

Lest we forget the True Cost of War. The Plight of Britain's War Veterans

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'Lest We Forget' – each year this message is pushed home in the media, on the streets, and particularly by politicians wearing their red poppies very visibly in Parliament and of course every time they appear on camera being interviewed. Pity the government doesn't put its money where its mouth is. All it does is support the Poppy Appeal, run by the British Legion, getting us to feel guilty about how many servicemen and women have sacrificed themselves for Britain – and please put money in the Charity's tin.

The British Legion's director general Chris Simpkins had [strong words](#) to say about this last Saturday. The Legion was founded 90 years ago in an effort to both recognise and support the veterans of WWI and their families, many of whom were trying to cope with shell shock, gassing and other injuries, as well as unemployment and homelessness. Since then, each year, they have been picking up the government's tab. Because of the desire of political leaders to make themselves look powerful by sending armies off to war – and let's not forget the desire of big business to make money thereby – the number of desperately needy veterans and military families requiring support rises by the year.

Nor is the British Legion the only charity that helps veterans, thus saving the government much unwanted expense. Combat Stress deals solely with the mental damage suffered by veterans and, because of the demand created by our interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan is inundated with pleas for help. Iraq and Afghanistan also created Help for Heroes. The British public is generous, rather more so than their leaders. All the charities are well supported (the British Legion's income for 2009-10 was £115 million, about a third of that being raised by the Poppy Appeal), yet the demand always exceeds the supply because of the failure of government.

But, valuable though their work is, they shouldn't have to supply what are essentially frontline services. Under the Military Covenant that should be the responsibility of the government. An unspoken pact dating back many years, it became codified into a covenant in 2000, setting out the mutual obligations between the Armed Forces who put their lives at risk, and the government, which has a 'duty of care' for the Forces. To the Legion, having to pick up the government's pieces from Iraq and Afghanistan, it was obvious the government was failing in its duty. It campaigned vigorously and was promised that the Covenant would be 'enshrined in law'. But earlier this year it became clear that the government was [backing away](#) from making its obligations a matter of law. After another month or two and a lot of pressure, and they said they [would](#).

On 3 November it did finally become [enshrined in law](#). But time will tell if the government actually honours its 'commitment' to the Forces. One can understand their reluctance.

Here we are deep in a financial crisis, cuts being made and austerity the fashion of the day – how could we expect the government to find all the money needed to fulfil its obligations? Not that it (or any other government) has any difficulty finding the money to pay for the things it wants to do – like waging war for instance. The amount of money spent on war is scandalous.

In 2005 Iraq had already cost us £3.1 billion. By 2010 Afghanistan and Iraq combined had cost [£20.34 billion](#). That didn't include the annual defence budget of around £35 billion, or £280 billion for the eight years. Nor did it include the vast black hole of overspending by the Ministry of Defence (MoD), amounting to billions, mostly due to its utterly useless procurement of weapons and vehicles, getting worse each year. And I shan't even mention the costs of renewing the Trident programme or half-building aircraft carriers, or the fact that, having got rid of the one aircraft carrier we did have, by the time we get a new one we won't have any planes suitable to use it. But we'll still wage war. And don't let's talk about Libya. Running a bath when you haven't put the plug in doesn't even go there.

But back to the costs of Iraq and Afghanistan: the £20.34 billion also doesn't include the salaries of the soldiers, paying for their pensions when they've retired or been invalided out, compensation for injuries received or, and this is the total unknown, paying for their long-term injuries and mental health care.

And what kind of care will that require? Many of our soldiers have been injured by the dreaded IEDs (improvised explosive devices), the roadside bombs that have blown up their vehicles and destroyed them during their foot patrols. The most common injury inflicted by one of these devices if you're on foot is a *triple* amputation – both legs and one arm (as you tend to swing your upper body and arms when walking, one arm is always at least partly protected by the body). Amazingly, because of the miracles of modern medicine, many survive these and other ghastly injuries, most of the survivors being very young and requiring high levels of care for their lifetimes.

But blast injuries cause more damage than lost limbs. According to Ronald Glasser in his [book](#) *Broken Bodies, Shattered Minds* anyone near a blast from an IED or other bomb, or of course engaged in firing big guns, can suffer brain trauma from the blast waves. There is also a possibility that this type of brain trauma can cause post traumatic stress, and at the very least add to its severity. So the young man who has lost his legs will also suffer from the long-term effects of brain injury as well as the psychological horrors of PTSD.

The US figures for this are staggering: their operations in Iraq and Afghanistan have now produced over “300,000 wounded, another 250,000 diagnosed with PTSD and over 300,000 with traumatic brain or concussive central nervous system injuries, along with amputees approaching levels not seen since the Civil War”. And bear in mind that in many cases the PTSD may not surface for another 15 years after the incident that caused it. Combat Stress knows only too well it will be seeing increasing numbers of veterans as the years go by. The MoD is far more cautious about releasing its figures. It says that there are ‘low incidence rates’ of probable PTSD (4%) for the UK Armed Forces – it must be our stiff upper lip. Actually, most of their [study](#) is based on interviews with soldiers and soldiers are notoriously wary of admitting to any mental problems.

Still, they have increased the compensation payments and Admiral Lord Boyce, the former chief of the defence staff proudly [announced](#) that a young soldier who was seriously injured

would now get about £1.5m in financial support over a lifetime. But that young soldier may live, or rather, exist, for another 50-60 years. That works out at £30,000 a year. A young man can live on that (at today's prices) but if he needs specialist care or special adaptations to his home or cannot work because of his injuries.... It suddenly doesn't look that generous, does it?

And how many would this apply to? According to the MoD:

Iraq

- 78 UK military personnel were categorised as Seriously Injured from all causes excluding disease.
- 40 UK personnel were categorised as Very Seriously Injured from all causes excluding disease

Afghanistan

- 258 UK personnel were categorised as Very Seriously Injured from all causes excluding disease.
- 272 UK personnel were categorised as Seriously Injured from all causes excluding disease.

That alone is a total of £972 million. Many soldiers, while not being injured, still have to be compensated for hearing impairment for instance, even total deafness. *All* injuries have some level of compensation attached. Then of course there are the pensions, and although the government is trying to up the contributions and down the payments, many more soldiers are retiring early (with full pension rights) because of injury/ill health. On top of that many will be made redundant – the Army alone being reduced from a total of 196,150 personnel in 2006 to no more than 82,000 by 2020. All of these will require pensions in due course. In the meantime many of them will be left unemployed and could well become homeless, and will certainly need benefits to live on. But hey, that will come out of another Ministry's budget, so that's okay then.

Government has fought its own battles over the years – against recognising the cancers caused by testing our nuclear weapons; against owning up to the damage depleted uranium has caused; against acknowledging the level of post traumatic stress disorder. It will do anything to avoid admitting its responsibilities and paying out what it owes. Just ask the Legion. Much of their support work for veterans involves helping them to get the money they're entitled to.

The bottom line is that if this or any other British government took their obligations seriously and provided the care owing to veterans and their families, they really wouldn't have the money available to pay for their mostly illegal military adventures that make them feel so important. We would still be able to afford to defend this country if it was attacked, the only legal condition under which we can wage war. But the UK could *not* afford to indulge in regime change, intervention or interference, particularly not the kind of intervention on 'humanitarian' grounds, backed by a dodgy UN resolution, which created many more civilian casualties than it saved (but I wasn't going to mention Libya – £300 million, by the way)

And future ceremonies at the Cenotaph wouldn't have so many more names to add to its list

of the dead..

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