

By Paula Jaegar

Many politicians speak now of the unfeasibility of expecting military power alone to deliver an outcome in Afghanistan which will be sufficiently acceptable to all parties to allow an end to the ISAF intervention.

It is illuminating to hear from the British Army a definition of our aim in that country as being to assist in the delivery of civil power; to enable civil effect, and the deliverance of government. Civil power, General Sir Richard Dannatt, Chief of the General Staff, reminds us, cannot get ahead of the success of the military mission.

The challenge of Afghanistan is very different from that of Iraq. In the latter, it is important that it is recognised that the British campaign has achieved a success; which is the same, the General is quick to emphasise, as a win or a victory. What has been achieved is the handover of power to an indigenous security apparatus, which has largely been rebuilt, trained and mentored by the British Army in the south, and which, after a shaky start, has grown rapidly in competence and confidence.

British prestige in the world is inextricably bound up with the achievement of this kind of success; we cannot fail, we cannot be seen to fail, without a concomitant loss of international standing. For a soldier who speaks of his profession with love, as a fine and honourable thing to do – the finest, the most honourable – this is the natural extension of his driving ethos.

The infantryman of today is almost unrecognisable from his 2003 counterpart in terms of equipment. The procurement process known as UOR, or Urgent Operational Requirements, is essentially a shortcut for raising funds from the Treasury for mission critical equipment, bypassing the usual convolutions of the conventional procurement processes. Initially rough, the system has settled into an efficient delivery mechanism. But there are underlying problems with the throughput of procurement which the General would like to address, as part of a restructuring programme with three interlocking elements: procurement, brigade structure and training/recruitment/deployment.

It should not be forgotten that UORs are an emergency measure, like the pattern of roulement which has led to serious breaches of harmony guidelines, with personnel, particularly in the Army, often serving for six months out of twenty-four or less in high-intensity combat situations – perhaps fighting two, three, four hour pitched battles as many as two or three times a week for each tour. What Dannatt requires is a breathing space, a return to the norm, and a reconsideration of what that might now imply.

Money is finite. Dannatt is willing to accept that what he's been promised is what he's going to get. He accepts assurances that there will be no further cuts. Nor will there be increases. He is

willing to do business on these terms. What this deal confers is an absolute responsibility now to balance capabilities against commitments, and, most importantly, to accept all round that we can no longer defer difficult decisions.

It means an end to delay upon delay in decision making and in delivery. Pointing to the Secretary of State's pre-Christmas Statement, Dannatt reminds us that, although delays to the Carrier programme grabbed all the headlines, the great disappointment was the delay, yet again, to the Future Rapid Effects System (FRES). It is a medium-weight capability which will be required well into the long term. In the meantime, a dedicated family of lighter-weight vehicles – Bulldog, Ridgeback, Mastiff – provide a decent working solution to the specific requirements of current operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, but should not be mistaken for an adaptable permanent capability. In 5 or 8 years time, unless the process goes ahead now, our infantry will suffer from the shortfall.

General Sir Richard Dannatt, Chief of the General Staff spoke at an IPPR Security Lecture, Transformation in Contact on Monday 19th January 2009