

UK Parliament mourns imperialism's Afghan debacle

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Yesterday's UK parliamentary debate on Afghanistan had a funereal air, punctuated by bitter cries of betrayal from the Conservative government benches that were replicated by Labour MPs.

A collective howl of anguish, despite inevitable references to the fate of women, girls, gays and the Afghan people under the Taliban, was motivated solely by the defeat suffered by British imperialism.

The anger of the criminals and blowhards in the House of Commons was directed as much against the United States as the Taliban, with denunciations of both the Biden and Trump administrations. And Prime Minister Boris Johnson and his key frontbench team were denounced from the right, not the left, for relying too much on Washington and not being able to independently project Britain's predatory ambitions on the world arena.

The rout in Afghanistan has assumed a significance similar to if not greater than the Suez crisis in 1956, as a symbol of British imperialism's decline and the desperate need to claw back a place in the sun even in defiance of US imperialism.

Johnson exhibited no trace of his usual bravado. He tried to placate his critics by praising the supposed "achievements" of the 20 years of war and occupation of Afghanistan, while bluntly stating the military and political realities facing the UK.

Replying to hostile questions from his predecessor as Tory leader, Theresa May, he said that the UK "came up against hard reality". Afghanistan was an occupation led by the US, which could not continue without US military might once President Donald Trump announced a pull-out last year and President Joe Biden carried it through last week. No matter the sincerity of those calling for a non-US led military response, there was no appetite among any of the UK's other partners

for a "continued military presence" and hadn't been since the official combat mission ended in 2018.

Labour leader Sir Keir Starmer's reply began with a hymn of praise to the occupation of Afghanistan. A "disastrous week, an unfolding tragedy" should not detract from the fact that, instead of rule by the Taliban, "a fragile democracy emerged." By "no means perfect," it had prevented "international terrorist attacks," won "liberty" for women and allowed Afghans "to dream of a better future."

These boons were all won by the "sacrifice by the Afghan people" and "over 150,000 UK personnel... including members across this house."

Speaking to the military, Starmer emoted, "Your sacrifice was not in vain, you brought stability, reduced the terrorist threat and enabled progress. We are all proud of what you did." He reiterated the trope of every right-wing demagogue in history, including Hitler, of a betrayal of those whose "sacrifice deserves better than this," thanks to the "staggering complacency from our government about the Taliban threat." Johnson, he added, was "a threat to national security"

When Tory MP Sir Iain Duncan Smith asked Starmer whether he agreed that Biden's statement blaming Afghan forces for not fighting the Taliban was "shameful", he agreed "that's wrong."

The tone set by Starmer was continued by the Tories, starting with May who said, "We all understand the importance of American support, but I do find it incomprehensible and worrying that the UK was not able to bring together an alternative alliance of countries to continue to provide the support necessary to sustain a government in Afghanistan... I am afraid I think this has been a major setback for British foreign policy."

Things reached a new low with every speech by an

MP who has served in the armed forces. Chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee, Tom Tugendhat, a former officer in the intelligence corps in Iraq and then Afghanistan, was treated to silent awe by MPs. He attacked Biden's calling "into question the courage of men I fought with" once again as "shameful," continuing, "Those who have not fought for the colours they fly should be careful about criticising those who have."

He called on the UK to "make sure that we are not dependent on a single ally, on the decision of a single leader, that that we can work together with Japan and Australia, France and Germany, with partners large and small and make sure we hold the line together." His "emotional" diatribe won a round of applause.

Tobias Elwood, chair of the defence select committee and a former captain in the Royal Green Jackets, said he regretted there would be no vote today that would show the government did not have the support of parliament. The UK should have more confidence to pursue its own strategy. "We have the means, the hard power, the connections to lead. What we require is the backbone."

Johnny Mercer, a former Army captain, declared that people who sign up for the military "do not serve the American flag, they serve the British flag. It dishonours their service to simply say: the Americans have left, we are leaving." Soldiers are not trained to lose, and "we're not trained for ministers to, in a way, choose to be defeated by the Taliban".

Not to be outdone, Labour's Dan Jarvis, an Iraq and Afghanistan veteran and member of the parachute Regiment, asked of Afghan army personnel, "Where were we in their hour of need? We were nowhere, that was shameful".

One Blairite scoundrel after another sought to demonstrate their jingoistic bona fides. Former Shadow Foreign Secretary Yvette Cooper added "disturbing" and "distressful" to the now obligatory "shameful" in her description of events. Chris Bryant referenced the plight of gay men to bemoan "the most sudden collapse of any foreign and military policy objective on the part of the UK since Suez, and you might argue further back."

Shadow Foreign Secretary Lisa Nandy said, "This is an unparalleled moment of shame for this government," which was "behaving as if they have no agency and no

power... We have so much to be proud of as a country, Mr Speaker. Can it again include our government?"

What then of those who are supposed to stem this tide of nationalist warmongering and cut through the lying defences of a filthy war of colonial conquest? Ex-Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn, having participated in a small demonstration by the Stop The War Coalition outside parliament along with a handful of Labour "left" MPs, strained every sinew in his efforts not to unduly antagonise his audience.

After calling on the UK to allow all Afghan collaborators with the occupation into the country, he advanced a critique of the war that never mentioned anyone involved in starting it or waging it for two decades—including Labour's former leaders, Tony Blair and Gordon Brown—and certainly nothing critical of Starmer and company.

He offered instead a history lesson that proves wars in Afghanistan "do fail... three in the 19th century and a number in this century." There were, he concluded, "some serious historical lessons to be learned here about how we take major foreign policy decisions" and a need for "sober reflection on the disaster which has happened in Afghanistan."

The debacle in Afghanistan, following on from Iraq, Libya and Syria, the desperate crisis provoked by Brexit, and the protracted economic and social tensions amplified by the pandemic, have derailed the strategic ambitions of British imperialism. Its political representatives gathered in Westminster yesterday have all but lost their heads in response, dreaming of a return to the glory days of Empire just as darkness is falling.

Outside of parliament, meanwhile, millions of working people opposed to these wars, who see these same MPs as the architects of their own hardship and suffering, will come to see the debacle in Afghanistan as an indication that they too can challenge and defeat Britain's "mighty" ruling elite.



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