

British general's memoirs hit Blair government on military policy

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The former head of the British Army, General Sir Richard Dannatt, has made his most strident criticisms to date of the governments of Tony Blair and Gordon Brown on the issue of military deployments to Iraq and Afghanistan in his recently published memoirs.

Dannatt has made the claims and accusations in his book, *Leading from the Front*, which is being serialised this month in the *Sunday Telegraph*.

Dannatt said evidence for Iraq's possession of weapons of mass destruction, which was the justification for Britain's involvement in the illegal US-led 2003 invasion of the country, was "most unconvincing" and the planning for the aftermath of war an "abject failure".

He called the 1998 Strategic Defence Review (SDR), carried out soon after the election of New Labour, a "good framework" for defence policy in the Labour years, but said it was "fatally flawed" by being underfunded by then chancellor Gordon Brown and could not cope with the strains of deploying troops in both Iraq and Afghanistan simultaneously.

"History will pass judgment on these foreign adventures in due course, but in my view, Gordon Brown's malign intervention, when chancellor, on the SDR by refusing to fund what his own government had agreed, fatally flawed the entire process from the outset.

"The seeds were sown for some of the impossible operational pressures to come".

"Why didn't Tony Blair resolve this problem.... I was forced to the conclusion that he lacked the moral courage to impose his will on his own chancellor".

"To me it seems extraordinary that the prime minister, the number one guy, cannot crack the whip sufficiently to his very close friend, apparently, his next door neighbour, the chancellor, and say, 'We're doing this in the national interest, Gordon, you fund it,'" Dannatt told the *Sunday Telegraph*.

He also said he had warned the current coalition

government that continuing the present rate of casualties in Afghanistan was unacceptable. "We've got to have cracked it by 2014/2015. You couldn't ask an organisation to go on taking this level of casualties for 10 years".

Dannatt's remarks are significant, because he has played an unprecedented role in the politicisation of the military in Britain, and this reactionary agenda continues in his latest disingenuous pronouncements.

Dannatt was appointed chief of general staff (CGS) in 2006. The position is second in importance only to the chief of the defence forces. He stepped down in August 2009, to be succeeded by General Sir David Richards.

But Dannatt started working for the then opposition Conservative Party as defence advisor while still holding official positions, thus flouting the established principle that the armed forces do not interfere in the governmental function of deciding military policy.

Dannatt and the Conservatives aimed to humiliate the then Labour government of Prime Minister Gordon Brown, the move instead proved a major political embarrassment for Britain's armed forces. The military expressed its displeasure, with General 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, the Conservative leader, David Cameron, was unapologetic, while Dannatt insisted in a lecture 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 denied that his decision was "a long-term plot we've been hatching up for a long time".

As the WSWWS stated at the 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 was motivated by a conviction amongst a significant segment of the military top brass that Britain and the United States should shift focus to the supposedly “winnable war” in Afghanistan.

In subsequent years, Dannatt made repeated and provocative public criticisms of the Brown government for under-resourcing the army in Afghanistan. He told Rupert Murdoch’s *Sun* and the BBC that government 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’s “disloyalty” encouraged other senior members of the military to publicly attack the government for its supposed failings in the Afghan offensive. Dannatt’s criticisms received support amongst retired generals, including a former chief of the defence staff, Field Marshal Lord Bramall, while Major General Andrew Mackay suddenly resigned, in September last year, with the clear intention of embarrassing the government. In the same month, Falkirk Labour MP Eric Joyce, a former army officer, resigned as parliamentary advisor to the defence secretary after solidarising himself with Dannatt.

As the WSWWS also pointed out at the time, Dannatt’s conduct echoed developments in the United States, where the former top commander in Afghanistan, General Stanley McChrystal, had been campaigning for weeks to ensure that President Barack Obama sign off on a deployment of an additional 40,000 troops.

As then, the media has been generally supportive of the former army chief’s positions, let alone asking the obvious question that if Dannatt had felt so strongly about

his political superiors at the time, why did he not resign?

The supposedly liberal *Guardian* newspaper ran a September 6 piece entitled “Soldiers such as Sir Richard Dannatt have a place in politics”, which argued, “Without the contributions of generals to political discourse, the debate can be uninformed...”.

The political and military consensus over the Afghan occupation was even formally legitimised in Parliament last week as members voted overwhelmingly in favour of keeping UK troops in Afghanistan, in the first vote they have held on the issue. There have been several perfunctory statements and toothless debates since the 2001 US-led invasion of Afghanistan, but a motion has never previously been put to MPs. The vote, on the motion that “this House supports the continued deployment of UK armed forces in Afghanistan”, passed by 310 votes to 14.

The decision to join the US-led invasion was taken without a parliamentary vote, unlike the invasion of Iraq in 2003. It was backed by the leaderships of all three main parliamentary parties. Some 335 UK troops have died since the 2001 invasion of Afghanistan and thousands have been injured. Around 10,000 are currently deployed as part of the occupation of the country.

The US-led invasion and occupation of Afghanistan is a colonial war of conquest and plunder driven by the struggle between the major powers to carve up the region’s strategic resources. The military and political role of individuals like Dannatt is to help facilitate this on behalf of British imperialism in a region of the world historically well versed in the latter’s infamous deeds.

Dannatt’s self-serving and under-hand attacks on his previous political masters, along with the recent highly publicised campaigns of the wounded servicemen charity “Help for Heroes” serves to militarize political life and legitimise an unpopular war in wider society. This military/political offensive is designed to pursue imperialist ambitions abroad and face down growing social opposition to austerity measures at home.



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