

NO GLORY IN WAR: THE MILITARY AND INDEPENDENCE. 9.12.13

Pete Cannell, Stop the War Coalition,

This week the SNP government has outlined its 'defence' proposals in the White Paper.

The background to this is a rampant US imperialism, which has been involved in almost continuous wars throughout the world. Britain has been a major prop for US imperialism and has also been involved in many wars, both in its own direct imperial interests and alongside US imperialism.

The centrality of the British state in NATO is an important reason for voting 'Yes' in the 2014 referendum. NATO was set up by the US in 1949 at the start of the Cold War. It was part of a wider strategy to encircle the USSR. By militarily uniting the western countries under US control, it ensured US dominance over Europe. It tied the European powers into support for a post-Second World War foreign policy that claimed to be pro-democracy and anti-colonial, but was in fact lethally aggressive. NATO also coordinated secret special forces operations across Europe to subvert the left and prepare action against possible left wing governments.

'Pax America' came with an implicit price tag that accepted the US security umbrella. If a country depended on the US for security protection, it also dealt with the US on trade and commercial matters. NATO was a key platform in the US plan to reorganise the world economy – to open up the whole world to US business and to tie it to its political interests much as possible.

In 1999 NATO extended its field of operations to cover the whole of Eurasia. Its slogan was, "Out of area or out of business". In 2003, NATO took up joint control of operations in the disastrous occupation of Afghanistan. It was also the command umbrella for Operation Unified Protector, in the 2011 bombing campaign of Libya.

With regard to nuclear weapons, NATO upholds a 'First Strike' policy. Germany, Belgium and the Netherlands have all unsuccessfully called for the removal of US nuclear weapons from their countries.

There is a consensus in Scotland for scrapping Trident, but NATO membership and the SNP government policies outlined in the White Paper still tie us into a nuclear club.

Next year, the NATO conference will be in Wales. The NATO conference in Strasbourg was surrounded by razor wire, protestors were strip searched and beaten up by riot police. The Westminster government will raise the stakes by hosting this NATO conference in South Wales. It will hide behind the concept of 'humanitarian intervention'.

2014 will also be the centenary of the beginning of the First World War. The government intends to spend £50-60M celebrating this. The Commonwealth Games are also being linked to the WW1 celebrations. The purpose behind this will be to encourage support for imperial wars today and to undermine the 'Yes' campaign. Yet this was a war in which 20 million

people died. Furthermore, at certain times, more than half the troops fighting on the British side were from the Indian sub-continent – something that is usually ignored.

The Stop the War Campaign has launched a ‘No Glory in War’ campaign to counter this. The Jimmy Reid Foundation, Disability History Scotland, Scottish Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom and other organisations are also planning initiatives – we aim to work together to make this a mass campaign. In Edinburgh there will be a poetry event, based on the fact that Craiglockhart acted as a military hospital in WW1. Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon were both sent there to recuperate. Other events are planned.

CND is planning a big debate on NATO in the new year. There is a division between those like CND, Trident Ploughshare and STWC which are opposed to NATO and those who want to fall in behind the SNP government’s contradictory ‘No to Trident/Yes to NATO’ stance. It would be good if RIC could send a delegation to this conference.

Discussion

Donny said that it was important to move away from the official ‘Yes’ campaign focus on independence being better for your pocket. This can not be guaranteed given the uncertainties of the economy. However, there could be a ‘peace dividend’ if Trident was scrapped, but this would need withdrawal from NATO. We needed to highlight the role of the British state and the military in the world.

Bob agreed that it was impossible to separate opposition to Trident from opposition to NATO. We also had to be careful to get the message right. ‘No Glory in War’ suggested we are pacifist, but there are wars of liberation.

Dave said he would play the devil’s advocate. Pete had said that NATO and trade went together. An independent Scotland would need to ‘export or die’. Look at the economic mess that neutral Ireland had got itself into. Furthermore, socialist brotherhood was all well and good, but was it a viable response. The Scottish Communist Party has already argued that Salmond is considering the possibility of getting NATO rents for Faslane, whilst Scottish regiments would be wanted to fight wars given their reputation. We have to be able to win over people who think like this to a ‘Yes’ vote. We don’t want to be isolated.

Allan argued that there was no direct link between NATO membership and trade. Up until 2008 Ireland had had a booming economy without being a member of NATO. Nor was it the lack of NATO membership that did the Irish economy in, but its adherence to the neo-liberal model, which both the US and UK heavily promoted.

In the past not only had the SNP opposed NATO, but Salmond even stood out against intervention in Bosnia. He was attacked, but this had no effect on his vote when it came to Westminster of Holyrood, and he was elected from the conservative Banff and Buchan constituency. What is missing now is a party publicly opposing NATO, despite the widespread scepticism about NATO interventions in the world. This has been highlighted by the government’s failure to get support for an invasion of Syria.

Pat said that RIC was for a ‘Yes’ vote, but not at any price. RIC was for scrapping Trident, and for a Scotland that isn’t prosecuting wars across the world. People are living in misery in a rich Scotland.

Andy pointed to the walk out of a pro-SNP government delegate who attended the ‘Break-up of the UK’ session at the RIC conference, when Mary McGregor (RCN) spoke in opposition to the SNP leadership’s stance. However, she had widespread support, from all the republicans, socialists and anarchists present.

Paulo argued that the fundamental flaw in Dave’s article was the use of the word “isolation”. NATO will not like a gap in its North Atlantic defences resulting from the closure of the Faslane base. However, a peaceful Scotland would be an example to other countries, and could build a whole new network of friendship.

Talat argued that opposition to imperialism and wars energised many delegates to the RIC conference. Furthermore, ‘Jocks’ were certainly not appreciated in the country her family came from – India. This was true of all the countries colonised by Britain. There was also an underlying racist logic about nuclear weapons – certain countries, white and northern, could be trusted to have them but the rest of the world can not!

The British Army had a recruitment drive at the university Freshers’ Fair. Students go on to be officers. However, there are also army recruiting offices in Princes Street designed to attract poorer young people, promising them a good career. This is a form of economic conscription - and it is the same in India. Instead of seeking rental income from military bases, we should be calling for taxes on the rich.

Ally wanted to change the focus of the discussion. Do we support armed forces? The existing forces are profoundly undemocratic and class-based. Sandhurst exists to train the senior officers mainly drawn from the upper class. In Fettes College. Membership of the Officer Training Corps is compulsory. These lads will not go on to be squaddies or defuse bombs. There are places where the tradition is somewhat different. Chavez came from the officer class in Venezuela, but this pattern is unusual.

How would we structure and democratise a reformed army? Does everybody contribute to the armed forces? What do we want to see?

Pete replied by saying that opposition to imperial wars was popular. In his experience on StWC stalls, he had come across squaddies and their families who were opposed to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Some are more clear-sighted than the general population.

The world is not going to be more stable in the future. NATO is shifting its axis towards the Far East. It also has forces in every single African country.

Furthermore, even if NATO did not use its nuclear forces it still had a great capacity to bring about death and destruction as its recent interventions showed. So opposition to NATO remained important.

Pete agreed with Ally about the need to have further discussion about the type of military forces we needed.

The cost of being a nuclear state was very expensive. The money currently spent on Faslane could be invested green jobs. It is important that we have answers for the economic as well as ideological reasons given by nuclear force advocates. Faslane provides a lot of jobs in the Helensburgh area. Yet the valuable skills currently being used there could be transferred to green production with some retraining. RIC's job is to put that on the agenda.

Lastly, in reply to Bob, the 'No Glory in War' campaign is very specifically about the First World War, and not a generalised political slogan.