

Are we failing in Afghanistan?



YES RORY STEWART is head of the Turquoise Mountain Foundation, an NGO leading an urban regeneration project in Kabul

NO SHERARD COWPER-COLES is British ambassador to Afghanistan. He was principal private secretary to the foreign secretary, the late Robin Cook

Dear Sherard

27th November 2007

Britain is putting more resources and energy into Afghanistan than into almost any other country in the world. It plans to create a safe, democratic and prosperous Afghanistan and has taken particular responsibility for fighting drugs and the insurgency in the province of Helmand. But what is the chance of success?

Some things have been achieved in the six years since the US-led invasion, from getting millions of girls back into school to child inoculations and the creation of a central bank. But these are tiny steps relative to our ambitions of creating a multi-ethnic centralised state based on democracy, respect for human rights, gender equality and the rule of law. Many of these objectives are not simply difficult but dishonest and impossible.

The rural areas of Afghanistan remain far more isolated, conservative and resistant to change than we publicly acknowledge. War has eroded social structures and entrenched ethnic suspicion between Pashtun, Hazara and Tajik populations. Pakistan and Iran continue to exercise a dangerous influence. There is a wide-

spread insurgency. Many provinces are now too dangerous for international civilians to visit. Power is in the hands of tribal leaders and militia commanders.

Much of Afghanistan is barren and most people cannot read or write. Despite our efforts in counter-narcotics, production is at a record high. And in Balkh, where the government boasts that the poppy is eliminated, villagers are growing cannabis instead. Afghanistan's economic comparative advantage seems to lie in the fact that it is the source of 92 per cent of Europe's heroin yet still receives \$4bn a year in international aid.

Most of these problems are beyond the power of the US to solve, let alone its much smaller ally Britain. Yet Britain continues to behave as though it were omnipotent. It assumed responsibility for Helmand, perhaps the most difficult province in Afghanistan; it chose to take prime responsibility for counter-narcotics, perhaps the most difficult security issue in the country. It has also launched a "state-building" programme in areas dominated by groups opposed to the government. Most of this effort is wasted, and in many cases has made the situation

worse for both Afghans and Britain.

We need a policy which reflects our actual capacity rather than our hubristic fantasies. We cannot win a counterinsurgency campaign against the Taliban. We do not control the borders with Pakistan, where insurgents find safe havens and support. Our troop numbers are limited and so is our understanding of local structures. Nato is divided and uncoordinated. The Afghan government lacks the capacity to provide the level of support which we require. The local population is at best suspicious of our actions. In Helmand, where we have increased the troop presence from 200 to over 7,000, our gains can only be temporary. It is more dangerous there for foreign civilians than it was two years ago, before we deployed our troops.

We have also discovered that we cannot create key Afghan institutions from outside. The police are predatory and corrupt—in some cases, security improves when they withdraw. We can build a technical institution such as a central bank and we have trained soldiers, but we have not had a big impact on the police or rural courts or power structures. Instead of trying to transform the remote parts of the country with slogans of "rule of law" and "governance," we should accept that we don't have the power, knowledge or legitimacy to change those societies.

Moreover, we cannot run successful development projects in the middle of an insurgency. A dollar spent in Kabul has about 20 times the impact of a dollar in an insurgent-dominated town such as Musa Qala in north Helmand, where much of our aid was wasted on security and where projects were undermined by lack of intimate engagement with the community. In such towns, expensively constructed projects collapse or are destroyed as we leave.

Afghanistan will probably remain weakly governed and poor for a long time. There is little we can do to prevent it. But it is not a cause for despair because there are things which we can do, and do well. We have the capacity, for example, to build roads and dams, to provide advice on commercial law or to undertake development projects in stable areas. The province of Bamiyan has had far less money poured into it than the small insurgency-ridden sub-district of Panjawi, but it has become a much better place for its inhabitants. This is because its population brings its own ingenuity and energy to bear on foreign-supported projects, and will maintain them after we leave. We should focus on such places,

mainly in the centre and the north. We should also pursue a security agenda focused on counterterrorism, rather than counterinsurgency, using intelligence or special forces operations to destroy terrorist training camps if they re-emerge.

