# Labour ministers accused of muzzling military after RAF 'Gladiator' war-game exposes air defence gaps



Labour ministers have been accused of muzzling senior military figures after an RAF officer publicly warned that Britain’s air defences could be overwhelmed in a simulation of a Russia‑style attack. The Mail on Sunday reported that Air Commodore Blythe Crawford told a Royal United Services Institute conference in April that a war‑game modelling the opening day of the invasion of Ukraine produced a bleak outcome for UK bases, aircraft and runways — a disclosure that critics say prompted tighter controls on what uniformed officers and officials may say in public. According to RUSI’s conference listing, Crawford took part in the event as Commandant of the RAF’s Air and Space Warfare Centre. (Paragraph 1)

The scenario described by Crawford — run in a synthetic environment known in reporting as ‘Gladiator’ — modelled massed missile, drone and strike‑aircraft attacks on forward air bases and home stations and highlighted shortages of hardened shelters and other resilience measures. Commentators seized on the simulation’s findings as a wake‑up call: the exercise underlined how the concentration of assets and fewer available airfields can leave national airpower vulnerable to coordinated long‑range strikes. These assessments have fed into a wider debate about whether the UK can still assume geographic safety on the western edge of Europe. (Paragraph 2)

RUSI and defence commentators say exercises of this kind are designed to stress test plans and expose hard lessons; but the publicity surrounding the findings appears to have prompted changes to how officials are allowed to speak. The Mail on Sunday reported that organisers alerted attendees at a subsequent land warfare conference to a late change in reporting rules that placed many speeches and panels off the record, and that a reminder has been circulated to officers due to attend next month’s Defence, Security and Equipment International show. RUSI’s own programme confirms it regularly hosts classified and open sessions where sensitive capability and resilience issues are discussed. (Paragraph 3)

There is a formal framework that governs such contacts with the media. The Ministry of Defence’s Defence Instruction on contact with the media, issued in February 2025, requires authorisation for personnel to speak publicly on defence matters and sets out that senior officers (1‑star rank and above) normally need Directorate of Defence Communications approval — usually with 14 days’ notice — before media contact. The guidance explains these processes are intended to protect operational security and ensure coherent public messaging, a point that officials cite when defending restrictions. (Paragraph 4)

Critics say the effect has been a centralisation of control in No 10’s communications machine. The Guardian reported that new Downing Street guidance has effectively curtailed civil‑service participation at events where journalists are present, prompting think‑tanks and public servants to denounce the approach as heavy‑handed “control‑freakery”. Political blogs and opposition sources have amplified insider accounts suggesting micromanagement, and parliamentary questions from MPs such as Mark Francois have pressed the government for clarity. Those sources characterise the recent pattern of restrictions as politically driven, triggered in part by the embarrassment caused when senior military figures’ public comments diverged from ministerial messages. (Paragraph 5)

Downing Street and the Ministry of Defence have pushed back. A government source told the Mail on Sunday there is no blanket “gag” on public speaking and that arrangements are considered on a case‑by‑case basis, adding that similar procedures have been in place under governments of different parties. The MoD’s public guidance, meanwhile, frames the rules as administrative safeguards rather than a political clampdown. (Paragraph 6)

The row pits two legitimate priorities against each other. On one hand, senior officers and subject‑matter experts argue that transparent public discussion of vulnerability and resilience helps drive corrective investment and public understanding; on the other, ministers and communications officials emphasise the risk that detailed public commentary about specific weaknesses could be exploited by potential adversaries. Tory defence spokespeople have used the episode to argue the ministry is in disarray, while proponents of the tighter rules say disciplined messaging is necessary in a complex security environment. (Paragraph 7)

Whatever the merits of the arguments, the episode has crystallised a broader question about who should set the boundaries of public debate on defence: the uniformed professionals who run exercises and expose shortfalls, or the political leadership that must weigh operational security, diplomatic consequence and public reassurance. The competing accounts — candid war‑game disclosures from officers, official rulebooks on authorised contact, and political accusations of micromanagement — together illustrate why the governance of defence communications remains politically fraught and operationally consequential. (Paragraph 8)

### 📌 Reference Map:

## Reference Map:

* Paragraph 1 – [[1]](https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-14986445/Gag-RAF-chief-UK-Russia-war.html?ns_mchannel=rss&ns_campaign=1490&ito=1490), [[3]](https://my.rusi.org/events/rusi-iamd-conference-2025/speakers.html)
* Paragraph 2 – [[4]](https://en.interaffairs.ru/article/view-from-britain-chilling-war-games-show-russian-missiles-overwhelming-uk-bases-jets-blitzed/), [[3]](https://my.rusi.org/events/rusi-iamd-conference-2025/speakers.html)
* Paragraph 3 – [[1]](https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-14986445/Gag-RAF-chief-UK-Russia-war.html?ns_mchannel=rss&ns_campaign=1490&ito=1490), [[3]](https://my.rusi.org/events/rusi-iamd-conference-2025/speakers.html)
* Paragraph 4 – [[5]](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/defence-instruction-contact-with-media-and-public/contact-with-the-media-and-communicating-in-public)
* Paragraph 5 – [[6]](https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2025/jun/26/no-10-accused-of-control-freakery-over-ban-on-civil-servants-speaking-at-events), [[7]](https://order-order.com/2025/06/19/exc-downing-street-military-gagging-order-triggered-by-starmer-spat-with-defence-chiefs/), [[1]](https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-14986445/Gag-RAF-chief-UK-Russia-war.html?ns_mchannel=rss&ns_campaign=1490&ito=1490)
* Paragraph 6 – [[1]](https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-14986445/Gag-RAF-chief-UK-Russia-war.html?ns_mchannel=rss&ns_campaign=1490&ito=1490), [[5]](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/defence-instruction-contact-with-media-and-public/contact-with-the-media-and-communicating-in-public)
* Paragraph 7 – [[1]](https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-14986445/Gag-RAF-chief-UK-Russia-war.html?ns_mchannel=rss&ns_campaign=1490&ito=1490), [[7]](https://order-order.com/2025/06/19/exc-downing-street-military-gagging-order-triggered-by-starmer-spat-with-defence-chiefs/), [[5]](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/defence-instruction-contact-with-media-and-public/contact-with-the-media-and-communicating-in-public)
* Paragraph 8 – [[1]](https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-14986445/Gag-RAF-chief-UK-Russia-war.html?ns_mchannel=rss&ns_campaign=1490&ito=1490), [[4]](https://en.interaffairs.ru/article/view-from-britain-chilling-war-games-show-russian-missiles-overwhelming-uk-bases-jets-blitzed/), [[5]](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/defence-instruction-contact-with-media-and-public/contact-with-the-media-and-communicating-in-public), [[6]](https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2025/jun/26/no-10-accused-of-control-freakery-over-ban-on-civil-servants-speaking-at-events)

