"Seriously Underprepared for what is coming": Lord Stu Peach on Britain's Urgent Wake-Up Call

Guest Speaker LORD STU PEACH

"It's not old fashioned to have civil defense as a concept, to have a means by which critical national infrastructure can be protected under surveillance and protected both the information risk through cyber attacks and the physical protection. And then you build this cultural resilience, people looking out for the unusual, people being capable of critical thinking in case of being swamped with misinformation."

Nik Gowing
Welcome to Talking About Thinking the Unthinkable, our latest leadership conversation podcast. Hello, I'm Nik Gowing. At last, the grim realities confronting us all in this unthinkable, ruptured world are forcing a public acknowledgement that we're unprepared for what we need to assume is coming. Thinking the Unthinkable has been working to raise the alert for several years. Now the National Resilience Committee of the Upper House of Parliament, the House of Lords here in the UK, has shed

what for too long had been an instinct for caution and restraint. In a damning, sobering new report, they warn that Britain is seriously underprepared for a host of emergencies, like the threat from Russia, Iran and China, like cyber attacks, like proxies acts of violence and sabotage, and extreme weather, plus, plus, plus. But the committee says national risks and resilience are treated as, quote, distant or hypothetical problems.

The UK government must not be squeamish, they say, about sharing realities with the public. In my language, the public and public life has got to raise its state of preparedness to a dramatically new level that will guarantee to overcome the existential threat to the stability we take for granted. It's all tough stuff. It's frank, which in TTIU's view is long overdue. It needs to make a profound impact on public life. So how can that happen?

Joining me is Lord Stu Peach, one of 12 members of the committee. He ended a 50-year military career in the Royal Air Force as Chief of Defence Staff here in the UK, then as Chair of NATO's Military Committee. A warm welcome, Stu. You and your colleagues warned governments not to be squeamish and to come clean with their publics. Why must they do that now?

Lord Stu Peach
Because the range and the urgency of the threats and risks we face makes it essential to have a national conversation. That's the UK perspective from the House of Lords report. We've taken evidence from over 150 people and we've received hundreds of written submissions. So we've worked on this for 10 months and these are our conclusions.

Nik Gowing
It is damning. It is very frank as well. Is this about survival? Is it existential?

Lord Stu Peach
Well, it could be, but now is the time to prepare. You used the words, in your introduction. We agree with you. It is about preparedness, but it's not just about the government's Be Ready campaign, which we support and endorse. It's more than that. It's about organizing ourselves. It's about command and control. It's about thinking about the range of threats as they collide and bump into each other and how we would need to respond to them and that's what we're aiming to set out for the government. Really it's about prevention being better than cure.

Nik Gowing
Where are the obstructions? Where is the resistance? Is it literally mindset and unwillingness to talk frankly about how serious this is?

Lord Stu Peach
I think it's partly a mindset issue, but it's also partly we have developed quite sophisticated ways of life support mechanisms, such as supply chains, which involve very few indigenous production, relying on imports. Those maritime supply chains are now being exposed as pretty vulnerable through the conflict in the world right now. It could get worse, of course.

And also, the nature of our supply chains is dependent on a few facilities. Those facilities need to be protected. They need to be cyber protected. They may need physical protection. And so I think it's about, it's a wake up call for us to prepare to defend our way of life.

Nik Gowing
What your report does though is accuse the government, and it is pretty accusing, of being too vague about what is really coming down the track. What do they now need to do?

Lord Stu Peach
Again, building on their, the government's Be Ready campaign, we need to be clearer about the range and the intensity of the threats and risks we face. We need to therefore ready the people via a national conversation for that. We then need to properly organise ourselves with exercises and stress test the model. And you will recall very well, Nick, that after the financial crisis of 2008,

That's precisely what the banks ordered to do. And they have done that. And they have gone through a whole regime of stress testing exercises. We need to do that really across the many sectors of our lives and our way of life.

Nik Gowing
I think it's fair to say, and I remember you in your valedictory speech as chief of defence staff here in the UK six, seven years ago, no longer than that, when you were basically highlighting much of what was in this report. But I think you said to me privately sometime later, you wanted to go further, but you couldn't because the system didn't allow you to do it. Is this now coming clean and saying this is now a very dangerous moment?

Lord Stu Peach
Well, it's not about me, but it's about all these things crashing together. mean, give you an example. The power of geography has not changed. So the choke points of the world where ships have to flow through narrow parts of the world are all under some form of duress. Not all of it is due to conflict. Some of it is due to climate stress, climate emergency. There's not enough water in the dams above the Panama Canal. Therefore, the volume of loading has to go down.

There's not enough water in the European river system, so the volume of loading has to go down. Because of conflict, the ships are not using the Suez Canal as much, so they go all the way around Africa. So it's a global issue, and this report is a British perspective on what we need to do next.

Nik Gowing
Now this is subtitled, Building a Culture of Resilience. Easy to say resilience. Do think there's a real clarity of what resilience really means and involves?