Our principle should be to protect ourselves against a terrorist threat from Afghanistan, while delivering a handful of well-executed projects which create jobs and incomes for Afghans and help to restore national confidence after decades of conflict. Afghanistan is not going to be the only fragile and unstable poor country with which we will have to deal over the next 30 years. We need a strategy, one which is smarter, more honest and more efficient with our resources; one which can be applied to Somalia, Sudan or anywhere else where trouble emerges.

We are hiding the dishonesty and failures of our policy by claiming that “failure is not an option” and talking about a moral obligation. Ought implies can. We do not have the moral obligation to do what we cannot do.

Very best wishes

Rory

Dear Rory

30th November 2007

By the time you read this Gordon Brown will have made a statement to parliament on Afghanistan. I don't know exactly what he will say. But I do know that the cabinet ministers involved in Afghanistan—David Miliband, who paid his first visit as foreign secretary outside Europe here, Douglas Alexander, Des Browne and the prime minister himself—have told me that they want us to tell it as it is. They have asked us what is going right, what is going wrong, what Britain should be doing more of, and what less of. You yourself have talked to several of them on their visits here. I'm surprised you continue to believe we are starry-eyed about what is possible.

Telling it as it is is precisely what my team and I have done. And over the six years since the Bonn agreement on the future of Afghanistan, much has been achieved here, more than you acknowledge: a constitution is in place; presidential and parliamentary elections have been

held; millions of children, particularly girls, are back in school; dramatically improved healthcare means that tens of thousands of young Afghans are alive today who would not otherwise have been; schools and clinics have been built, wells sunk, roads laid; millions of Afghans are connected not just to the next village but to the world by mobile telephone; and, perhaps most significant, Afghanistan enjoys robustly free media, in which her problems are debated.

We have reported all that. We have also reported what needs to be done better. Not just by Britain but by the international community and Afghans themselves. Co-ordination among the scores of foreign actors here is one example. Improving the way in which we train the Afghan police is another. Getting proper Afghan and international backing for a serious long-term policy for taking the country out of the opium trade is a third.

So you are right to suggest that Britain is taking Afghanistan very seriously. But we are doing so not on our own, as you seem to imply, but as part of a huge international coalition. A coalition that gave its word at Bonn—and then again nearly two years ago in London—that it would help Afghans rebuild their shattered land. Some of the hopes expressed at those meetings, by Afghans at least as much as by foreigners, may prove unrealistic. But nothing I have seen in my six months on the job suggests that anyone involved in this project has what you call “hubristic fantasies” about what Britain can do.

Indeed, those inside government agree with much of your diagnosis. We sympathise with your frustration at what has not been done in a land you know and love more than most outsiders. But I cannot agree with what seems to be your prescription—that we pull back, and out; that we concentrate on a few prestige development projects in more developed areas and end our military support to the Afghan authorities, instead concentrating on intelligence-led special forces strikes against “terrorist” targets.

You don't say whether you think that Britain should move to such a posture unilaterally. Or whether we should try to persuade the Americans, the Canadians, the Dutch and all the other 40 or so nations represented here, plus the UN, Nato and the EU, to do the same.

At present, Britain channels around 80 per cent of its aid through the government of Afghanistan, under arrange-

SHERARD COWPER-COLES:

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ments overseen by the World Bank and audited by PriceWaterhouseCoopers. We do so because we believe we have to trust the Afghans to rebuild their own country. Are you saying we should end all that?

You say we should give up on counter-narcotics, so allowing Afghanistan to turn itself into a narco-state. And this, when all the evidence (13 poppy-free provinces this year, compared with six last) is that, where there *is* security, poppy production falls. This is a hard road but giving up now would undermine all else we do.

Similarly, I don't understand your thinking on our military posture. If we, and the Americans, Canadians, Dutch and others, did as you suggest, the Taliban would sweep back to power across the south and east, destroying all that has been achieved in the past six years. The people—especially the women—of the Pashtun belt would be plunged back into a new dark age. The warlords would regroup, and come down from the north. Kandahar would fall. Kabul would be fought over again. A new and even bloodier civil war would erupt while the west stood on the sidelines, engaging in what you call “counterterrorist” operations.

So, as I hope the prime minister will have told the Commons by the time this is published, there is much we should do better. But your prescription would not only kill the patient. It would bring shame on any who tried to administer it.

