

The politicization of the British military

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The declaration by General Sir Richard Dannatt, until recently the head of the army, that he will sit on the Conservative benches in the House of Lords and join a future Tory government represents the most serious expression yet of the politicization of the military in Britain.

Dannatt was appointed chief of general staff (CGS) in 2006. The position is second in importance only to the chief of the defence forces within the armed forces. He only stepped down on August 28, to be succeeded by General Sir David Richards.

Dannatt now holds the office of constable of the Tower of London and was elected chair of the Royal United Services Institute on September 1 this year. His decision to join the Conservatives so shortly after retirement and while still holding official positions flouts the democratic principle that the armed forces do not interfere in the governmental function of deciding military policy.

Dannatt's move was announced during last week's Conservative conference by party leader David Cameron. Designed to humiliate the Labour government of Prime Minister Gordon Brown, the move has instead proved a major political embarrassment for Britain's armed forces. The military expressed its displeasure, with Gen. Lord Guthrie, an ex-chief of the defence staff, urging Dannatt not to take the Conservative whip. Army sources also pointed out that Dannatt taking a position in the Ministry of Defence would put him at loggerheads with both his successor Richards and the chief of defence staff, Air Chief Marshal Sir Jock Stirrup.

Despite this, Dannatt has been unapologetic, as has Cameron. In a lecture this week, he insisted that he could not afford to wait "an elegant year" to accept Cameron's invitation because the "mission in Afghanistan is really critical." He then insisted that he had only recently been approached by Cameron and

rebutted that his decision was "a long-term plot we've been hatching up for a long time."

The denial carries little weight. Dannatt has been a constant and vocal critic of the governments of Tony Blair and Gordon Brown regarding Iraq and Afghanistan since his appointment in 2006. Barely two months after becoming CGS, in an interview with the *Daily Mail*, he called for a withdrawal from Iraq within two years, in direct conflict with what was then official government policy.

In that same interview, Dannatt, an evangelical Anglican who once considered being ordained, called for a national Christian revival to combat Islamic fundamentalism. The "Islamist threat" was amplified by the "moral and spiritual vacuum in this country," he said, due to the decline in "Christian values." "The broader Judaic-Christian tradition has underpinned British society. It underpins the British army," he added.

Dannatt's call for early withdrawal from Iraq and his invocation of a Christian crusade were of a piece. They were motivated by his belief that Britain and the United States should shift focus to the supposedly "winnable war" in Afghanistan.

In subsequent years, he has made repeated public criticisms of the Brown government for under-resourcing the army in Afghanistan. Even as the Tory conference was meeting, he told Rupert Murdoch's the *Sun* and the BBC that ministers had delayed the supply of equipment and Brown had refused to increase troop numbers in Afghanistan by 2,000 due to financial considerations.

Dannatt has not been alone within the military in lobbying for a stepping up of the Afghan offensive and launching public attacks on the government for its supposed failings. His criticisms received support amongst retired generals, including a former chief of

the defence staff, Field Marshal Lord Bramall.

Last month, Major General Andrew Mackay suddenly resigned, with the clear intention of embarrassing the government. On September 3, Falkirk Labour MP Eric Joyce, a former army officer, resigned as Defence Secretary Bob Ainsworth's parliamentary advisor. Joyce solidarised himself with Dannatt, telling the BBC that efforts to "attribute political motives" to him and other senior officers were a "big mistake."

There are clear echoes of developments in the United States, where the top commander in Afghanistan, General Stanley McChrystal, has been campaigning for weeks to ensure that President Obama signs off on a deployment of an additional 40,000 troops.

Many of the press criticisms of Cameron's announcement have been explicitly motivated by concern that Dannatt's imminent appointment undermines his carefully cultivated image as an "honourable man," moved to speak by his concern for soldiers betrayed by the political elite. Writing in the *Daily Mail*, Max Hastings noted, "Labour fought back against General Dannatt's assault by dismissing him as a 'Tory stooge.'" He continued. "This seemed the cheapest of shots at an honourable man, and impressed no one. But now, at a stroke, he has played straight into the Government's hands, inflicting serious damage on his own credibility."

The most craven apologia for Dannatt came from the *Guardian*. The nominal mouthpiece of the liberal middle classes, it still formally supports Labour. But it has been lurching rightwards along with the wealthier social layers for which it actually speaks, and has indicated its readiness to switch to the Tories. It complained only that whereas "The general's anger is real, and his case strong," he was "making it badly."

Stating that "No one thinks Mr. Brown has dealt with the military well," the editorial concluded, "Sir Richard's warnings on Afghanistan run with the grain of the national mood. No one is asking for him to be gagged, but he should avoid recklessness. He has every right to serve with the Conservatives, if he wants to... But by launching such a loud campaign he is politicizing and so harming the armed services whose interests he understandably and honourably wants to defend."

Labour's own reaction has been extremely muted. Only one Labour peer, Lord George Foulkes, stated

directly that Dannatt "is now exposed as having been colluding with the Tory Party all along, working with them hand in glove."

The government cannot and will not be seen to conflict with its critics in the military. Instead, Brown has this week committed an additional 500 troops to Afghanistan. When implemented, this will make a total increase of 1,700 in troop numbers since last year

Labour may now be the target of a political offensive by those demanding a more strenuous military campaign in Afghanistan, but it is directly responsible for this development. Labour collaborated with the Bush presidency in the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq. It did so in defiance of massive popular opposition, while simultaneously utilizing the "war on terror" to pass draconian legislation subverting fundamental democratic rights.

The turn to colonial wars of conquest is driven by the struggle between the major powers to carve up the planet's strategic resources, such as oil and gas. This, in turn, is bound up with the drive by a narrow and fabulously wealthy elite to secure ever-greater levels of personal wealth. Under conditions of a global economic slump and a deepening gulf between rich and poor, such an agenda is incompatible with the maintenance of democratic forms of rule—given that it must be carried out at the direct expense of the vast majority of the population.

The net result is not merely that the military becomes politicized. Rather, society and political life are becoming militarized, in order that ever worsening levels of exploitation and attacks on essential services can be imposed, and the "nation" placed in the service of the bourgeoisie's imperialist ambitions.

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