

by the Editor

Defence Viewpoints rarely gives its own opinions - we are the canvas for our contributors. But reflecting in the run up to midnight on the year about to start. the news of the last 2008 fatality amongst British troops on operations in Afghanistan came through. Royal Marine Corporal Liam Elms was the 50th UK soldier to be killed in that country last year.

Since the Second World War scarcely a year passes without British service personnel dying in the service of their country. British Armed Forces are subect to control by democratically elected politicians. They go where they are told, do as they are told, to the best of their considerable abilities. "Theirs not to reason why", as The Charge of the Light Brigade recalls. (and we note in passing that 19 Light Brigade will soon deploy)

Most Members of the British House of Commons do not have military experience - and this is especially true of Labour Government Ministers. This fact is balanced by the willingness of Parliamentarians to take part in the admirable Armed Forces Parliamentary Scheme, to join the various All Party Parliamentary Groups, and to support the U K Defence Forum (our publishers) and the Parliamentary Welcome Homes for troops - including wounded - returning from operations.

But a corollary of this is that defence has been neutered as a party political issue and is not seen by UK politicians to play with the electorate in the way that it does in the USA. As a proportion of Government spending, it's way down the list, drowned by Health, Social Security and Education. At a little over 2% of UK GDP, defence spending is not seen as a votewinner.

But at least in 2008 we've seen a greater respect for our Armed Forces even if not much extra money has been made available for deficiencies in areas other than immediate operations. Welcome Homes now take place in many local towns. Hearses from RAF Lyneham have brought streets to a standstill. Remembrance Sunday is still remembered. Aftercare for the wounded in Selly Oak Hospital has been given serious attention - and some of those giving it have been recognised in our national New Year's Honours, as reported yesterday. Compensation for the seriously wounded has been increased, and we're moving towards a US-style system for giving Veterans a leg up in higher and further education. This is all good, and it would be uncharitable to carp at the moment about quantity and timing when at last we're moving in the right direction.

But there are two serious issues to which politicians should be setting their collective minds.

We ask our military people to go into harm's way. They deserve to know why and to be sure of the legality and morality of actions they are ordered to undertake. The probable withdrawal from Iraq will perhaps start to draw a line under a war that, while it might not have been strictly illegal,

was considered "fishy" by a large number of the British people. When coupled with a totally incompetent post war policy not of our making, Op Telic operations in Iraq have almost always been seen in a different light to Op Herrick in Afghanistan.

The speech of the Chief of the General Staff in December on both these operations is one we welcomed, and we were perhaps the first to publish it in full - within hours of its delivery. We commend it to you. Although we think it deserved wider and fuller coverage, it is a reasoned explanation of both the what and the why of British armed interventions.

But we look askance at the subversion of the military for the domestic party political. On the handover of Basra airport today to Iraqi control, an MoD release said "The transfer of the airport was one of Prime Minister Gordon Brown's remaining key tasks in Southern Iraq, illustrating how close we are to completing our mission and that UK forces have been successful in what they set out to achieve." So Brown has his pants over his trousers, cape flying, as he single handedly sorts out Iraq. He'll be doing the same in Afghanistan too no doubt - but too late for the soldier from The Rifles killed in the course of the day.

Politicians have a castiron duty to explain as fully as circumstances allow why they are sending our people into conflict zones - and that's never to boost their egos or political reputations at home and abroad. What are our nation's "war aims"? How will we know we won, and the opposition know they lost? What is a reasonable timescale for engagement, and given the paucity of resources, what will be foregone to enable such interventions to take place?

This last is our second key point. We are habitually told that the cost of operations is met from the UK Treasury's contingency reserve. This is true but only up to a point. There are various ways that over time the spending burden is shifted back to the regular defence budget. Recently we commented on the proposed cuts and rejigging of the defence equipment plan. This is a direct result of the need to reallocate funds, and while there is some which won't be particularly harmful, long term projects and new capabilities are suffering from deferments, reductions, and possibly to come outright cancellations.

There is no doubt that we need to ensure we get the right equipment quickly fielded for operations. But when an aircraft can last 50 years, an AFV the best part of 40 and ships 30, defence equipment is a long term business too. Just a few months before Gulf War 1, planners weren't thinking about hot sandy places. We're there now. But where might we have to be in 20 years time?

Our armed forces are small but capable and adaptable. Our politicians must devote proper resources to the long term as well as the here and now.

We hope that 2009 will be peaceful. But the start has been the opposite of auspicious in that regard. What we back home must do is to support our troops however we can in the anticipation that we are doing the right things.

But for that to be more than wishful thinking, our politicians have to shoulder their burden too.