

BRITISH TROOPS MUST NOW PREPARE TO LEAVE IRAQ

by

Rt.Hon. Charles Kennedy MP ¹
Leader of the Liberal Democrats

It has been tempting to pre-judge the Iraq elections - to declare that they are neither "free nor fair" by comparing them with the kind of election we are used to. For those of us who opposed the war from the outset, there is a gnawing sense of outrage at the loss of life, the instability and the violence now endemic in Iraq. That should not lead us to an unbalanced approach to either the elections themselves or where we go from here.

The truth is that it will be a week before we can see whether this vote has delivered a representative constitutional body and it will be some months before we can judge whether the mandate handed to the new Iraqi Government will be respected or lasting. But, right now, I believe that we can and should applaud the bravery of those citizens who went out to vote and the paramount issue is how best we can help the Iraqi people to move forward.

Of course, no one should be under any illusions. The insurgents won't lay down their arms just because of this vote. The spectre of civil war still hangs over the nation, and Iraq has become a crucible of militant terrorism. The new Iraqi Assembly faces a truly daunting challenge in drawing up a constitution that balances both the secular and religious values of the conflicting faiths while also providing for Kurdish autonomy. But the poll does mark a new phase - which is a window of opportunity for our government too.

My views on our involvement in this military action are well known. Suffice to say that Tony Blair took Britain to war on a threat and a promise: the threat of weapons of mass destruction and the promise of focusing attention on the Middle East peace process. Neither has materialised and what we are seeing are the tragic consequences. The original - unjustified - use of force has been a powerful growth-agent of terror.

¹ This article first appeared in The Independent, 01/02/05.

British troops in Iraq are doing the best they can in difficult and dangerous circumstances. Their peace-keeping record in the southern sector reflects their dedication to doing the job well. But by taking part in the initial invasion, both British and American troops are seen by many Iraqis as occupiers rather than liberators. Given such mistakes as the heavy-handed operations in Fallujah and the well-publicised instances of abuse at the hands of coalition forces, for many Iraqis and Arabs in neighbouring countries, the mere presence of British and American troops in Iraq is either unacceptable or actually feeding the insurgency.

I believe that it's time for a new approach. Our government should start talking openly about a detailed exit strategy from Iraq - a strategy that augments the democratic process and provides for Iraq's security.

It should do so clearly and in language which brooks no uncertainty.

Certainly, Downing Street and the Foreign Secretary are now hardening up their language - but they still have a problem with public trust. Only two weeks ago, Tony Blair told me, in our weekly session of Prime Minister's Questions, that there were "no plans" to send additional troops to replace the departing Dutch, only to be contradicted a week later by his own Defence Secretary who announced an additional deployment. That begged the question whether the Prime Minister had been entirely candid with me? If there genuinely were no plans for additional troops - what is the Ministry of Defence up to in announcing an actual deployment a week later? If there were plans for additional troops, why did the Prime Minister say the opposite to Parliament?

The question of when our troops come home is central to the argument. Some of our European allies have already pulled out - such as Spain and Hungary - while the Dutch, the Czechs and the Portuguese are expected to depart soon. Poland is reducing the number of its forces and the Italian commitment may not survive these elections, so it's not an issue the government can afford to fudge.

There is an important additional factor. The coalition presence in Iraq is currently legitimised by the United Nations mandate which runs until

December. There is nothing to stop us openly setting that as a deadline for the withdrawal of British troops. Such a deadline would inject a new sense of urgency into ensuring that Iraqi defence and security forces are made ready. The preparations could begin soon. It would send the signal that we mean business.

It may well be that there would still be a need for the international community to help provide Iraq's security beyond that time, but a more suitable answer than a continuation of the occupation by coalition forces would be a proper UN military presence - ideally drawing particularly on troops from predominantly Muslim countries.

This is not a strategy for cutting and running. It is an acceptance that the British presence in Iraq - despite much good work that our soldiers have done - was undermined from the start by the way we chose to go to war. And it is an acceptance that Iraq will not find the long-term stability and security it requires while British troops remain.