

Britain: Anger at sailors selling stories forces government U-turn

Chris Marsden
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The decision to allow 2 of the 15 sailors captured by Iran to sell their stories to the media has backfired—spectacularly and deservedly. Near-universal criticism forced Defence Secretary Des Browne just 24 hours later to announce a resumption of the ban on serving personnel accepting money for interviews. A review of the regulations was also promised by Second Sea Lord Vice-Admiral Adrian Johns, who, together with Browne, is accepting responsibility for taking the decision. Prime Minister Tony Blair is depicted as only having been “informed.”

Johns told the press, “The decision was taken by the Royal Navy and then referred up the chain to the Ministry of Defence. Ministers knew about it and the Secretary of State [Des Browne] knew about it as well.”

Browne declared, “No further service personnel will be allowed to talk to the media about their experiences in return for payment.”

Leading Seaman Faye Turney had sold her story to Rupert Murdoch’s tabloid *The Sun* and ITV’s “Tonight” with Trevor MacDonald for a figure estimated at around £100,000. Operator Mechanic Arthur Batchelor, the youngest of the captured sailors, sold his to the *Daily Mirror*.

Permission to do so was given on April 6, the same day that the Royal Navy held a press conference attended by 6 of the 15, during which a prepared statement was read out by the two well-briefed officers—Lieutenant Felix Carmen and Captain Chris Air—claiming ill treatment and “psychological torture” by the Iranians as an explanation for why all 15 had admitted to being captured in Tehran’s waters.

The Royal Navy, in consultation with the Blair government, had calculated that a continued media focus on alleged abuses by Iran (described as a “controlled release” of information) was needed, both to detract from the acute embarrassment caused by the incident itself and to put additional pressure on Iran as part of the ongoing political and military campaign being waged by the United States and Britain.

The problem was that the *Sun*’s lurid headlines about

Turney’s and Batchelor’s “fears” of rape and sexual abuse, and of being executed or at least imprisoned as spies, were recognised from the start as precisely such a propaganda campaign.

This did not sit well with the denunciations of Iran for using the sailors as a tool for its own propaganda, a fact that numerous commentators noted. In addition, the claims made against Iran, even if—and this is a big if—they were true, still left the behaviour of the sailors open to ridicule by the Conservative media and ex-military figures in Britain and by the press in the Middle East.

Most people clearly found the whole business distasteful and a transparent attempt to manipulate public opinion. The families of serving military personnel and those killed or maimed in Iraq were particularly incensed.

Reg Keys, whose son was killed in Iraq in 2003, said that his son’s colleagues had been banned from talking about his death, adding, “If the story aids the Government in their propaganda against the Iranians, they will allow people to speak, but if it is embarrassing to the Government or Ministry of Defence, you are not allowed to. The Government is using them for spin.... I find that offensive.”

Such public hostility was extremely damaging to the government, but it should not be confused with the right-wing motives that animated much of the antagonistic reaction in the press and on the opposition and Labour backbenches, which prompted calls for a statement to Parliament and a parliamentary inquiry by the Defence Select Committee and forced the government’s U-turn by 5:00 p.m. that day.

For these layers, the government’s crime was to have damaged the ability of Britain to continue its military aggression in the Gulf and elsewhere in the world by further undermining the public perception of the armed forces.

Shadow (Conservative) Defence Secretary Liam Fox spoke of “a situation where we have division inside the Armed Forces, a loss of public sympathy and an undignified public auction going on.”

Shadow Defence Spokesman Gerald Howarth said, “Des

Browne is guilty of complete dereliction of duty. We are engaged in a propaganda war with Iran and he has completely messed everything up.”

Kelvin MacKenzie, a notorious demagogue and former editor of *The Sun*, said, “The government are very concerned that they have lost the propaganda battle with Iran and these 15 are simply pawns in this battle. They have opened up a can of worms. It is a catastrophic error.”

Fox yesterday toured a naval base in Portsmouth that is threatened with closure, promising that its future would be safe under the Conservatives who he said are the real party of the armed forces.

The chorus demanding the censorship of service personnel that has dominated Britain’s media for the past days should be rejected and opposed. The fact that existing restrictions had to be relaxed in order to mount a propaganda campaign only proves that under normal circumstances such censorship serves the interests of Britain’s ruling elite.

Not for the first time, one can turn to the *Guardian*—once considered to be the bastion of British liberalism—for a clear and unabashed call for the imposition of anti-democratic legislation by the government.

Its April 10 editorial, “Publish and really be damned,” defends and demands the censorship of the armed forces, civil servants, politicians and the media.

It complains, “The command structure of the armed forces collapsed on first contact with the Fleet Street chequebook,” before denouncing the “beasts of the media” and “the performance of the hostages” for surrendering “to Rupert Murdoch even faster than they gave in to their Iranian interrogators” and their families for grabbing “a slice of the loot.”

Why the vitriol? The *Guardian* goes on to note, “Many traditional military assumptions are unsustainable in a world in which service personnel are volunteers with human rights and mobile telephones.”

As a sweetener to its position, it describes this change as welcome “in many ways.... There is no way that first world war commanders could have sent a generation to be slaughtered on the Western Front if our great-grandfathers had been blogging each night from Picardy.”

But the editorial then makes clear that it wants censorship precisely in order that this generation can be sent to be slaughtered in Iraq, Iran and wherever else is deemed necessary.

It insists, “Nevertheless, the MoD’s original concession of a ‘right’ to sell one’s story was a corrosive precedent...it was also the latest step in the process by which defence policy has become increasingly constrained by democracy, law and human rights and in which the general staff’s capacity to make war as it sees fit—certainly to fight a

politically controversial elective war such as that in Iraq—has been subverted not so much by disobedient squaddies as by squaddies’ families with access to lawyers, Max Clifford and the media....

“The challenge is to re-establish rules that work,” the *Guardian* threatens, “and then to be prepared to enforce them.

“This means enforcing them not just on soldiers and sailors but on publishers and journalists, civil servants and politicians. It involves standing up to the claim that there is a public interest in the media publishing everything it can get its hands on at any time. There have to be secrets and there have to be no-publicity rules to protect them either absolutely, as there still are for secret-service personnel, or for reasonable periods of time, as is still nominally the case for civil servants and ministers.”

The *Guardian* concludes, “Ultimately the reason for such rules is the same—because the system will fall apart if they are not applied. Our defence forces cannot function if their personnel are free not just to take the Queen’s shilling but Mr Murdoch’s too.”

As far as the media is concerned—liberal or otherwise—and the opposition parties, the crime of the government has been to undermine Britain’s standing as an imperial power and then, in its attempts to dig itself out of a hole, to threaten the continued functioning of its armed forces.

The millions of working people and youth who are opposed to the occupation of Iraq, Afghanistan and the warmongering against Iran must draw the necessary conclusions from this. War can only be opposed on the basis of an independent political movement of the working class. And for this a new socialist party is required.

The Socialist Equality Party is standing regional lists in the West of Scotland and South Wales Central in the May 3 elections to urge the building of such a party and to offer a voice to all those whose genuine opposition to war is presently being corralled behind those parties—such as the Scottish National Party and Plaid Cymru—whose opposition to Labour is of a purely tactical and unprincipled character.



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