

Head of British Army calls for Iraq withdrawal

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14 October 2006

Britain's Chief of the General Staff, General Sir Richard Dannatt, has made a public call for British troops to withdraw from Iraq soon or risk catastrophic consequences for both Iraq and British society.

In an interview with the *Daily Mail*, the head of the army said that not only did the continuing presence of British troops "exacerbates the security problems" in Iraq, but that it also exacerbates the "difficulties we are facing around the world." In addition, it meant that a "moral and spiritual vacuum" has opened up in British society, which is allowing Muslim extremists to undermine the Christian values that underpin "our accepted way of life."

Dannatt explicitly condemned Prime Minister Tony Blair's stated aim of forging a "liberal democracy" in Iraq as a "naïve" failure.

"We are in a Muslim country and Muslims' views of foreigners in their country are quite clear," he said. If invited in you can be welcomed, but, "The military campaign we fought in 2003 effectively kicked the door in. Whatever consent we may have had in the first place, may have turned to tolerance and has largely turned to intolerance.

"That is a fact. I don't say that the difficulties we are experiencing round the world are caused by our presence in Iraq but undoubtedly our presence in Iraq exacerbates them."

Of the war and subsequent occupation, he said, "I think history will show that the planning for what happened after the initial successful war fighting phase was poor, probably based more on optimism than sound planning.

"The original intention was that we put in place a liberal democracy that was an exemplar for the region, was pro West and might have a beneficial effect on the balance within the Middle East.

"That was the hope, whether that was a sensible or naïve hope history will judge. I don't think we are going to do that. I think we should aim for a lower ambition."

Dannatt's decision to go public in denouncing the Blair government's justification for the Iraq war, its conduct, and its results is unprecedented. His comments are the most

dramatic expression yet of the seething discontent within the armed forces over the failure of Britain's efforts to suppress the insurgency in southern Iraq and the more general opposition to Blair's political alliance with the United States.

He spoke at a time when the government is insisting on the need for a continued military presence in Iraq for years to come and he directly rebutted the prime minister's repeated denials that the Iraq war had contributed to the threat of terrorism.

He made no explicit mention of either the Bush administration or the situation facing US troops in Iraq. But it can hardly be accidental that he spoke to the *Daily Mail* after President Bush has made a number of statements insisting that the US must "stay the course" in Iraq and amidst numerous reports that Washington is actively considering a coup to remove the Shiite-dominated government of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki in Iraq.

One consideration for Dannatt will be to put on record his own position so that he does not share responsibility for the increasingly disastrous consequences of US and British government policy.

But he will not have acted alone. His intervention can only indicate a widespread belief amongst serving soldiers and the army's top brass that the war and occupation has proved to be a disaster. And it should also be noted that he is equally troubled by the situation in Afghanistan. In an earlier interview with the *Guardian* he warned that troops in Afghanistan were being stretched to the breaking point, asking, "Can we cope? Just."

Justifying his decision to make his latest statement, Dannatt said, "I am going to stand up for what is right for the army." The *Times* speculated as to whether he had "spoken out without consultation with or the approval of the other Service chiefs, and, in particular, Air Chief Marshal Sir Jock Stirrup, the Chief of the Defence Staff."

For its part the *Telegraph* solicited the comments of a number of serving officers. One respondent, Lt. Col David Labouchere, commander of British forces in Iraq's Maysan

province, spoke of the hostility of local people, adding, “If we cannot deliver the goodies then you are excess to what is needed. Just because we are the hardest tribe here does not matter much to them.”

Dannatt went further than criticising the government on policy. In comments that indicate that the failure of Blair’s foreign policy has provoked a well of anger in the armed forces, he warned that the government was in danger of breaking the “covenant” between a nation and its army and insisted that the government should not “let the army down”.

His remarks have exposed the full depth of the political crisis facing the Blair government and the entire British bourgeoisie. Not only has Blair himself never recovered from his decision to take Britain to war against Iraq—in the process he has destroyed the political legitimacy of the British state in the eyes of millions throughout the world and fostered broad oppositional sentiment amongst working people at home.

The government is utterly isolated and is pursuing a policy that is opposed by the overwhelming majority of the British population. It no longer has a popular mandate to govern. Now, as a result of the debacle in Iraq, a new and immensely destabilising factor has emerged in the form of the alienation of the army and deepening divisions and conflicts within the ruling elite.

Dannatt speaks for sections of the bourgeoisie grouped around the Conservative Party which have concluded that Blair has compromised the interests of British imperialism in pursuit of his “special relationship” with the Bush administration, and who are demanding that these independent interests are aggressively and effectively reasserted.

The worst political mistake would be to entrust opposition to the Blair government to any section of the ruling class, least of all to the head of the armed forces. For this reason the statement made by Andrew Burgin, head of the Stop the War Coalition, welcoming the general for having made “a very powerful case for the troops to be withdrawn from Iraq” as “exactly right” is politically dangerous.

Dannatt’s interview gave full rein to his own extreme right-wing views. He outlined a scenario of the British Army fighting a global crusade to defend Christian society against Islam, a fight that must also be waged on the home front.

“When I see the Islamist threat in this country I hope it doesn’t make undue progress because there is a moral and spiritual vacuum in this country,” he said. “We can’t wish the Islamist challenge to our society away and I believe that the army both in Iraq and Afghanistan and probably wherever we go next, is fighting the foreign dimension of the challenge to our accepted way of life.”

“We need to face up to the Islamist threat,” he continued. “It is said that we live in a post-Christian society. I think that is a great shame. The broader Judaic-Christian tradition has underpinned British society. It underpins the British army.”

Since he gave his interview, Dannatt has made a number of statements stressing his commitment to winning the war against Iraq. He told the BBC that Britain stood “shoulder to shoulder with the Americans, and their timing and our timing are one and the same...”

“I am on the record from a speech three weeks ago saying that I’m planning force packages in Iraq through 2007 into 2008. I’m a soldier—we don’t surrender, we don’t pull down white flags. We will remain in southern Iraq until the job is done—we’re going to see this through.”

Blair took this as his cue to say that he agreed with every word of these interviews and that he “suspected” that the general had given a long interview with the *Daily Mail*, and that some of his comments had been taken out of context.

The great advantage enjoyed by the government is that the mass popular opposition to its warmongering, attacks on democratic rights and pro-big business economic and social policies has been disenfranchised, suppressed and derailed as a result of the degeneration of the former workers’ organisations. It is this that allows Blair room to manoeuvre and find ways to continue pursuing his militarist and antidemocratic agenda.

Today the struggle against militarism and war must be waged directly against the Labour government and its defenders in the trade union bureaucracy. Dannatt’s admissions on Iraq are not a reason to sit back passively and wait for a saner foreign policy to be developed by the ruling class. They must be a signal for an intensified and independent political struggle against the government by the working class on the basis of a socialist and internationalist programme.



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