

# Britain: Eric Joyce MP resigns over UK policy in Afghanistan

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Eric Joyce, an aide to British Defence Secretary Bob Ainsworth and Member of Parliament (MP) for Falkirk, resigned Thursday.

Despite stating that he had timed his resignation so as to cause the least problems for the government, his aim was to cause maximum embarrassment. Joyce made his announcement less than 24 hours before Prime Minister Gordon Brown was forced to make a defence of his government's policy in Afghanistan.

British casualties are mounting, as UK troops join in the anti-insurgency campaign waged by the US. Two soldiers were killed during Brown's surprise visit to Afghanistan at the weekend. They were among a total of 77 suffered by US and NATO forces in August—the highest tally yet. Since 2001, 212 British soldiers have died, with 41 killed in July and August alone.

Casualties are rising under conditions in which claims by the US and the UK that they are involved in a battle for democracy are being revealed as a fraud. The recent elections in Afghanistan are widely acknowledged to have been subject to the most blatant vote-rigging and fraud by incumbent President Hamid Karzai.

A column in the *Financial Times* by Michael Semple published the day of Joyce's resignation was entitled, "Fraud endangers Afghan democracy".

"The iconic election images are of officials methodically marking hundreds of ballot papers for President Hamid Karzai, before stuffing them in ballot boxes," Semple wrote. "Traditional Afghanistan, the tribal elders forever in search of state patronage, are this week telling of wads of cash received from government officials to cast votes for the incumbent. Plenty of the participants in the ballot-box stuffing exercise had video-enabled mobile phones, and you can see the result online".

He concludes, "As the whole country has now got wind of the mass fraud, only those immersed in the fantasy of 'reasonably free and fair' could hope that a majority out of this mess would confer any legitimacy on a government".

The Electoral Complaints Commission is currently probing more than 2,000 fraud claims.

All this is feeding opposition to the occupation in Britain and internationally. A *Daily Telegraph* poll conducted last week found that two out of three people in the UK are now against the war in Afghanistan.

Joyce acknowledges this growing anti-war sentiment in his letter. But this is not the constituency which he is addressing. An ardent right-wing supporter of New Labour and an enthusiastic backer of the interventions against Afghanistan and Iraq, Joyce criticises the Brown government on the basis that it is not waging the war with sufficient vigour and resources.

A former major in the Royal Army Education Corps, Joyce recalled how under Blair, the party had refashioned itself as the most consistent supporter of the Armed Forces. He said, "It seems to me that your personal success on the economy won the deal in 1997, while colleagues at Defence sealed it."

He complained that Labour had now "lost our empathy with the defence community" and added, "We must not allow this to happen".

Commenting on Brown's visit to Afghanistan last week and public opposition to the increasing death toll of UK soldiers, Joyce warned, "I do not think the public will accept for much longer that our losses can be justified by simply referring to the risk of greater terrorism on our streets. Nor do I think we can continue with the present level of uncertainty about the future of our deployment in Afghanistan."

In his speech at the International Institute of Strategic

Studies, Brown defended his government's policy as "the right action, the action that is necessary, to safeguard both our country and promote security in the world."

But Joyce's resignation letter expressed the concern that such palliatives are no longer enough if the government is to have any hope of building a public consensus behind the war.

While Joyce couched his resignation in terms of the need to reduce troop numbers, which he says should be possible "during our next term in government", his main point was to insist that everything must be done to ensure the war is won, and to more stridently build support for the military.

He states, "I think we must be much more direct about the reality that we do punch a long way above our weight, that many of our allies do far too little, and that leaving the field to the United States would mean the end of Nato as a meaningful proposition."

Fearing British imperialism's declining influence in global affairs, Joyce calls for better terms to be demanded from Washington in return for support from London. "We also need a greater geopolitical return from the United States for our efforts," he wrote, complaining that the "common view" of the war was, "Britain fights; Germany pays, France calculates; Italy avoids."

Joyce called on the government to recognise Karzai's lack of legitimacy, saying that the UK and the US should immediately throw their weight behind a second round of elections. But this is not so as to bring an end to the foreign occupation, much less establish any genuine democratic structures in Afghanistan. It is because the openly corrupt and fraudulent character of the recent elections threatens to undermine the plans of the Obama administration for a major escalation in troop levels.

Earlier this week, Gen. Stanley McChrystal, the US commander in Afghanistan, presented a classified report which is widely expected to set the stage for between 10,000 and 45,000 additional US military personnel, on top of the 62,000 US troops currently deployed.

Such a "surge" would be taken in opposition to growing anti-war sentiment—which is why an important section of Joyce's resignation letter was taken up with demanding a greater role for the military in British

political life.

In oblique terms Joyce complained of attacks on "senior service personnel", that "are now, to the public, indistinguishable from attacks on the services themselves."

This is a reference to the conflict between the government and the former chief of the General Staff, General Sir Richard Dannatt. Dannatt, who stood down last month, had made a series of high profile implied criticisms of the government over its supposed lack of commitment to the military, especially in terms of resources, and calling for increases in troop numbers in Afghanistan.

Joyce calls for the military to be allowed to play a more decisive role in the future saying, "... in my view we should allow our service personnel greater latitude to voice their views on matters which make distinctions between defence and politics pointless."

With a general election due next year, Joyce has, in essence, adopted the positions of the opposition Conservative Party, based on the belief that the deepening quagmire in Afghanistan threatens not only the loss of that war, but a decisive weakening of the global position of British imperialism.

Conservative Shadow Defence Secretary Liam Fox was quick to endorse Joyce's letter.



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