Britain: Brown rules out Iraq troop withdrawal as top general speaks of a "generation of conflict"

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As tensions continue within political and military circles over Britain's role in Iraq, Prime Minister Gordon Brown has made clear that he will not bow to calls for a troop withdrawal.

In reply to a letter from Liberal Democrat leader Sir Menzies Campbell urging an exit strategy, Brown said that Britain's troops still have "an important job to do" in Iraq, and that setting a timetable for withdrawal would undermine the UK's "clear obligations" in the country. And he defended Britain's current policy in Afghanistan, insisting that despite "the tough, dangerous and difficult tasks and terrain involved there...I will strongly defend the integrity, bravery and intelligence with which UK commanders and forces are taking forward the strategy they have developed."

Campbell has been at the forefront of calls for a refocusing of the UK's military efforts from Iraq to Afghanistan. There are currently just 5,500 British forces in Basra, southern Iraq. In the next days, the UK's contingent that is currently holed up in Basra Palace is due to pull back to Basra airport.

The government claims that the move is in line with long-established plans for a "handover" to Iraqi security forces, with the UK playing a supportive, "holding" role. But UK casualties have risen significantly with 41 killed so far this year, and it is openly acknowledged that British troops are now the main focus of attacks by the insurgency.

According to the *Independent on Sunday*, two senior British generals had told Brown that Britain can achieve "nothing more" in the southeast, and that rather than remain as sitting ducks, there should be a move towards troop withdrawal "without further delay."

In his August 16 letter, Campbell cited concerns that the government's continued refusal to draw up a timetable for withdrawal had less to do with military considerations than a public display of solidarity with the United States. And he has argued, "The debate on this issue will not go away, particularly as the American presidential elections will put Iraq at the centre of American politics."

Establishing an exit strategy in Iraq, Campbell argued, would enable Britain's military to refocus its efforts on Afghanistan, which is portrayed as the more "winnable" war.

The situation facing the UK's "overstretched" contingent in Afghanistan, he wrote, "would be made much easier if we were not engaged simultaneously in two such demanding deployments."

"In short, is it not clear that withdrawal from Iraq would give us a considerable advantage in Afghanistan, where the military advice is that Nato's mission can still be successful?"

In his reply, Brown argued, "it is wrong to say" that UK military operations are "restricted in what they can do."

"UK forces in Basra continue to have the capability to strike against the militias and provide overall security.

"They will continue to work with the Iraqi authorities and security forces to get them to the point where they can assume full responsibility for security."

Brown's defence of British policy was followed by Foreign Secretary David Miliband's insistence that any decision on UK strategy in Iraq would be made independent of the US and based only on the "British national interest."

The fact that a British foreign secretary should have to make such statements is itself telling. For the fact remains that Brown's highly publicised reply to Campbell was mainly intended to reassure the Bush administration that the government has no intention of "cutting and running."

Of more fundamental importance to Britain's ruling elite than the discontent already swirling in its own ranks has been the open criticisms of any suggestion of a UK withdrawal from within the US itself.

Earlier this month, the *Washington Post* cited a "senior US intelligence official" as stating, "The British have basically been defeated in the south." The *Post* continued, "The administration has been reluctant to publicly criticise the British withdrawal," but cited an "expert" as stating that concerns have "been expressed at the highest levels" by the US government to British authorities.

Last week, senior US military advisor General Jack Keane—a chief architect of Bush's "surge"—expressed "frustration" that Britain was not controlling the "deteriorating" situation in Basra.

And, at the weekend, Bush advisor Frederick Kagan gave notice that the "special relationship" between Britain and the US was threatened by the restrictions on the UK's military.

Britain's "ground forces are too small and are now paying the price," he said, adding that any UK withdrawal would mean extra US troops having to be deployed.

"I do worry about the short-term effects on the relationship between the two countries," he said. "It will create bad feeling

with American soldiers if they can't go home because the British have left."

