and, specifically, the island of Diego Garcia. While, last year, the UK finally accepted multiple international rulings that we have no right to claim sovereignty over these islands, a deal with Mauritius means the British navy will retain the use of Diego Garcia for at least 99 years. UK defence secretary John Healey said last year, when explaining this continued presence, "two-thirds of global oil shipments [are] transported through the Indian Ocean. Our constant presence in these waters serves to safeguard trade routes." As with many of these bases, Britain uses its colonial history to secure the territory, but it's really Washington that takes most advantage of it. The joint US/UK base on Diego Garcia is a major US military hub, and the island also hosts one of the world's four ground station antennas for the Global Positioning System, an important piece of Pentagon surveillance infrastructure. It's not clear how much it costs British taxpayers to run the military base on Diego Garcia – in order to help the US project its power and protect oil tankers voyaging from the Middle East and to East Asia – but the answer will likely run to the billions. What we do know is that, under the deal with Mauritius, Britain will now be paying £101m a year to rent the land for the purpose.

Of course, it's not just fossil fuel companies that use the shipping routes Britain helps protect. But about 40 per cent of global shipping is coal, oil or gas, so climate-busting firms are by far the biggest beneficiaries, and when we look at justifications for this expenditure, they are the biggest reason given. In 2025, the Royal Navy's flagship, the aircraft carrier HMS *Prince of Wales*, led Operation Highmast, a major eight-month, multinational deployment, sailing from the UK to Japan, through most of these pinch points. This was, among other things, to police these trade routes, which are primarily used by the fossil fuel industry. Healey praised the "unprecedented scale" of an exercise that formed part of the operation. "Our commitment to the Indo-Pacific is unwavering, as this huge military exercise demonstrates," he said. "We will continue to work alongside our closest allies to maintain the security and stability that underpins global prosperity." Commenting on Highmast and the wider 'Indo-Pacific tilt', Clive Lewis said: "Why the hell are we spending billions of pounds on a military posture which is becoming outdated by the day? "Why are we making the Pacific Ocean part of our concern? We need to focus on the northern hemisphere – it just seems to be we're doing what we've always done."

The fact that there are stepping stones of British territories and proxy regimes along the trade route from the Atlantic to East Asia is no coincidence. For centuries, much of British foreign policy was based around securing the route to and back from India – initially around the South Atlantic Gyre, and hence the possession of St Helena – and then through Suez. When the military switched to using oil rather than coal as its primary fuel, this geopolitical infrastructure was used to guarantee a constant supply. Much of it still exists, with US, oil-based global supremacy having been built partly on the back of the British empire. These imperial remnants might feel like an anachronism. Look at the MoD's official documents, and you see the opposite. In the department's 2024–25 annual report, for example, it states: "Going forward into 2025–26, we have a wider ambition,

including: increasing our leverage of the strategic geographic position of our footprint overseas... and exploiting our strategic advantage for economic growth.” The “economic growth” they are referring to likely means two things: selling weapons, and protecting the flow of oil. It’s not just along trade routes that Britain maintains military bases or other kinds of security infrastructure, in large part so that the government can assist oil companies that are in some way British. After the US, the UK has the world’s second-biggest network of military bases, made up of 145 sites worldwide. Of these, by my count, roughly 62 are in oil-rich countries or in locations vital for guarding the infrastructure of the world’s oil industry.

For decades, Britain has used military and security experience and might to prop up its oil companies. The list of examples of the British military acting in ways that help sustain the oil industry in general, and Shell and BP in particular, could fill multiple books. Often this is in relatively small, unseen ways. As I revealed last year, the Metropolitan Police provided training to former KGB agents in Azerbaijan’s security services in the midst of the Nagorno-Karabakh dispute, despite the fact that Britain was officially neutral. The arrangement looked very much like a sweetener encouraging the country’s government to sign the ‘deal of the century’ granting rights to its oil fields to BP. London Assembly member Zoë Garbett asked the mayor of London “whether the Metropolitan Police Service had any conversations with BP about the training of the Azerbaijani security services at any point since 4 June 1993”. She was told that the Metropolitan Police “does not comment on the work of international security bodies or security matters”.

Sometimes the military’s support for the oil industry is bigger in scale. There are around 2,000 British soldiers permanently based in oil-rich Brunei, propping up its sultan. The country’s plentiful hydrocarbons are tapped by Brunei Shell Petroleum, which is half owned by the state, half by Shell. More than one in ten people who work in Brunei are employees of or contractors for Brunei Shell Petroleum, and around one in every 200 people in Brunei is a British soldier.

Sometimes the British military helps out the oil industry through all-out war. Whether oil was the major motivator for Britain’s campaigns in Iraq and Libya is a debate for another day, but what’s certainly true is that Shell and BP did very well out of them. Often, supporting the hydrocarbon industry is the explicit intention. The MoD’s annual report and Healey’s comments make that clear.

