British military chief denounces Labour leader Corbyn on use of nuclear weapons

Chris Marsden
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The head of Britain's armed forces, General Sir Nicholas Houghton, has made an extraordinary public declaration that Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn's refusal to authorise a nuclear strike "would worry me if that thought was translated into power."

The chief of the defence staff was speaking on the BBC's *Andrew Marr Show* about the renewal of the Trident nuclear submarine missile programme. Marr asked Houghton directly, "Of course, we now have a leader of the opposition who says quite openly that he would never press the nuclear button. Does that worry you?"

Houghton replied, "Well, it would worry me if that thought was translated into power, as it were."

Marr then interjected. "If he wins, he's a problem?" To which Houghton replied, "Well, there are a couple of hurdles to cross before we get to that."

Houghton went on to indicate that Corbyn would be unfit to hold office if he held onto his views.

"The whole thing about deterrence rests on the credibility of its use," he said. "Most of the politicians I know understand that. And I think that, dare I say, the responsibility of power is probably quite a sobering thing and you come to a realisation that 'I understand how this thing works.'"

The interview with Marr came after Houghton had complained on *Sky News* that Britain was "letting down" its allies by not taking part in the bombing of Islamic State (ISIS) in Syria. These comments were clearly made in support of the Conservative government and against Corbyn, who has argued that Labour should not back UK involvement.

Houghton's remarks to Marr were in clear breach of constitutional principles. In response, Corbyn told the media, "It is a matter of serious concern that the chief of the defence staff has today intervened directly in issues of political dispute. It is essential in a democracy that the military remains politically neutral at all times.

"By publicly taking sides in current political arguments, Sir Nicholas Houghton has clearly breached that constitutional principle."

Corbyn said he would raise the matter with the defence secretary, asking him "to take action to ensure that the neutrality of the armed forces is upheld."

The government did not even wait until receiving such a letter before it rushed to Houghton's defence, solidarising itself with Houghton's remarks.

Prime Minister David Cameron's spokesman said the defence chief "made clear he wasn't talking about a personal thing… He made a point about the credibility of the deterrent. And as the principal military adviser to the government, it's reasonable for the chief of defence staff to talk about how we maintain the credibility of one of the most important tools in our armoury."

An unnamed "senior government" insider was blunter still, telling the *Daily Mail*, "Jeremy Corbyn wants to scrap Trident and abolish the Army. If the chief of the defence staff is asked, he is going to respond."

Of equal significance is that Corbyn's own front bench was just as quick to support the general.

Shadow Defence Secretary Maria Eagle told the *Andrew Marr Show*, "I understand the point that he is making. It is the point that I made myself when Jeremy said what he said." Indicating that she would resign if Labour did not back the renewal of Trident, she added, "I think I would find it difficult [to continue in the shadow cabinet], but we are not there yet."

Eagle's remarks were echoed by the former sea lord (commander of the UK Navy), Admiral Sir Alan West, who sits on the Labour benches in the House of Lords.

He claimed that Houghton had been manipulated by

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Marr so that he "maybe strayed further than he should have done," but added that it was "highly likely" he would "resign the whip" if Corbyn's stance on Trident became party policy.

Houghton is no naïf, as is suggested by West. The *Daily Mail* quoted a close source as saying that he "would be aware of the effect of his actions yesterday." The newspaper went on to write: "'When he says something, he intends for it to have an impact,' said the insider. 'He doesn't make things up on the hoof.'"

Events have again demonstrated that there is no longer any significant constituency for the defence of democratic rights within ruling circles. Such is the advanced state of social and political antagonisms that there is now a barely concealed behind-the-scenes discussion of domestic military intervention should the need arise.

In September, when he was asked if he would "press the button" and authorise the use of nuclear warheads, Corbyn replied: "No. One hundred and eighty-seven countries don't feel the need to have a nuclear weapon to protect their security."

He has stressed that this is purely a personal position and that the Labour Party will be given a free vote on the issue and will almost certainly back the renewal of Trident. Nevertheless, his remarks prompted a furious backlash, with an unnamed serving general threatening mutiny.

The general who "served in Northern Ireland in the 1980s and 1990s" told the *Sunday Times* that if Corbyn came to power, "There would be mass resignations at all levels and you would face the very real prospect of an event which would effectively be a mutiny…

"You would see a major break in convention, with senior generals directly and publicly challenging Corbyn over vital important policy decisions such as Trident, pulling out of NATO and any plans to emasculate and shrink the size of the armed forces. The Army just wouldn't stand for it. The general staff would not allow a prime minister to jeopardise the security of this country, and I think people would use whatever means possible, fair or foul to prevent that."

There was a refusal at the time to seek even to identify the general and only a muted call for this to be done by Corbyn. Now, less than two months later, we have the extraordinary situation of the head of the armed forces publicly opposing Corbyn politically and even questioning his fitness to hold office.

Houghton, who served in Northern Ireland and commanded the 39th Infantry Brigade leading up to the 1998 Good Friday Agreement, has all but publicly solidarised himself with the remarks previously made only anonymously. He does so in a de facto political alliance with both the Tories and Corbyn's right-wing opponents in the Labour Party, who are working every day to end his unwelcome stint as party leader.

A striking feature of this campaign is how large a part is played by the attempt to whip up jingoism and overt warmongering. Corbyn has now been denounced for, among other things, failing to sing "God Save the Queen" at a ceremony commemorating the Battle of Britain, not bowing to the monarch and assuming his post on the Privy Council, and, the same day as Houghton made his appearance on the BBC, for not bowing low enough at the Cenotaph on Remembrance Day.

What is being made abundantly clear is that Corbyn's professed pacifist sentiment is incompatible with his playing a leadership role in the Labour Party, which has always functioned as a faithful instrument of Britain's predatory imperial policy and will do so in future—whether in respect to Trident or war in Iraq and Syria.

In response, Corbyn has again indicated his readiness to capitulate before his opponents and accept this latest political outrage. Even as he called for Houghton to face censure, he insisted the comments would not sour their relationship. "I look forward to meeting him," Corbyn said. "I don't do bad blood, I do positive."

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