Campbell complained that Brown's reply could have been written by his predecessor, Tony Blair. That a differing response could be anticipated points to the myth-making that was involved in preparing the so-called "seamless transition" from Blair to Brown back in June.

Conscious of popular hostility to Blair and faced with a desperate political need to create some popular basis for the chancellor, who is credited with imposing Labour's big business strategy of tax breaks for the rich and growing social inequality, the media had claimed Brown would implement more "social democratic" policies and would even distance his government from Washington.

For weeks, pro-Labour political commentators had forecast Brown would utilise the opportunity presented by General David Petraeus's presentation on Iraq to the US Congress next month to announce a scale-back.

It is a myth that the Stop the War Coalition (STWC), led by the Socialist Workers Party, has been only too willing to promulgate. All the efforts of the STWC are now directed towards a petition to Brown urging him to use his parliamentary statement in October "to signal a break from George Bush's foreign policy and to bring all the British troops out of Iraq immediately, regardless of US plans." It has become increasingly apparent, however, that Petraeus has no intention of announcing any "softening" of the US administration's line on Iraq, let alone Afghanistan and Tehran, as underscored by Bush's recent belligerent speeches on foreign policy objectives.

The sense of dismay amongst what passes for Britain's liberal circles is palpable. The *Guardian* editorialised Wednesday, "As the Americans struggle to extricate themselves from Iraq, they are creating an increasingly difficult dilemma for their British allies."

"Helping the American endgame in Iraq might well be a legitimate aim," it continued, "but it is apparently one difficult for a government anxious to show its independence from Washington to publicly discuss. Even if it is a legitimate objective, there are limits to the price Britain should be ready to pay...."

"If it is right that we should consult American interests, they should also consult ours. There is much talk in American circles of the Baghdad clock and the Washington clock. But there is a London clock too, and it too is ticking."

The claim that Britain is simply the hostage of a more powerful ally does not wash, however. This was reinforced by a speech delivered by the head of the British Army, General Sir Richard Dannatt, to a Royal United Services Institute conference in June.

The Ministry of Defence's decision to release the text of Dannatt's conference speech—from which the press was excluded—was clearly aimed at reminding its critics just what Britain's foreign policy objectives are and demanding they fall into line.

Stressing the need for progress in Iraq and "significant achievement" in Afghanistan, he continued that this meant "The heady appeal of 'go first, go fast, go home' has to be balanced with a willingness and a structure 'to go strong and go long.' "

"Success today in these two theatres," he said, was the "top and bottom line."

Dannatt's remarks were couched in the usual banal propaganda of a battle of "ideology," "values" and the fight against global terrorism. But within this, he gave some indication of British imperialism's strategic geo-political concerns.

Francis Fukuyama had been mistaken when he claimed "the end of the 20th century marked the triumph of the West and that capitalism, liberalism and democracy had emerged victors of that century's protracted ideological conflicts," Dannatt said.

He was correct, however, in positing the origins of current events in the "end of the stability of the old bi-polar World," which gave way to the collapse of the Berlin Wall and the 9/11 attacks.

Dannatt cited 1979 as the year in which "the plates adjoining the fault lines became active"—citing the Reagan presidency's adoption of the "roll back" strategy against the Soviet Union, the Iranian revolution, the Chinese bureaucracy's open embrace of capitalist restoration and the period in which Osama Bin Laden—in the wake of the Afghanistan war—"found a vocation in promoting Holy War."

His main point was that "many powerful forces" had been set in motion, from which Britain was not able to extricate itself.

The British Army was now "extensively enmeshed" in the "remnant of the post-communist Balkans," "On the edge of a new and deadly Great Game in Afghanistan" and "helping construct a modern Islamic state" in Iraq, "in a region perched precariously above a large proportion of the World's remaining supply of oil."

And far from outlining a scale back in military operations, Dannatt insisted that the "key question" was how to prepare Britain's armed forces for a "generation of conflict."

The challenge was for the British Army to move "from being Continentally-based facing a single threat, to becoming a genuinely Expeditionary Army...widely committed on operations," he said.

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