

Right-wing campaign against Brown to ensure Afghan escalation

Robert Stevens

12 November 2009

Sections of the British armed forces and the pro-Conservative Party press are waging a concerted campaign for the drastic escalation of the war in Afghanistan. Prime Minister Gordon Brown has been personally targeted on the grounds that he has not done enough to “win the war.”

Following Brown’s speech last week in which he reiterated his government’s commitment to the war, he was attacked by three former chiefs of defence staff. All three are now members of the House of Lords.

Brown had said that he would increase troop numbers by 500 if certain conditions were met and insisted, “we cannot, must not and will not walk away” from Afghanistan.

In response, Lord Boyce said he believed the government “did not realise we are at war,” adding that “it is too much to hope that the present government will provide the necessary cash to allow its aspirations to be realised properly or honourably.”

Lord Inge condemned the prime minister, saying that the armed forces had “felt he [Brown] has never really been on their side and they have not had his support.”

Lord Guthrie remarked that Brown was “dithering” over his pledge to send 500 more troops to Afghanistan and added, “I do think that military services, the people in the front line, are questioning whether the government is really, really committed to making progress in Afghanistan.”

The attacks on the government’s policy came as an internal Ministry of Defence document, entitled *Strategy for Defence*, was leaked to the Rupert Murdoch-owned *Times*. The report was authored by the two most senior officials at the Ministry of Defence, Air Chief Marshal Sir Jock Stirrup, the Chief of the Defence Staff, and Sir Bill Jeffrey.

The document insisted the war in Afghanistan had to be won as it was of “critical importance to the security of British citizens and the UK’s national interest, including the credibility of NATO, and to the reputation and long-term future of the Armed Forces.” Rejecting any talk of an early withdrawal from Afghanistan it said, “Planning within Defence should be based on the assumption of a rolling three-year military commitment to Afghanistan, reviewed

annually.”

Speaking on the BBC’s Andrew Marr show on Sunday, Stirrup said he thought UK troops would be in Afghanistan for at least another five years and that US General Stanley McChrystal’s prediction of a 2013 withdrawal was “a little optimistic.” Stirrup said, “It is another four or five years, but it will be a gradual process.”

On the BBC’s Politics Show, Lieutenant-General Jim Dutton, the deputy commander of UK troops in Afghanistan, said that British national interests in the region meant that the war had to be continued. “There is much more to the provision of stability in this area of the world, which is a project for which I have to say, yes, it is worth some soldiers having to die for because the consequences of it going wrong are far greater,” he said.

The Tory media has utilised the latest deaths among British troops, with eight killed in the last week alone, to focus on the supposed failure of Brown as a “war leader.” Every military set-back suffered by the British troops in Afghanistan is now being laid at his door by the most right-wing sections of the establishment.

The broader target of the anti-Brown offensive is the substantial and growing opposition to the war. Its aim is to assert that the problem with the war so far is that it has been handled and argued for badly by Labour, whereas the Conservatives will be “in it to win it.”

Latest opinion polls show a significant increase in those who are in favour of withdrawing troops from Afghanistan (63 percent) and those who believe that the war is “unwinnable” (up to 64 percent from 58 percent in July). Just 21 percent of adults support the war in Afghanistan, down from 28 percent in August, according to a YouGov survey this week.

The *Daily Telegraph* editorialised Monday on the extent of this hostility: “To an extent not seen since the end of the Great War, the public’s perception of this conflict is being shaped almost entirely by the casualty count rather than by the achievement of military objectives. As a result, it is hardly surprising that support for the war is draining away.”

Brown is being personally blamed for this fact. Stirrup told Marr that not enough had been done by the government to, “demonstrate that over the long term that this is doable” and added it was “incredibly important that we do better at explaining the successes we are having.”

Due to convention and protocol, military figures do not generally intervene in political affairs, let alone designate themselves as supporters of the Conservative Party. However, the campaign against Brown has become one that is overtly party political.

Over the past year, the main critic of Brown from within the military has been General Sir Richard Dannatt, until recently the head of the army. Appointed chief of general staff in 2006, he stepped down on August 28 to be succeeded by General Sir David Richards.

Last month it was revealed that Dannatt will sit on the Conservative benches in the House of Lords and join a future Tory government. Dannatt’s intentions were announced at the Conservative conference by party leader David Cameron. The announcement proved to be something of a political embarrassment for the military top brass, with several leading figures stating they opposed the move. Yet, aside from serving to make the historically close relation between the military leadership and the Conservative Party too apparent, there is nothing to distinguish the rhetoric of Dannatt from that of his predecessors.

Another all too apparent indication of the political pedigree of the pro-war offensive against Brown is the role played by Murdoch’s tabloid, *The Sun*. The newspaper revealed the contents of a condolence letter sent by Brown to Jacqui Janes, the mother of a soldier, Jamie Janes, who was killed in Afghanistan in October.

The newspaper widely publicised the handwritten letter in which Jacqui Janes complained that Brown had made 25 spelling mistakes, including her surname and her son’s first name.

Brown was forced to personally apologise, stating that what were perceived to be spelling errors was actually his poor handwriting (Brown is blind in one eye and his eyesight is failing). *The Sun* then uploaded, in full, a 13 minute private phone call between Brown and Jacqui Janes.

The newspaper also criticised Brown for “failing to bow at the Cenotaph” during the Remembrance Day ceremony on Sunday. It added, “Both blunders provide yet more evidence of Mr Brown’s underlying disregard for the military. And of his half-hearted attitude to the war in Afghanistan.”

The Sun’s assertions are politically motivated. In September it ended 12 years of support for the government by declaring, during Labour’s party conference, that it was now offering its services to the Conservative Party, which it would support at the 2010 general election.

Commenting on the meaning of this tawdry episode, Roy Greenslade of the *Guardian* said, “Well, after the handwriting saga, there cannot be a shadow of doubt. Murdoch has let *The Sun* loose to do as it wishes. Brown must not only be beaten. He must be crushed.”

This was so apparent that Benedict Brogan, the pro-Tory *Daily Telegraph*’s chief political commentator, was moved to complain that criticising Brown’s “handwriting just makes it harder to justify the war.” He asked, “does it necessarily follow that Mrs Janes’ grief should be directed by *The Sun* in this way? This story hardly seems designed to promote public confidence in the war in Afghanistan or help prevent the drift towards cut and run.”

That right-wing elements are campaigning with such hostility against a government that has ardently supported the conquest and occupation of Afghanistan and Iraq is a warning to all working people. This is a government that has maintained thousands of troops in Afghanistan for nearly a decade as the second largest contingent after the US presence. To this end it has spent £1 billion since 2006 on new armoured vehicles to be used there. According to an estimate by the *Independent* in July, including hidden costs, the war has cost more than £12 billion to finance—£190 for every man, woman and child in the UK.

At the centre of the campaign against the Brown government is the attempt to channel the rising discontent over the war and Labour’s record in office in a reactionary direction. The opponents of Brown are using the set-backs suffered by the British military to ensure that their own their own pro-war agenda wins the day. This strategy is based on vastly increasing the UK troop presence and the bringing to power of a Conservative Party committed to savage cuts in public services and austerity measures.



To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact