
Winning Afghanistan

FOR MOST PEOPLE on the left in Britain the sight of public mourning at the death of British soldiers is perplexing. On the one hand there is broad sympathy for the largely working class lads fighting and dying in a foreign war. On the other there is an almost instinctive hostility towards Britain's military adventures abroad; these are thought of as semi- or neo-colonial in origin or as brazenly imperialist incursions into other peoples' countries. When confronted with arguments concerning the appalling nature of the enemy most left wing people adopt a position not dissimilar from the isolationism often found among Tories who argue that what Serbian or Afghani fighters do in their own lands has nothing to do with us; we should not intervene unless it can be proved, unequivocally, to be in Britain's *national* interest.

Left-wing opposition to British military intervention is generally couched in terms of a belief in the right of all nations to self-determination; anything that is wrong within a particular foreign country should be left to its own citizens to sort out. Consequently, the British left, broadly speaking, believed that it was the job of the Iraqi 'masses' or the Iraqi 'working class' to overthrow Saddam Hussein. They heartily agreed that he should be overthrown by his own citizens, but were deeply hostile to his overthrow by American and British troops.

This kind of outlook informs much left-wing opinion on the war in Afghanistan. Although it is not seriously contested that the Taliban gave safe haven to the perpetrators of 9/11 and other outrages, hostility to the American forces and their British acolytes, appears to be *de rigueur* for socialists, anarchists, and communists in Britain. This attitude is unaffected by the profoundly reactionary character of the Taliban – the

predominant feeling is still that the people of Afghanistan should be left to sort out their own problems, and as the number of British deaths rises the left will seize the opportunity provided by popular dismay at the suffering of our soldiers to undermine the case for the war; although, not as concentrated or as passionate as opposition to the war in Iraq, hostility to British military action in Afghanistan on the left is becoming bolder and more explicit.

They will focus upon the deaths of the 'hapless' young working class lads and lasses induced to join-up by unemployment and lack of opportunity, misled by their officers, and poorly equipped by the government. They will assiduously note every civilian casualty and attribute the death of every Afghan woman and child to the reckless brutality of the American-led ISAF forces. What they will not do is discuss in detail what should be done about the Taliban in Afghanistan, in Waziristan or in the rest of Pakistan. The necessity of defeating the Taliban and of ensuring that the state of Pakistan, and its nuclear weapons, does not fall into the hands of religious zealots, will be lost in flurries of *Pilgeresque* accusations about the bombing of wedding parties, the destruction of villages, and the killing of innocent civilians.

The problem for traditionally left-wing people about Afghanistan is this: there is no Afghani 'working class', there is no Afghani 'national bourgeoisie', there is no significant Afghani labour movement, consequently, there are no Afghani 'masses'. The traditional rhetoric and assumptions of the left can find no purchase on the reality of Afghanistan. The only familiar factor is the dastardly actions of American imperialism and its British hangers-on. Afghanistan does not offer the left, even rhetorically, the opportunity to bang on about the 'popular' or 'national' self-determination of the Afghani people.

These absences, of course, are not simply a problem for the left; these absences also reveal why the war cannot be won on the battlefield. Afghanistan is not, as most people are well aware, really a single

country, and it has never had a coherent modern state. The writs of governments in Kabul have never really run much beyond the environs of the city itself.

Some people argue that the modern state of Afghanistan came into existence with the assumption of power by Ahmad Shah Durrani in 1746, but this is to use the concept 'modern state' in its loosest sense. At any rate the state of Afghanistan did not receive significant international recognition until 1919 when the British imperial authorities recognised the right of the Kabul government to conduct its own foreign relations and to maintain its own embassies and missions.

However, none of this meant that state institutions in Kabul could actually govern the country without reference to local power brokers whose authority rested upon the status of tribal and clan chiefs, religious leaders, and those thought to be of royal or noble birth. The country has always been governed by shifting constellations of local elites who wield enormous, if parochial, power. Speaking Dari, Pashto, and thirty or so other languages the twenty-nine million people of Afghanistan are racially and ethnically heterogeneous. However, eighty per cent of the population can speak and understand Persian and most Afghans are bilingual or even multilingual, and certainly believe that Afghanistan is a single country that should be allowed to manage its own affairs.

Kabul is a city of around a million people, there is a national airline flying national and international routes but there is no rail network. Most goods and people have to move by road. Eighty per cent of Afghani women cannot read or write and half the men are illiterate. Most people have no reliable access to health care or education. National water resources are poorly managed and often become the source of many local conflicts. Afghanistan is by any index one of the poorest countries on earth.

This poverty was, of course, sustained and exacerbated by the assassination of President Mohammed Daoud Khan and the assumption of power in Kabul by the People's Democratic Party in 1978. The seizure of

control by Hafizullah Amin, and the Soviet invasion of 1979, spun the entire country into a cycle of poverty and war from which it has yet to emerge.

The Taliban's five-year rule between 1996 and 2001 emerged from this bloodshed and chaos. They are, of course, associated with the Islamist network of fighters committed to attacking the West, to whom they gave sanctuary. However, although the Taliban are Muslim religious zealots, they are not Islamists of the *Al Qaeda* type. The Taliban in Afghanistan, in Waziristan, and most recently in Swat, are a movement committed to the preservation of clan and tribal government. Consequently, they are opposed to both Afghani and Pakistani national institutions and to anything that they see as posing a threat to their traditional modes of patriarchal rule. The religious fervour they employ enables maximum cohesion and, paradoxically, leads them to oppose many traditional modes of Islamic religious practice; it leads them to oppose religious music and dance, much religious literature, the education of girls and much else, as they attempt to sustain patriarchal clan authority by imposition of novel and extreme forms of Islam.

They are a semi-feudal, and in many respects, a *pre-feudal*, and in some circumstances even an *anti-feudal* force, sustained by parochial interests in more or less inaccessible mountains and valleys. Consequently, the Taliban will only be defeated by the dissolution of their parochial and patriarchal social structures. This dissolution can only happen with the rapid and coherent development of modern roads, rail networks, and of telecommunications, capable of opening up the country to education, to health services, to the world market and the international division of labour. Afghanistan needs the kind of infrastructure that will radically undermine the social structure that the Taliban is striving so fiercely to maintain. The creation of this modern commercial and social infrastructure is however inconceivable without waging the war. This is why the soldiers of ISAF deserve our unequivocal support.