

Fake “Just Wars”: Britain’s Parliament Vote to Bomb Syria

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Global Research, December 04, 2015

“If you are not confused, then you don’t understand the situation.”

Sir Alan Duncan, Dec 2, 2015 London.

It was a long session of debates – some 10 hours in all. There was little sane about this Commons session – the British Prime Minister, David Cameron, was making his case to rope in parliamentarians in the hope that he would get the numbers to bomb Syria. He refused to apologise for his expansive suggestion that opponents of any enlarged operation against ISIL and its components were terrorist sympathisers.

The SNP’s Alex Salmond, in looking through a list of members who had made their stance against such actions clear, searched in vain for them. “I have examined that list very carefully and cannot identify a single terrorist sympathiser.”[1]

The debate that led to a solid vote in favour of the bombing motion on Syria (397 for; 223 against) was a bitter thing to see. On the pretext of being brave, men and women decided that more armed conflict was the answer. Logistics did not matter, logic even less. The sentiment of waging war, the instinct to be violent in anticipation of more violence, triumphed.

There was nothing brave or decent, let alone principled, by the proceedings. The recourse to war in distant theatres on the pretext that the war is already on your doorstep is the greatest symptom of woolly-headed thinking in the Twenty First Century. The Bush legacy of a “war on terror” has proven irreversible in making countries hundreds of miles away havens for forces that require uprooting.

Scholars in the field of international relations theory, religious figures, and even the odd philosopher has been attempting to rationalise where a “just war” figures after the invasion of Iraq in 2003. That that particular US-led adventure was fatuous (poor intelligence on Saddam Hussein’s links to al-Qaida), deceptive (no fabled weapons of mass destruction), and disastrous (removing the lid on Sunni-Shia tension), should have been ample proof that the idea was dead and deeply buried. There were just wars, bad and worse.

The effigy of just war, having been burnt, was revived in an even more disturbing form: the responsibility to protect. The R2P doctrine (such terminology emphasises clarity, clean killing and protection) has insinuated itself so comprehensively in the righteous wars since 2003. Libya was where it made its most grotesque debut. It predictably failed, giving way to more bloody, destabilising realities.

The end of the Qaddafi regime, the handiwork of French-UK-US strikes, has also allowed

another phenomenon to dovetail into the global terrorist mania: refugees, making their way through the broken doors of Libya, have been packaged with terrorist infiltration, a reactionary's wet dream.

To then hear the drivel of shadow foreign secretary Hilary Benn's "internationalist" emphasis on the compact of the UN, and the role of socialism in protecting such values, was yet another seedy attempt to bring violence to bear upon an already failed situation. If history needed a good deal of abuse and misuse, Benn was there to provide it.

"What we know about fascists is that they need to be defeated and it is why, as we have heard tonight, socialists and trade unions were just one part of the International Brigade in the 1930s to fight against Franco." It was the reason, argued Benn, "why this entire house stood up against Hitler and Mussolini." So much conflation; so much ease in doing so.

Even such progressive outlets as *The Guardian* fell for the spectacle, seduced by the message for war war over jaw jaw. Rafael Behr claimed that the Commons had done itself credit in the entire debate.[2] John Crace would call Benn's performance a "morality tale made flesh." [3]

If there was a historical reminder worth pushing down the throats of the Labour hawks, it was the very point that a social democratic party, pretend or otherwise, when on appropriate digestives, will embrace bloodshed. Pacifist credentials will be thrown out. The triggers will be pushed. The bugles of war will sound.

Eerily, the shadow of 1914 was cast over proceedings, a year when the supposed socialist cause capitulated, even gladly, to the guns of August. Lights went out, and a generation in Europe was killed off.

Even the religious figure of the Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby, who has shown himself to be rather sensible at points, decided to jump onto the wagon of an enlarged conflict without form, without boundaries, without limits. He could see that the "just war" criteria had been met, and encouraged the MPs to vote accordingly.

As if seeking the ultimate blessing for what effectively amounts to a revived Crusader rhetoric, Cameron got what he wanted from the Archbishop, with a caveat: merely bombing Islamic State targets would "confirm their dreadful belief that what they are doing is the will of God." [4] In that sense, the just war context is pure nonsense, a false calculation imposed on an amorphous, immeasurable problem.

It should be axiomatic: There is nothing, by definition, proportionate in something that cannot be measured. If that be the case, everything is either proportionate, or not. Standards are removed altogether. What, in a sense, are they bombing? Depots, supply lines, the oil links? Formations, marked positions, as opposed to villages where civilian and fighter coningle? The refusal to even describe ISIL/ISIS elements as Islamic State in preference for the more derogatory Daesh provides an all too clear example about an inscrutable force that has befuddled opponents.

In the absence of definition, the emotive register is struck instead. The religious killings. Paris. Beheadings. Burnings. The destruction of artefacts, the erasure of history. The upstart Caliphate. Never mind that beheadings, killing and remorseless strafing is practiced by that erstwhile British ally Saudi Arabia, who has been rather happy to funnel supplies to

groups who have found themselves on an assortment of terrorist lists while also bombing Yemen. (To date, Sanaa has been reduced to rubble.) Terrorist sympathies can come in all forms – including your allies.

There is no “exit” plan. Or strategically viable prospects. Hard headed sceptical advice has been avoided. Most disturbingly of all, there is no sense about how many civilians have perished amidst the murderous righteousness. Yet two RAF tornadoes were, symbolically, awaiting the call to fly and were off within hours of the vote from the Akrotiri air base in Cyprus. Two more followed. And, said BBC news, they returned – unharmed.

Britain has signalled that it will, foolishly, continue that Western tendency to interfere in zones its imperial ambitions have long traumatised. It is a trauma that will make a revisit.

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Notes

[1] <http://www.bbc.com/news/uk-scotland-34986204>

[2] <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/dec/02/syria-airstrikes-commons-isis-debate>

[3] <http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2015/dec/03/syria-debate-hilary-benn-launches-shock-and-a-we-campaign-against-labour>

[4] <http://www.anglicannews.org/news/2015/12/archbishop-of-canterbury-speaks-on-uks-anti-daesh-military-campaign.aspx>

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