

By Bill Ewart

Sending British troops to fight abroad is the most serious action a government can take. The decision must be morally right, the objectives clear, and ideally the nation supportive. In recent years the government has failed to meet these standards, and the Liberal Democrats demand that radical changes be made to ensure that they are always met in future and to achieve a stable defence policy capable of reacting quickly and effectively to world events.

Liberal Democrats champion the freedom, dignity and well-being of every individual in Britain. We believe that when we send our troops abroad to defend those rights, we must always ensure that the good we gain outweighs the sacrifice they take. We therefore believe that if we must send our troops abroad, we owe it to them to do the best we can for them in terms of their equipment and training; the care of them and their dependants if something happens to them; and the way they are treated back home. These duties that the state owes to its soldiers are at the heart of the new Liberal Democrat defence policy.

The starting point for change must be a Strategic Defence Review held every five years, akin to the Quadrennial Defence Review in the United States. As Nick Harvey, Liberal Democrat Defence spokesman has stated, 'Ministers should come forward with a plan for a full Strategic Defence Review, rather than salami-slicing expensive programmes.' The inconsistencies, overspend and lack of long term planning that are rife in British defence policy at present would be directly challenged by a consistent review system which would include extensive public consultations along the lines of those in 1998 for the last Strategic Defence Review.

This will enable the government to conduct a thorough appraisal of not only government policy, but also the Defence Planning Assumptions and the structure, infrastructure and modernisation requirements of the armed services.

Furthermore we demand a full inquiry into the Iraq War, to learn from the past and to avoid such future catastrophe. As Shadow Foreign Secretary Ed Davey has stated, 'Anything that gets the Government to hold a full inquiry into the Iraq War as soon as possible will have the support of the Liberal Democrats.'

Overspend on recent defence equipment places an unacceptable strain on our armed forces and the taxpayer. At the same time, the Urgent Operational Requirements system produces results fast, with no evidence to date of excessive spending. We believe that there are further lessons to be learned here so that a more cost-efficient and reliable means of purchase can be set in place. Establishing greater awareness of and adherence to budget through long term planning should also be a central function of the Strategic Defence Review.

Overstretch of the armed forces is a damaging burden on not only functionality and morale, but also the security of our nation and our ability to aid peacekeeping internationally. Every aspect

of Britain's defence capabilities under Labour are under strain to near breaking point. Our generals have told us that so many soldiers are sent so often to Iraq and Afghanistan that Britain's forces, 'now have almost no capability to react to the unexpected.'

The strains on the British military are exacerbated by the high number of troops it commits abroad, which are far in excess of the majority of its allies. European NATO allies have 2,000,000 troops at their disposal, yet use less than 5% of them outside their individual borders. Our allies must be persuaded to prepare for and assume their fair share of burdens agreed upon by NATO or through emerging European defence and security policies.

The need to enact a new military covenant has been made clear in recent times by the failings of our government in the care provided to our troops in the aftermath of the conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq. We believe that our troops, their families where appropriate, and veterans should be guaranteed the best possible care. Liberal Democrat leader Nick Clegg has highlighted the burgeoning view that the current Prime Minister simply does not care about the individuals within the armed forces, and he is determined that the rights of the serviceman should be given the utmost consideration at all times. While we will always welcome improvements, piecemeal responses to public pressures need to be replaced by a thought through policy and commitment.

In response to news that Gurkhas who served in the British Army prior to 1997 are being denied a full pension and British Citizenship, Clegg stated, 'When I told people what you get from the Government in return for the years of brave, loyal, uncomplaining success people simply don't believe it. It is quite simply a national disgrace. I am simply saying you should be treated with the respect and honour you deserve as brave soldiers. I will do everything I can to end this unacceptable and immoral discrimination.'

Following a visit to Afghanistan Liberal Democrat Defence spokesman Bob Russell reported that amidst ever-more permanent bases troops were living in tents unsuitable for the extremes of temperature in the region.

The decision to close military hospitals under the Conservative government in the 1990s is now having a distinct impact on the medical facilities available to the services. The last of eight of such hospitals closed in 2007, having provided medical care since 1753. The troops are not receiving sufficiently thorough care which is sympathetic to military ethos on their return home from duty, and this is the very least that should be provided.

We strongly support putting in place steps that will lead to the eventual global elimination of nuclear weapons. Nick Clegg has urged that Britain play an active role in the 2010 Non-Proliferation treaty talks, using her standing in the world to push towards the eventual goal of global, multilateral nuclear disarmament. The party is committed to setting an example in the lead up to the talks, through a, 'unilateral 50% cut in its nuclear warheads, whilst retaining a multilateral negotiating position on further warhead reductions and system replacement.'

The Liberal Democrats have a proven record of making the right judgement at times of international conflict. We strongly believe that international institutions should be given every opportunity and resource to pursue the peaceful resolution of conflict.

The Liberal Democrats are determined that these failings be rectified, and that plans be put in place to ensure a more consistent, thorough defence policy for the betterment of the British

troops and the British people.

We therefore propose a radical six-point approach to ensure that the 2% of national wealth we spend on defence each year delivers best value, better results and advance efforts to achieve permanent and fair international peace:

1. A wide-ranging Defence Review every five years.
2. A new military covenant.
3. Better-value buying processes for equipment.
4. Closer co-operation with our allies.
5. Steps toward the global elimination of nuclear weapons.
6. The strengthening and support of international institutions that pursue diplomatic alternatives to the resolution of international conflict.

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