

# After troop deaths, British establishment rallies behind Afghan war

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The killing of five British soldiers by an Afghan policeman on Tuesday has only served to highlight the British government's determination to remain in Afghanistan.

The five soldiers, three from the Grenadier Guards and two from the Royal Military Police, were killed by an Afghan police officer they had been "mentoring" in Helmand province. The Afghan officer then escaped.

The killings were particularly devastating to the government, given that what passes for an exit strategy from Afghanistan is the plan to train Afghan army and police personnel to take over the role being played by US, British and European personnel.

In another setback, the killings coincided with an announcement by the United Nations that it was evacuating 600 of its 1,100 international employees in Afghanistan.

In the face of this deteriorating situation, the leaders of the three main parties, Labour, the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats, along with numerous columnists stepped forward to insist that there should be no retreat from Afghanistan. Rather, they insisted, President Barack Obama should "stop dithering" and send more US troops.

Prime Minister Gordon Brown, in a speech Friday, reiterated that he will increase UK troop numbers by a further 500 to 9,500. "We have made clear for some months that Britain accepts General McChrystal's recommendation to accelerate the expansion of the Afghan army to 134,000 by this time next year," he stated.

Former Liberal Democrat leader Paddy Ashdown acknowledged, "We are not succeeding in this war; we are failing at an accelerating rate." But he did so in order to insist that the growing "clamour" for Britain to withdraw from Afghanistan could only be thwarted by "a powerful defence of the war at home and a game-changing shift from the US."

This left one dissenting voice from a senior political figure. Labour Member of Parliament Kim Howells wrote in the *Guardian* admitting that "public support for our military involvement in that United Nations-led operation is diminishing" and arguing, "It's time to pull out of Afghanistan and take the fight to Bin Laden in Britain."

Far from articulating popular hostility to the Afghan war, Howells was an ardent supporter of the invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq. From 2005 to 2008 he was a figure central to the execution of these wars as the former minister of state at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. His responsibilities included the Middle East, Afghanistan and South Asia, as well as counter-terrorism.

His present plan for an Afghan withdrawal is based on proposals that would constitute the establishment of a de-facto police state within the UK itself.

He wrote, "It is time to ask whether the fight against those who are intent on murdering British citizens might better be served by diverting into the work of the UK Border Agency and our police and intelligence services much of the additional finance and resources swallowed up by the costs of maintaining British forces in Afghanistan.

"It would be better, in other words, to bring home the great majority of our fighting men and women and concentrate on using the money saved to secure our own borders, gather intelligence on terrorist activities inside Britain, expand our intelligence operations abroad, co-operate with foreign intelligence services, and counter the propaganda of those who encourage terrorism."

Detailing what such a shift in policy would entail, he continued, "Life inside the UK would have to change. There would be more intrusive surveillance in certain communities, more police officers on the streets, more border officials at harbours and airports, more inspectors of vehicles and vessels entering the country, and a re-

examination of arrangements that facilitate the ‘free movement’ of people and products across our frontiers with the rest of the EU.”

Howells claims that “these are my views, not those of any part of the British government or of any parliamentary committee.” Such disclaimers carry no weight. He speaks as someone who is very close to the highest levels of the British intelligence and security services in MI5 and MI6. He is the chair of the Intelligence and Security Committee (ISC), a highly secretive body that is supposed to oversee Britain’s intelligence and security agencies, and a member of the Privy Council.

Howells’ statement expresses the thinking of those whose voices have not yet been heard openly, but who are primarily concerned with the dangers faced by the ruling class of the emergence of mass popular opposition in Britain itself

In the first instance, this represents a concern over mass antiwar sentiment. Howells has made previous criticisms of British strategy in Afghanistan, telling parliament in December, “Forget the nonsense about being prepared to fight on the mountains and plains of Afghanistan for 30 years. People will not accept the notion that British families should send their sons and daughters, grandsons and granddaughters to risk their lives fighting religious fanatics, tribal nationalists, corrupt warlords and heroin traffickers in one of the most godforsaken terrains on the face of the earth.”

But Howells’ concerns—and those of the security services—do not stop there. His call for repressive measures within Britain can only be properly understood as a response to the emerging development of struggles by the working class against the onslaught on jobs, wages and living standards.

Howells is particularly acute in his reaction to such dangers because of his background in Stalinist politics and his past relations with the trade union bureaucracy.

He first became politically active as a student at the Hornsey College of Art where he participated in an occupation against the Vietnam War in 1968. He joined the Communist Party of Great Britain and built a career first of all as an official of the National Union of Mineworkers in South Wales.

Howells came to national prominence through his efforts to undermine the year-long miners’ strike of 1984-85. He maintained that the action was not valid, as a ballot for industrial action had not taken place. During the strike, he called for an end to the conflict and for a return

to work without a settlement.

In December 1984, at the height of the bitter dispute, he pronounced that any struggle against the powers that be was futile. “The state is much better organised for taking on mass pickets than it was in the early 1970s,” he said. “It is the hardest lesson any workforce has had to learn since 1926. The whole of the organised labour movement has to take a fresh look in future disputes.”

The basis of Howells’ provocative stance during the 1984-85 strike is still to be fully revealed. But an indication of how close Howells has been for a long time to British intelligence is provided by a November 9, 2008, *Daily Mail* article, “MI5’s watchdog Kim Howells was an art school anarchist...trailed by the Spooks in his revolutionary student days.” The *Mail* reported that the MI5 files remain closed “on Mr Howells’s later role as an official of the National Union of Mineworkers during the Miners’ Strike of 1984-5.”

Rejecting any perspective based on the previous reformist programme of Labour and the trade unions, Howells was one of the progenitors of New Labour and avidly supported the transformation of the Labour Party under Tony Blair into an avowed party of big business. In 1996, he called for the word socialism to be “humanely phased out” of Labour Party documents, and in 2003 said, “New Labour is about running capitalism better than the Tories.”

As with so many prominent Labour MPs, particularly fellow former Stalinists such as Jack Straw and Peter Mandelson, Howells’ left background and knowledge is now deployed directly against the working class. An avowed opponent of socialism, Howells and those sections of the establishment he represents have drawn the conclusion that financing a losing war in Afghanistan is a fundamental diversion from the pressing task of preparing for major struggle against the working class in Britain. He is not an opponent of war, but the advocate of preparing for class war at home on behalf of the secret state.



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