Lord Stu Peach
Well, helpfully, our alliance, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, sets that out for us under Article 3 of the Washington Treaty. It has a very well written document, and I always say that, from 1949, which has stood the test of time. And that preparedness, that culture of resilience, is very well understood.

And I will be clear that we have really taken extensive consultations with our Scandinavian friends and allies, and they have that culture of resilience, and it's inbuilt in their society and has been for decades. And we can draw lessons from that and we can move quickly to establish a resilient future for the UK.

Nik Gowing
But what do you say to the public who need to understand what resilience really means, not just extra tins in the fridge or in the extra tins in the larder. It's something about the way of life is under threat. Is that what you're saying?

Lord Stu Peach
It is. And one of the things that we could, we maybe, we think we should do, and we've said that in our report, is bring right down into the national curriculum for our schools, civic duty, civic responsibility. Let's think back to what we did during the Cold War. It's not old fashioned to have civil defense as a concept, to have a means by which critical national infrastructure

can be protected under surveillance and protected both the information risk through cyber attacks and the physical protection. And then you build this cultural resilience, people looking out for the unusual, people being capable of critical thinking in case of being swamped with misinformation. And you and your work have done so much, to make people aware of misinformation and there's plenty of it.

Nik Gowing
Now, one of the things you say very, very sharply, the government and politicians need to trust the public and take them into their confidence as much as security will allow. And I'm quoting there from the document. And you know, there is a culture which is mustn't tell them too much, they'll get too worried. Where do you think this is now going? Is there a big shift in emphasis?

Lord Stu Peach
I think the national conversation has begun and I think our report is just a part of it. Various ministers have made good and helpful statements, including both the defence secretary and the security minister in recent weeks.

So this is beginning, but I think it needs more structure and form to go to look at society as a whole, to look at how we manage our import, export, foodstuff. Medicines, we discovered during the course of our deliberation, the UK imports all of its antibiotics. And so what our Scandinavian friends have shown us is buffering doesn't mean going ridiculous in terms of stocks of food, but we need to think more carefully about logistics than we have done because we trusted the market with a just-in-time logistic model. That is now under stress.

Nik Gowing
But needing to trust the public. How much do you engage the public? Make them aware of what's happening, where the threats are, the speed at which these threats might be realised. Because there's one quote I've got here, civil society is often treated as an add-on. In other words, not a resource, as your document says.

Lord Stu Peach
That's why I think we need something in the national curriculum. We need to make civic duty part of our upbringing. We need one of the very interesting examples we learned from observing exercises and stress testing in the Finnish model was actually, it's the length of time the electricity may be down that really should drive your resilience planning. It's the ability to survive

for more than a short period. It's the ability to work around the modern methods if the internet goes down. We saw in recent weeks, both the attacks on the shops through the supermarket fridges, and of course last week for different reasons, Microsoft's worldwide outage.

So that I don't think in this national conversation, people are not unaware, they are aware, but they need to be guided and they need, It needs to be taken seriously. The second part of civil society though, briefly, is to bring the private sector in to this conversation. And that's an important part of our report. Not treat the private sector as somehow separate. It's part of the solution and they must be brought in because they control our logistics right now and will continue to do so.

Nik Gowing
Can I just press you on why is there an institutional reluctance in government to be frank about what looms and therefore how the public must prepare and be prepared? The public needing clear, practical language. And I put to you what the new head of the British cabinet, cabinet secretary, Antonio Romeo, said in a big speech a few days ago. She said, we've got to be on the front foot. We've got to be ahead rather than reacting. And I would suggest to you that what you're critical of is the fact that too much has been reactive.

Lord Stu Peach
Too much has been reactive. I think it's changing and we're part of that. I think it can be changed and the cabinet secretary's speech is very welcome and again part of that conversation. And now it needs to develop and bring private sector in and not be so reluctant to do so. I think war gaming can help and I think it can help government.

I've always believed that. I think exercising at the national level can help. I've always believed that. And of course, recalling during the Cold War, we had layers of organization and command structures so that we were organized. And there's nothing wrong with those structures. We should have them again, from the local to the regional to the national.

Nik Gowing
But war gaming is about professionals sitting around a table in ways which you as a military figure have done so many times. But let me just broaden this very considerably because the report says using the words resilience and preparedness does not convey what is expected of individuals and households.

In other words, how they survive, how they keep their life going, whether it be shopping, whether it be paying their mortgage, whether it be finding fuel for their car or just surviving, what they need to do. You can't wargame the public, can you?

Lord Stu Peach

No, you can't. The wargaming part of this is first, bring in the private sector and make sure that you prepare with them, not as if it's a separate organization. Secondly, it's then about joining up those local to the regional conversations. And not that all the local solutions will have to be different because of the geography, but they have to be different because of the conditions.