But the question that is rarely asked is, why? Why does Britain provide, in the form of a vast global military bootprint, a multi-billion-pound annual subsidy to the oil and gas industry? After all, it’s not like the industry pays for it. Between 2017 and 2022, Shell paid no tax in the UK. In recent years, both Shell and BP have often paid significantly more tax in Norway than in the UK – and Norway isn’t spending billions to help maintain a geopolitical corridor through which they can trade. In Germany, the idea of joining efforts to police the Gulf has been highly controversial, in the way that it’s not at all in the UK.

More profoundly, these companies are driving the biggest single security threat we face – the climate crisis. By providing this multi-billion-pound subsidy to the oil and gas industry, Whitehall ensures that Britain – and the rest of the world that uses oil made cheaper by this subsidy – remains addicted to oil and gas. Investment in alternatives is less profitable, and the much needed transition to a zero carbon economy is delayed. Ahead of the first world war, the British military played a central role in the global shift from coal to oil power. Now, rather than seriously pondering the strategic implications of a global transition to an economy based on renewable

power and batteries, and helping make it so, it is propping up the old order. Why?

One partial explanation is that the British military is itself heavily reliant on fossil fuels. “You can’t “run a military without an enormous amount of oil”, James Marriott, co-author of the book *Crude Britannia* argues. “It’s extremely difficult to run an electric tank.” Much of British oil infrastructure was initially constructed for military purposes, with civilian uses only catching on later. In itself, this unquenchable thirst for petrol, diesel and kerosene means that the British military is a significant source of global emissions. This is much more significant than the government lets on. British military emissions are likely to be at least five times bigger than reported, because of the failure to fully incorporate supply chain emissions in their numbers, according to recent research. Given that these numbers don’t include Britain’s 145 overseas military bases, they are likely to be significantly higher still. In other words, while official figures say that the British military is responsible for 0.7 per cent of our emissions, a more accurate figure is likely more than two per cent.

There is also organisational inertia. “It’s like turning round a tanker,” said Clive Lewis. Sam Perlo-Freeman is head of research at Campaign Against Arms Trade and a long-term MoD-watcher. He said: “Assumptions will have been formed at the end of WWII that we need to control the global oil supply and no one will have seriously challenged them. It doesn’t need anyone to remind people how important these things are. It would take something Earth-shattering to change that.” In the MoD, he explained, “the question of global oil supply and control of it is seen as a core UK military interest – one of the core purposes of UK military power. “Guiding strategies like this are incredibly slow to change. They affect who gets put in key roles, and those people then protect those positions. This ensures that that thinking largely goes unchallenged.” Some of it is about a history that is very deeply embedded in Whitehall of seeing a particular collection of British headquartered companies almost as wings of the state.

Historically, much of British colonialism was delivered by corporations like the East India company, which were closely bound into but technically separate from the state. Both Shell and BP have, in some ways, similar histories. In the 1950s and 1960s, the two companies secretly bankrolled the government’s cold war propaganda units. BP, which has its roots in Britain’s colonial relationship with Iran, was part owned by the British government until 1987. Shell was historically Anglo-Dutch and was also closely tied into the British empire. Shell and BP are so deeply embedded in the British state that they are practically departments of it. Both firms now have offices a short walk from Downing Street, on the edge of what you might call the greater Whitehall area. A former civil servant told me that it’s very common for mid-ranking British civil servants to make the leap from government into one of the companies, barely having to change their commute, while trebling their salary and taking all of their work contacts and friendship networks with them.

A lot of Britain’s military support for the oil industry is about Whitehall’s obsession with maintaining its relationship with the White House, which has, if anything, become more desperate since Brexit. In reality, much of British military strategy since the second world war has been shaped from the Pentagon, which is in turn motivated by its need to feed suburban America’s oil addiction, and the much closer relationship between US politics and corporate share prices. Whereas 23 per cent of British people own shares beyond their pension, about two-thirds of Americans do. Clive

Lewis believes that changing this situation is going to be very hard, considering how integrated British security infrastructure is with the US. He points to the Trident nuclear weapons system, which relies on US technology to operate, and also recent government contracts with the firm Palantir. Founded and chaired by Trump-supporting billionaire Peter Thiel, Palantir is a private outgrowth of the US Department of Defense. “The Swiss military stuck a big two fingers up [to Palantir] because they said it would compromise their national security. We’re going in deeper with them,” says Lewis.

