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54. "The arms trade is immoral."



It is the misuse of arms which can be immoral, not the people who make and deal in them. Every country has the right to protect itself and to have defence forces capable of ensuring its security. Without protection against armed aggression and conquest, all of the rights its people enjoy are empty and risk being overthrown.

The industry and the trade which meet that legitimate need are not immoral. On the contrary, they are helping countries to protect the rights that their citizens enjoy. The tanks, planes and ships which that industry supplies enable countries to protect themselves from armed aggression, and pose a significant deterrent to hostile acts being committed against them.

Further to this, the arms industry in Britain supports hundreds of thousands of jobs. These are in such areas as the manufacture of missiles and warplanes, making tanks and trucks, shipbuilding, and all of the support industries which go with these. The technological advances made in armaments often spill over into improved civilian products which go to help exports, and to give domestic consumers access to better products. Much night vision technology, for example, originally developed for military purposes, is now used by wildlife photographers. GPS systems, once used to locate troop movements, now steer cars and buses too.

There are problems where the arms sold for defensive purposes are used to commit acts of aggression, to wage civil war, or to repress a country's own citizens. The UK policy has been to deal with this by being selective about which governments it will sell arms to, and about what arms are appropriate. It means in practice that countries bent on the immoral or illegal use of arms have to obtain them from other, less scrupulous countries. Control of arms sales through export licences helps to keep the UK at least clear of the moral consequences of unacceptable uses.

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