Yours

Sherard

Dear Sherard

3rd December 2007

You have described many achievements from healthy babies to electoral democracy. And you invoke the waves of Mor-dor: “a new dark age... warlords from the north...” rushing towards Afghanistan's golden throne while Britain and “the forty” command the shameful tide to stop. Such moral fervour makes my compromises seem cowardly. But you know that in Afghanistan, as in Iraq, we have taken on more than we can handle. The situation is worsening. What is your plan?

I do not favour abandoning Afghanistan; I favour commitment. The country

RORY STEWART:

We need a policy based on reality not on hubristic fantasies. We cannot win a war against the Taliban

RORY STEWART:**We should choose to do three things well rather than 20 badly. We cannot eradicate the narcotics trade**

is fragile and traumatised, and needs a tolerant, respectful, enduring relationship. It does not need our electro-shock of stupendous resources as we rush for the exit. For 40 years, Afghans have witnessed international support roar from feast to famine, from high moral rhetoric to lowest cynicism; from billions of dollars to nothing and back. In the absence of a sustainable policy, we will flee again.

A sustainable policy requires honesty about what Britain and its allies want and can afford to do. If our priority is fighting terrorism, then Pakistan is a much more serious threat; Egypt and Iraq are more strategically significant and there are more pressing humanitarian needs in Africa. The British army and most of its allies are stretched to breaking point in Iraq and Afghanistan. We will have to reduce numbers to deal with new crises and do more globally with fewer troops. Our long-term priorities must not include a 20-year counterinsurgency campaign in the Pashtun areas. The Russians in the 1980s worried little about domestic politics, the media or human rights; they combined aerial bombardments with “hearts and minds”; they represented a single coherent ideology; and they had 160,000 troops in Afghanistan compared to our 40,000. If they could not occupy Afghanistan, then neither can we.

Nor can we eradicate narcotics. We have tried everything over the last six years: from paying farmers not to grow poppies, to destroying them and growing alternative crops. It may be true that 13 provinces are poppy-free, but that counts for little when 59 per cent more poppy was planted this year than last overall, opium income has soared to half of Afghanistan’s GDP and some poppy-growing provinces are now growing cannabis instead. Until there is security, a reliable alternative income source and a genuine local commitment to eradication, we are wasting our money.

But eschewing military occupation and futile counter-narcotics programmes is not the same as removing all support, as the west did in the 1990s, and abandoning the country to al Qaeda and civil war. We must keep some coalition troops and

generous development aid in Afghanistan for decades to come. We can prevent the Taliban from posing a conventional threat or seizing a city and stop terrorists from using Afghanistan as a base.

This simpler, long-term approach requires us to choose to do three things well rather than 20 badly. And that means leaving alone 17 things about which we care. Foreign governments cannot eliminate opium or change the lives of rural women in insurgency-dominated areas. Similarly, turning the Pashtun tribal areas into a liberal democracy or “defeating the Taliban” are beyond the power of any foreign nation.

I suspect you agree with such a lighter, long-term strategy but find it politically impossible to express. Yet the public senses that our dreams are unachievable and, in the absence of a practical alternative, is falling into cynicism. Meanwhile the policymakers, worried about lack of progress, are in danger of flipping from troop increase to flight. This is a chance for Britain to show leadership.

We should ditch many of our unproductive counterinsurgency, narcotics and development programmes in insurgency areas. We should champion an approach which is more affordable and locally driven. Over the next decades, other crises will emerge which will be more pressing than Afghanistan. Let us define a considered policy which can be maintained with confidence and honour, even when we turn to action on a different front.

Yours aye
Rory

Dear Rory
4th December 2007

I agree with almost everything you feel, and much of what you say. But you are continuing to tilt at windmills. The millenarianism that propelled interventions only a few years ago has gone right out of fashion. So no one in government in London or Washington, still less Ottawa or Berlin, advocates the kind of quasi-imperial occupation of these lands to which you are rightly opposed. Nor is anyone saying that the problems which confront Afghanistan after decades of war, centuries of underdevelopment and millennia of isolation need anything other than a long-term approach.

Our watchwords are indeed modesty and realism. Our themes—of gradually getting Afghans to take responsibility for their own security, of a more civilian approach to helping them stabilise their country, and of a more coherent interna-

tional input—will, surely, be ones of which you can approve.