But they need to be organized next and whether the boundaries align can be done by government, but not everything, and we do say this clearly in the report, not everything is either the responsibility of government or the military. If this gets much worse, the military are to be pretty busy.

So one of the concepts we've always had is military aid to the civil community. We may have to look at even thinking about in these extreme scenarios, would it have to be the other way around end up with civil aid to the military community. That's the sort of thinking, that's where the war gaming can help. And in the conversation, the national conversation, we need to prepare people that this is not likely to suddenly go back to some distant memories that many people have.

Nik Gowing
But you know what the language is like. There's a fear of complacency, but also of panicking people. What do you say about that, about what needs to be done?

Lord Stu Peach
We must reassure people not to. It's easier to say than do. We had lot of experience in NATO of doing highly professionally preparing allies for large-scale exercises and NATO continues to do so. So there's many ways of doing this. The NATO sets out very clearly, as I said earlier, its requirements for national resilience in Article 3 of the Washington Treaty.

That is really about organizing allies for the future in case the future turns out to be worse than expected. And all of that can be done. We talk to the NHS, we talk to the emergency services, blue light services. They've got a crucial part of Palenic in organizing for that future. And the military understanding joint commanders, it's now called, will need to be more focused on homeland defense.

Again, that is covered in Lord Robertson's Strategic Defense Review. We now need to bring it to life in action. And specifically, Nick, I think both in the military sense briefly, reserves and cadets are going to have to be more of a priority for the country.

Nik Gowing
Now what about how this is actually coordinated? Because you're pretty damning as well about government. There's a lot of government departments, but they're not really interconnected. They're not interconnected to handle disruption, not speaking to each other. And this came out in the heat waves which we had in the UK in the last couple of years, as well as the flooding as well.

In other words, you've got agencies, but they don't seem to want to match or be able to match each other. You've worked in government. Can this be overcome?

Lord Stu Peach
It can. The arms length agencies, the arms length bodies, the quangos, if you like that word, they need to be brought in and it needs to be a combined effort. And then we need to develop the model. And this can be done. The local resilience forums are very good. There's 41 of them. They need to be organized properly.

Nik Gowing
How do they organize themselves? Is it banging heads or is it actually a crisis which brings them together? Is it reaction or proaction?

Lord Stu Peach
think the latter, Nik, I think, sorry to interrupt, I think the latter, I think there is a very strong volunteering spirit in our nation. It is a strength. Look at the way that people responded at the beginning of COVID. It was remarkable and it can be again.

So we must be serious in this national conversation and respectful of local solutions where the local solutions work. And some of the work the local resilience forums do is simply remarkable. So we build on success where we find it and really it's about avoiding silos, avoiding gaps, bringing that organizing principle together across the nation because of the risks and threats we face.

Nik Gowing
Do you believe that this can be achieved, that there's a realisation of just how urgent all this is? It's all very well producing a report and these things can easily get forgotten and just pushed under a carpet or whatever. Do you think there's now a resonance, not just in the UK but in many other countries, to understand the enormity of national survival and the existential threats? How do you make resilience a part of everyday life?

Lord Stu Peach
Through this work. I'm not saying our report has any exceptional universality. Of course, I wouldn't say that. But right now, whether there are risks you can't see through the internet or through cyber attacks or in space, through to the things you can see, over 200 tankers have been hit this year. know, there is damage being done to the built environment all over the world as we're having this discussion.

And so I think people are very aware of what's going on, but they need to know how to play their part. think the spirit of volunteering, the way in which the UK has not just compassion, but more than that, it has that muscle memory that resilience matters. And I was, as you may remember, I was the chair of the Imperial War Museum and on the Imperial War Museum Board for 10 years.

And it was remarkable how society came together in the UK. So we've done it before and we can do it again.

Nik Gowing
We've got a minute left to you. Give me your big takeaway, which you'd like people to remember from this conversation.

Lord Stu Peach
There is no need to panic, but we must be ready.

Nik Gowing
And can that be achieved?

Lord Stu Peach
Yes.

Nik Gowing
Is there political will to achieve it?

Lord Stu Peach
I believe there is, I believe there is and our report is just but a small part of that political will. Of course it needs to be developed and I think once those ideas start flooding in we'll see that we can go back to be more resilient and be more ready for the risks and threats we face.

Nik Gowing
Well, Stuart, Lord Stuart Peach, thank you so much for joining us with that important reflection on this very important report. You can check what Stuart has just shared with me because a transcript of the podcast is posted in parallel on our website, along with contact details for the committee. It's important. And I would urge you to read in detail. It's got a lot of incredible quotes, not least the radicalness with which a lot of it is expressed. Subscribe to our YouTube channel.

There you'll find our podcast very much in the same vein of frankness and alert from me, Gowing, until the next time. Thinking unthinkable more than ever, it's possible and necessary from Lord Stu Peach and from me. Bye bye.

Lord Stu Peach
Bye bye, thank you.