I suspect another reason The MoD spends billions protecting the global oil industry relates to how much British defence is outsourced to a set of private companies, often through long-term contracts. Often these firms are closely integrated with big oil. Take the arms manufacturer BAE Systems. When it sold billions of pounds of weaponry to Saudi Arabia in the controversial Al-Yamamah deal, the Saudis paid in oil, which was shipped and sold by BP and Shell. There is a former BP executive on BAE Systems’ board. BAE, in turn, is closely integrated into British security circles. These sorts of relationship webs tend to have insidious effects on group thinking: a certain common sense bakes in, and people begin to see the world in a particular, shared way. Dissenting voices are quietly sidelined.

Ultimately, groupthink pervades government departments because they aren’t really democratically accountable: neither parliament nor the media seriously scrutinises British defence policy. “British military strategy is accountable to parliament in theory but insulated from it in practice, Lewis confirms. “By the time MPs are consulted, the strategic choices have already been made elsewhere.” There is “no veto for ongoing operations, strategy gets shaped before it gets to parliament, the executive can bypass parliament in emergencies,” and war is “overwhelmingly a royal prerogative,” he says. The royal prerogative is a unique feature of the British constitution whereby the prime minister inherits vast powers from the monarch via the monarch’s committee of advisers, the privy council, of which the cabinet is the executive committee. Because these powers constitutionally come from the monarch rather than from parliament, the government isn’t much accountable to parliament when it wields these powers. This ensures that MPs have less right to hold governments to account than their equivalents in other democracies, particularly in areas like foreign and defence policy. One crucial example of how the royal prerogative renders British military strategy unaccountable centres around intelligence, the special forces, and overseas military bases.

In other democracies, the general attitude is that national intelligence is owned by the country’s democratic institutions, and any parliamentarian therefore has a right to see it. In the US, for example, all congresspeople have an automatic right to see intelligence, in theory at least. (If they leak intelligence, they can be imprisoned.) It’s generally understood that it would be impossible for them to properly hold the executive to account without this capacity. Most European countries take the same attitude: that if the executive controlled what intelligence elected parliamentarians could see, this would be an unacceptable breach of the division of powers in a modern democratic system.

But Britain doesn’t have a modern democratic system, and our MPs have no right to see intelligence, meaning that they are often left in the dark about huge chunks of what the British military and security services are actually up to. A large amount of British military activity revolves around the special forces – the SAS, SBS and others. Since the 1980s, the government has adopted a policy of refusing to tell MPs what these armed military units are doing.

Even the Intelligence and Security Committee – the group of MPs hand-picked by the government to oversee some intelligence service activities – are not allowed to know what the Special Forces are doing, meaning that this major branch of British military activity is literally unaccountable to MPs. Despite this secrecy, we do know that there are deep connections between the special services and British oil companies, which often operate in politically unstable places where, for example, there is significant risk of kidnapping. Some of the activities that have come to light include SBS teams being dispatched to protect oil tankers. The lack of access to information fosters a wider culture where MPs just don’t talk about security policy. Operation Highmast, a hugely expensive initiative, only appears three times in Hansard, all of them just passing references. The words “Operation Kipion” have been used ten times in the Lords since it began 15 years ago, but have never been uttered in the Commons. In the British system, the people we elect don’t really see it as their place to talk about such things.

In reality, though, everyone is accountable to someone. Without proper democratic scrutiny of these activities of the British state, it’s not surprising that they end up having their strategies and activities shaped by other powerful forces, whether big oil directly, or by proxy through the US and their friends in the arms industry.

REVOLVING DOORS

The Royal Navy’s spending of so much of its resources on supporting the main industry driving climate breakdown poses a systemic risk to the Navy as an institution. But it’s unlikely that the Navy’s official leadership will take that view: the chair of its Audit and Risk Assurance Committee is Carol Howle, a non-executive member of the Navy’s board – and, in her day job, the interim chief executive of BP. The chair of the MoD’s Audit and Risk Assurance Committee is Brian Gilvary, a member of the MoD’s board of directors – and also chair of the fossil fuel giant Ineos Energy. Gilvary is also the senior independent director of Barclays plc, which has been accused of being one of the world’s biggest financiers of fossil fuels. He was previously on the board of directors of the Royal Navy. Gilvary also spent 34 years at BP, ultimately as its chief financial officer, before his semi-retirement and appointment to various boards. Charlie Forte is chief information officer for the MoD. The board on which he sits is responsible for overseeing the UK’s defence strategy. Forte was previously deputy group global chief information officer at BP. Clive Lewis expressed concern about the web of links between government and the oil industry: “It feels wrong – it’s literally the military industrial oil complex. You can see why, when we all thought oil was a dodo, there was always going to be an ‘empire strikes back’ moment. It tells you a lot about how close the British establishment and the oil industries are. They’ve got a conflict of interest.”

