

Britain's political elite and the Afghan war

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Britain has 9,000 troops stationed in Afghanistan. Since the 2001 US-led invasion, a total of 191 British servicemen and women have died there—more than in six years of war and occupation in Iraq.

It is estimated to have cost more than £12 billion—£190 for every man, woman and child in the UK, enough to pay for 23 new hospitals, 60,000 additional teachers or 77,000 nurses. The £9 billion military bill admitted to by the Ministry of Defence does not include the hidden costs for supporting injured troops, veterans and the families of personnel killed.

At least 218 soldiers have suffered “life-changing injuries” since April 2006 alone—and more than 50 personnel have undergone amputations following injuries.

Worst of all, more than 30,000 Afghan civilians are estimated to have been killed in the conflict. No figures are available for insurgent deaths.

In the face of this unfolding nightmare, and fueled by an escalating British death toll in the Helmand province, public opposition to the Afghan war is deepening. The July 28 edition of the *Independent* published an opinion poll by ComRes showing that the majority of British people want troops to be pulled out of Afghanistan. More than half of voters (52 percent) want troops withdrawn straight away. Some 64 percent said British forces should be removed “as quickly as possible.”

Fully 58 percent of respondents consider the war to be “unwinnable” and oppose sending additional troops to Afghanistan.

An earlier survey conducted by the Canadian-based Angus Reid Research Centre found that 53 percent of Britons oppose military involvement in Afghanistan, while the BBC and *Guardian* found 56 percent in favour of an immediate pull-out, and an ITN News poll put the figure at 59 percent.

Yet there is barely any expression of this opposition to be found within official political circles or the

media. Instead, a concerted effort is being made to intimidate the war's opponents and whip up support for the conflict by cynically utilising the issue of British casualties.

Whereas the Labour government harangues the British public with claims that the war is being won, the opposition parties complain that troop deaths are due to the British intervention being underfunded, understaffed and ill-equipped. For the most part, political speeches and newspaper comments end with demands for more troops and a “realistic” strategy for victory.

The day before the *Independent* poll was published, Labour Foreign Secretary David Miliband addressed NATO in Brussels and called for more troops to be sent by other member states, while the Ministry of Defence announced the dispatch of 125 personnel to compensate for numbers lost through death and serious casualties.

Prime Minister Gordon Brown chose the same day to proclaim “the first phase” of Operation Panther's Claw, the US and British offensive in Helmand province, to have been a success. Phase two promises to exact an even greater toll in deaths and injuries. In the run-up to next month's Afghan elections, British troops will be expected to “be present *on the ground in large numbers* in the areas they have captured,” writes the *Independent* (emphasis added).

As for the opposition parties, Conservative Party leader David Cameron constantly urges the dispatch of more troops and equipment and has promised that an incoming Tory government would prioritise the immediate equipment needs of frontline troops over long-term defence spending plans—indicating that he sees the war continuing long after 2010.

Nick Clegg for the Liberal Democrats has denounced the government for refusing to send 2,000 additional troops for “political reasons” and not giving the military the “political backing” it deserves.

The Scottish National Party (SNP) urges a “political

solution” that “will give people, not least our troops themselves, the confidence that the right strategy is being pursued and is achievable.”

Plaid Cymru’s spokesman for defence, Elfyn Llwyd, has made a vague appeal for an “exit strategy,” but adds that until such time “we need the fullest possible support for the military in their campaign.”

All such talk of a “political strategy” is motivated by considerations of how to successfully consolidate the control of Afghanistan by US and British imperialism. It centres on efforts to involve elements of the insurgency in the regime of Hamid Karzai so as to broaden the base of the proxy government and utilise a broader array of warlords, tribal leaders and bought-off Taliban elements to help police the Afghan people.

It is a policy that has already been adopted by the government, articulated by Miliband in Brussels and endorsed immediately by Richard Holbrooke, the US envoy to the region.

Nothing better illustrates the political monopoly enjoyed by the ruling class than this blanket refusal to deviate from the pro-war line in Afghanistan.

Even in the run-up to the invasion of Iraq in 2003, there were something like 100 Labour MPs who were formally opposed to war—a position shared by the Liberal Democrats, the SNP and Plaid.

In the face of mass anti-war protests at that time, Prime Minister Tony Blair, taking his orders from Washington, declared, “I do not seek unpopularity as a badge of honour. But sometimes it is the price of leadership.”

He insisted that if Britain was to maintain any presence on the world arena, it could do so only as the unswerving ally of US imperialism.

Blair’s dictum—that the essence of leadership is a readiness to defy the popular will—was a distilled expression of the contempt felt by the global financial oligarchy and its hirelings for democratic norms. It was his recognition that it is not possible to secure a democratic mandate either for predatory wars abroad or economic and social policies at home aimed at enriching the elite at the expense of the vast majority.

His message was received loud and clear. After making their token protest, the entire parliamentary fraternity fell into line behind the Iraq war as soon as hostilities began. They have never deviated from this course.

Today, just a handful of Labour MPs are on record as opposing military involvement in Afghanistan, and they are effectively invisible men. Full military participation in Afghanistan is broadly viewed within ruling circles as essential in securing a political alliance with the US and the Obama administration, which is regarded as a vital counterweight to Britain’s main European rivals, Germany and France.

Neither is there any significant extra-parliamentary expression of anti-war sentiment. The Stop the War Coalition, led by the Socialist Workers Party and the Stalinist Communist Party of Britain, was once able to mobilise almost 2 million protestors against the Iraq war. But its leadership ground this movement down to almost nothing, thanks to their insistence that an appeal to liberal sections of the establishment such as the Labour lefts and support for the European powers could prevent military conflict.

Today, the by-now official anti-war movement is a rump, and its only legacy has been to reinforce a belief that nothing can be done to oppose the warmongering of the Westminster parties.

Working people must demand the immediate withdrawal of all British, US and allied military forces from Afghanistan and Iraq and an end to the threats being leveled against Iran, Pakistan, Syria and other states and peoples. But they must also recognise that the Afghan conflict, like Iraq, is the bloody product of the drive by the major imperialist states to dominate the world’s strategic markets and resources—in particular, the oil reserves of the Middle East and Caspian region. It is a colonial war of subjugation.

The struggle against war can be waged successfully only through the independent political mobilisation of the working class against the bourgeoisie and the entire profit system on an international revolutionary strategy and programme.

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