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## Bibliography

1. <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-14986445/Gag-RAF-chief-UK-Russia-war.html?ns_mchannel=rss&ns_campaign=1490&ito=1490> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-14986445/Gag-RAF-chief-UK-Russia-war.html?ns_mchannel=rss&ns_campaign=1490&ito=1490> - This Mail on Sunday article reports accusations that the Labour Government has been 'gagging' senior military figures after an RAF officer, Air Commodore Blythe Crawford, warned that a simulated Russia-style attack could overwhelm UK air defences. It describes allegations of Downing Street interference to ensure defence messages are delivered by ministers rather than senior officers, including a late change to reporting rules at a RUSI conference that left many military speeches off the record. The piece quotes critics including Tory spokesmen and records a government source insisting there is no blanket gag, saying rules are applied case-by-case and have precedent.
3. <https://my.rusi.org/events/rusi-iamd-conference-2025/speakers.html> - The Royal United Services Institute (RUSI) event page for the 2025 Integrated Air and Missile Defence conference lists the programme and confirmed speakers, including Air Commodore Blythe Crawford as Commandant of the RAF’s Air and Space Warfare Centre. The page sets out the conference focus on air and missile threats, resilience and joint force mobility, and identifies Crawford among other senior military, industry and NATO figures. The listing confirms Crawford’s participation at a RUSI event where discussion and briefings on simulated scenarios and integrated air and missile defence capability took place, providing institutional context for public remarks attributed to him.
4. <https://en.interaffairs.ru/article/view-from-britain-chilling-war-games-show-russian-missiles-overwhelming-uk-bases-jets-blitzed/> - This International Affairs (InterAffairs) summary recounts reporting from UK outlets on a war‑game exercise in which RAF planners modelled the opening night of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine against the UK. It relays Air Commodore Blythe Crawford’s comments that the simulated scenario produced a bleak outcome for UK bases and aircraft, highlighting vulnerabilities such as shortages of hardened shelters, fewer airfields and the challenges posed by massed missile and drone attacks. The article describes the exercise run in a synthetic environment (‘Gladiator’) and frames the results as a wake‑up call about homeland vulnerability and the need to reassess assumptions about operating safely from home bases.
5. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/defence-instruction-contact-with-media-and-public/contact-with-the-media-and-communicating-in-public> - This Ministry of Defence Defence Instruction Notice (February 2025) sets out rules and authorisation procedures for MOD personnel contacting the media or communicating publicly. It explains that contact on Defence or Government matters requires authorisation, that personnel of 1\* rank and above must obtain Directorate of Defence Communications approval (usually with 14 days’ notice), and that unauthorised contact could risk operational security or incur disciplinary measures. The guidance clarifies the scope, procedures and exceptions and demonstrates an official requirement for authorisation before senior officers speak publicly about defence issues, thereby underpinning claims about formal restrictions on media remarks by military personnel.
6. <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2025/jun/26/no-10-accused-of-control-freakery-over-ban-on-civil-servants-speaking-at-events> - This Guardian report details criticism of Downing Street guidance that effectively restricts civil servants from speaking at public events where journalists might be present. It quotes critics describing the policy as heavy‑handed 'control‑freakery', notes cancelled participation at external events, and records objections from think‑tanks and civil service voices concerned about transparency and openness. The piece explains the government’s defence that ministers remain accountable and that the approach aligns with longstanding practice, while observers warn it risks undermining public trust and silencing expert contributions, lending wider media corroboration to claims of centralised control over public remarks by officials.
7. <https://order-order.com/2025/06/19/exc-downing-street-military-gagging-order-triggered-by-starmer-spat-with-defence-chiefs/> - This Guido Fawkes (Order-Order) article reports insider claims that a Downing Street communications decision effectively imposed a gagging order on senior military personnel following tensions between Number 10 and defence chiefs. The piece describes sources alleging micromanagement by the Prime Minister’s strategic communications team, references written Parliamentary questions from MPs such as Mark Francois about the guidance, and records the MoD’s public replies defending on‑record speeches in specific cases. While opinionated in tone, the article collects contemporaneous political reaction and parliamentary exchanges that support the narrative of a Whitehall‑level directive limiting what senior officers may say publicly.