You ask what is my plan. Put simply, the British plan is to move, with our partners, from where we are now to where the Afghans themselves want to be. But for any change of gear to have meaning, Britain has to take its partners—America, above all—with it. In your first letter, you suggested that some of us thought Britain omnipotent. But you fall into the same trap, in proposing policies that you imply Britain can implement unilaterally.

It means also accepting, as you do only grudgingly, how much has been achieved since 2001—not just by Afghans, but by all their international friends, including the brave men and women of our own armed forces. We cannot, at the click of a mouse, undo all that has been done, for better as well as for worse. This has nothing to do with moral fervour. But it has everything to do with not writing off the huge investment, of treasure and of blood, already made in this country.

So I in turn must ask you what is *your* plan. I agree with much of your manifesto. But I do not see how the words you use connect with real objects in an Afghan world in which ministers and military commanders have to make decisions about real people and real budgets.

Do you, for example, advocate pulling British forces out of Helmand, thus ceding the province to the Taliban? How would you explain this to our Nato partners, or the Helmandis themselves? That would be the kind of precipitate change to which you are rightly opposed.

You say that “we can prevent the Taliban from posing a conventional threat or seizing a city.” But how, without maintaining our policy of helping the Afghan forces themselves defend the villages and valleys of the south and east, and of using innovative non-military Afghan means to separate the insurgents from the people?

You say that Afghanistan does not “need our electro-shock of stupendous resources,” but then say we should continue to provide “generous aid.” Would you cut the support that the department for international development gives to the Kabul government? Would you end programmes that have provided small loans to 400,000 people—70 per cent women?

None of these choices is as simple as you suggest. I do, however, agree with you that, as our policy evolves, an overriding objective must be to maintain consent for what we are doing. We need consent both here in Afghanistan, where the

poll numbers are, for now, reassuringly robust in support of the international presence, and at home, in the western democracies embarked on this enterprise.

Yours ever
Sherard

Dear Sherard

6th December 2007

We launched an unwinnable counter-insurgency war which is politically impossible to sustain. We have deployed far more troops than we can afford. That is an extravagance we will regret when we need to engage in other countries. We need a better plan than “to help Afghans get where they want to be”: Afghans are not our only responsibility in the world.

The best option is to reduce coalition troop numbers significantly over the next two to three years, keep development aid at current levels, continue to support the Afghan government but introduce more projects which are visible and appealing to Afghans. This will be painful, because it implies that we cannot eliminate the Taliban. Yet accepting this is a necessary step in designing a more long term role.

We are afraid to change to a more successful course because it would show how much time, “blood and treasure” we have

wasted over the last six years. And we are worried about how to explain this to the US and other allied governments.

We should drop our futile counter-narcotics programme, stop wasting our aid money in insurgent-run areas, work with communities who want to work with us and reduce our troop levels in Helmand and across Afghanistan to an affordable level. Gordon Brown will then have a sustainable plan for Afghanistan over the next decade, one which matches our limited power and many global priorities.

Very best wishes

Rory

Dear Rory

7th December 2007

One fact first. “We” didn’t “launch a counterinsurgency war.” The Taliban chose to contest by force the choices made by the people of Afghanistan. Britain is in Afghanistan only as part of a huge international effort, mandated by the UN. It is that coalition that has chosen to help the Afghans defend themselves.

But no one here believes that the insurgency will be ended by force alone. Still less that the Taliban can be “eliminated.” Which is why we and the Americans are funding an Afghan-run reconciliation

SHERARD COWPER-COLES:

No one believes that the insurgency will be ended by force alone or that the Taliban can be “eliminated”

programme, under which 4,000 Taliban fighters have already given up their arms.

If now we did as you suggest, we would indeed ensure that all the international community’s work here over the past six years would have been wasted. War, and probably famine, would stalk the land again. We would have broken our word to the Afghan people and their elected government. We would do severe, perhaps fatal, damage to the international alliance. No responsible British prime minister could support such a policy.

But you and I agree on much more than we disagree. Neither of us wants to abandon Afghanistan. Both of us accept that Afghanistan and the international community together need to sustain this great project. And we share a love of this land to keep us going in the tough times.

Yours ever

Sherard