

"There are No Votes in Defence"

Prior to the most recent general election the above quote was credited to our present Foreign Secretary and possible future Prime Minister. With a message such as that coming from the highest levels of government and the fact that the official opposition to that government is now headed by an avowed pacifist and leading figure in the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND), who may also one day become Prime Minister, one has to wonder what the future holds for this country's armed forces and the security that they ensure.

If such negative messages coming from government were not damaging enough one only has to observe the general lack of interest and knowledge in our military to realise that outside what our police and special forces are doing (the later, through necessity, will always operate under a cloak of darkness), the defence establishment has lost the hearts and minds of the general public.

The reasons for this diminished lack of interest are of course many and complex. Prime among these is the fact that this country has not had to fight a major war for over 70 years and the most recent two generations have had increasingly limited interface with those who had to fight one. The Cold War, which was a major and long lasting military stand-off that could have gone horribly wrong, actually affected very few people and so did not impinge on their psyche to any great extent. Thus many people struggle to identify, outside Islamic Jihad, what the threat actually is (see previous UKNDA blog 'Threat - What Threat') and the military establishment, together with their political masters, seem unable to get the message across in a way that counters the thread of pacifism that is creeping through society.

Throw into the above mix a couple of recent unpopular wars. The much criticised Iraq invasion could not, I believe, because of international diplomatic considerations, be fully justified in public (see previous UKNDA blog 'Why are we Apologising for the 2003 Invasion of Iraq'). Eventually this led to various political elements declaring it unlawful and demanding the criminal prosecution of Prime Minister Blair. The Afghanistan campaign suffered from continuous sniping through the press because of a perceived lack of resource, a steady stream of casualties, little apparent progress and a sense of military entrapment which generated an air of negativity and led to the possible premature withdrawal of our forces.

If the foregoing were not enough to turn the public away from military affairs, consider the plight of the ordinary soldier or marine on active duty and in combat. If while under pressure, after and during an extensive period of extreme duress, when his very life and/or that of his team mates is in danger, he pulls the trigger in what a court later decides was a hasty and inappropriate action, he or she may be convicted of a criminal act and thrown into jail for possibly 10 years. That negative impression of young men and women, who otherwise would have been thought of as heroes, must be a major disincentive for any young person considering a military career. It was recently pointed out to me by a fellow UKNDA director, that a British soldier dies three times. Once when he is killed, a second time when his Union Jack covered coffin is carried down the aircraft ramp at RAF Brize Norton and a third time when he is actually buried. Another UKNDA director recently pointed out that the massive media coverage of limbless soldiers being rehabilitated and involved in many types of sporting activities, credible as it is, has a negative message that can act as a further disincentive for those considering military employment and succour to those who actively campaign against the defence services. Is it any wonder that the armed services are presently unable to maintain their already depleted manpower levels?

Where are the tales of 'Derring-Do', which must have happened in those hard fought and protracted campaigns? Where is the massive media coverage of pinning medals onto soldiers' chests and the lauding of their actions? Is it for their safety and that of their families at home that the action of these heroes must go unsung and so leave the stage open for negative attitudes? If that is the case then surely some anonymity can be accredited to the individual but the act and award still be published and shown media wide. Is it not time that the armed forces, together with their Civil Service and political masters, came out fighting, not for the defeat of a physical foe but for the vanquishing of the pacifist and defeatist attitudes that seem to be permeating our society.

The first target can be that section of the UK news media that sees negative controversy as the best copy and which ignores much of what is good. When accounts of the bad things we Brits have done to the populations of this world are not leavened with the many good things we have also done, it is understandable why many people think that we should retire into our shell and not get involved in the affairs of others. Many of the societies we have influenced around the world were not the benign and sophisticated regimes that some would have us believe and the UK brought to them, sometimes through the power of the gun, a form of law and order that most perpetuate to this day. In the 1970's, when the UK was afflicted by industrial strike after strike, I was asked by a man in Germany "why we still called it Great Britain". I replied that it was strange he should ask me that question in English. Our influence around the world has been great; yes some of it negative but most has been for the good and it is about time that message was restated.

Individuals and groups who speak out in negative terms about our armed forces should immediately be taken to task and told to explain themselves. They should be faced with the scenarios that must have been considered by the authorities in their contingency planning, e.g. 'little green men invading Estonia', and asked what 'exactly' they would do when the other side refused to talk or lied about what was happening. They should then be chased through those scenarios, stage by possible escalating stage, up to nuclear confrontation and pinned down on 'exactly' what their responses would be. Their inability to come up with a practical solution that does not fall in line with their previous statements should be blown far and wide in order to discredit their whole stand. Why for instance, when asked about the use of nuclear weapons do the CND activists automatically assume that the targets would be cities and not military infrastructure and why do they never seem to be taken to task over this. Also when such activists state that Britain should show the way towards global nuclear disarmament by getting rid of her weapons, is it rarely pointed out that since the cold war this country has massively disarmed, to the point where our deterrent is now actually quite a small one, but that most nuclear armed nations and those wishing to be so, have taken no notice of that at all. Shying away from these arguments will only leave a vacuum to be filled with pacifist sentiment that, in the long run, will prove to be extremely dangerous. The quote to consider in this case is "History teaches that wars begin when governments believe the price of aggression is cheap" (Ronald Reagan). Pacifism and its sister, Appeasement, are no barrier, financial or physical, to aggression!

Apparently at the behest of their political masters and the civil service, the military are considering yet another cut to their capability. It has been reported that one reduction being considered is the disposal of the bulk of this country's amphibious capability. If that happens, it doesn't matter what spin is put on this 'adjustment', by the military, the civil service and the government, the only message it can send is of a backing away from the 'will' to stand up for what we believe is right and the ability to support our friends and allies in their hour of need.

Our armed forces are rapidly approaching the position where they are becoming a laughing stock, both at home and abroad. "Being powerful is like being a Lady. If you have to tell people you are one, you aren't" (Margaret Thatcher). The time to aggressively speak out and tackle those who would demean and reduce our military is long overdue.