The revolving door between the top of government and the top of the oil industry used to swing both ways. John Sawers, former chief of the British Secret Intelligence Service (MI6) was on the board of BP from 2015 to 2024, and Iain Lobban, the outgoing head of the surveillance agency GCHQ, was appointed as an adviser to Shell in 2015. These days ex-BP staffers still play important roles in shaping British military strategy, but it’s not at all clear that the British military and security establishment has quite as much influence over the oil companies. The Shell board of directors includes Jane Lute, a senior figure from the US security world who was deputy secretary of the US Department of Homeland Security under President Obama. There is no longer anyone obviously from the British intelligence-security world at the top of either company.

When I asked the MoD about the disproportionate number of current or former BP staff on its senior committees, their spokesperson pointed me to the standard conflicts of interest process that its officials follow, and insisted that roles on the departments' boards are advisory. There is no suggestion that anyone has broken any of these rules. They also said that the Navy's presence globally is not dictated by the demands of the oil industry. "Oil is a strategic resource," the spokesperson said to me, "and its free flow is critical to world commerce and global economic prosperity. Due to the global nature of the international oil trade, disruptions to oil trade routes can lead to regional and even global economic crises as a result of significant impacts on energy prices, production, and wider trade. "Our clean energy superpower mission will ensure our energy security, getting us off the rollercoaster of fossil fuel prices and onto clean, homegrown power that we control," they added. They did not respond to my questions about their role propping up authoritarian regimes in Brunei, Singapore, Bahrain and Oman. BP, Shell, Barclays and Ineos Energy did not respond to my requests for comment.

CONCLUSION

In January 2026, a paper compiled by the joint intelligence chiefs was published after much delay. It gave clear warnings about the threat to British national security posed by global biodiversity loss and ecosystem collapse, primarily because of threats to food and water. Highlighting "cascading risks", it said the issue was "critical for national security" for multiple reasons, including the potential consequences for UK food supplies.

Climate breakdown, primarily driven by the extraction, transportation and burning of fossil fuels, is one of the primary drivers of that risk. The companies responsible have in recent years

made clear that their previous pretences to environmentalism were all just spin. And yet those same security chiefs are letting these firms into the British government's major departments, and allowing them to shape the country's military strategy in their interests. The paper was published as Donald Trump's invasion of Venezuela and threats to Greenland tore up the global security consensus. In that context, Britain needs a rapid and radical rethink of what its military is for, and how it's being used.

At the moment, Britain is spending billions on being the third wheel in the relationship between big oil and the Trump White House. In reality, both camps represent major threats to Britain's security. It's time to ask some serious questions. As Clive Lewis puts it, why the hell are we doing this? But the reality is that Britain's political institutions are so flimsy that they are very unlikely to counter the influence of the United States and the multinational oil giants. "The weakness of parliament's oversight and strategic decision-making, or more accurately the lack of it, needs to be part of a wider conversation about the health of our democracy and how it must change," Lewis concludes. At a time of growing international tension and the heightened risk of conflict, the need for unified and coherent positions that carry genuine democratic legitimacy becomes ever more important. "It is often said that democracies do not go to war with one another. Recent events suggest a necessary caveat: healthy democracies do not go to war with one another," concludes Lewis.

This Author

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DISCLOSURE

Adam Ramsay is a Scottish journalist and a member of the National Union of Journalists. His book *Abolish Westminster* is due out with Faber and Faber in 2026 and he publishes a Substack newsletter of the same name. His children's book *My Dad Brought Beavers Back* is due out with Scotland Street Press. Adam is a member of the Green Party of England and Wales and the Scottish Green Party, he is on the board of Europe for Scotland, a director of Make Hope Possible, and on the editorial advisory board of the journal *Soundings*.

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The Ecologist Writers' Fund was launched to support contributors who are from, or who write about, communities and identities that remain marginalised within the environment movement and the journalism industry. This includes, but is not limited to, BAME, LGBTQI+ and disabled people. The fund is supported by readers of *The Ecologist* online and subscribers to our newsletter. *The Ecologist* Special Series is funded by trusts and foundations and not through the EWF. However, we hope those who have read and benefited from the series will consider donating to the writers' fund online.

THE ECOLOGIST

The Ecologist is a news and analysis platform with a focus on environmental, social and economic justice. Our strategic aim for the coming years is to focus on the fossil fuel industry and its impact on people, society and the natural environment. *The Ecologist* is published online. Editorial Team: Brendan Montague and Eleanor Penny. The Ecologist online is a member of the newspaper regulator IMPRESS.

THE RESURGENCE TRUST

The Resurgence Trust is an educational charity (Charity Number: 1120414) that aims to improve our connection to each other and to nature. The charity examines how we can reconnect with the living planet from the perspectives of society, economics, community and individual wellbeing. The trust publishes the *Resurgence & Ecologist* magazine, *The Ecologist* online and Resurgence.org, as well as organising events at its centre in Hartland, Devon and in London. The trust is funded through its members and with some donations from a number of trusts and foundations which support environmental and social change. The work of the trust is overseen by its board of trustees.
