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Britain is stuck with a war it can't afford and can't win

By Mary Riddell

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Some conflicts have a happy ending, writes Mary Riddell. Afghanistan is not one of them.

In Ireland, peace comes dropping slow. But even on the W B Yeats timetable of reconciliation, the Bloody Sunday inquiry has proved unduly tardy. Today, Lord Saville publishes his findings on the killing of 14 protesters by British soldiers in Londonderry in 1972.

This inquest, 4,519 days in gestation, has cost £191 million in public money. Over-priced, over-long and overdue, it may stir up more controversy than it resolves. And yet, as Iraq convulses the Labour Party and the Afghan crisis deepens, the Saville report offers a rare coda to war.

Sixteen years have passed since I first met Martin McGuinness in Derry on the day that Sinn Fein announced it would talk publicly to the British for the first time since the partition of Ireland. Christmas lights glittered in streets that Mr McGuinness, an IRA commander at the time of Bloody Sunday, had once bombed to rubble.

When he told me that he liked cooking, did the Hoovering and read Seamus Heaney and the books of an English fisherman, Stanley Spencer, he meant that he had renounced

terror for politics. How today's leaders wish that they could replicate that alchemy in Afghanistan.

If only the Taliban could be persuaded to grow saffron instead of poppies, forswear corruption and cast aside explosives, then their country, if not on track to be the Surrey of the Middle East, would at least shed its hellhole status and so enable the UK to slide away. This week, a compliant Taliban seemed more necessary and more elusive than ever.

As David Cameron hinted at winding down the war, Liam Fox promised that "we cannot allow Afghanistan to be used again as a home for terrorists". The Defence Secretary, known as 13th Century Fox for saying the conflict was not about educating the girls "of a broken medieval state", may be more bellicose than the PM, but both are peddling myths.

Mr Cameron is eager that Britons, of whom around 75 per cent now want our soldiers out, are persuaded the war is working and security is being established. The trouble is that neither of these things is true. Last week, more than a dozen Nato troops were killed, taking the tally of British deaths to almost 300, a bomb attack on a Kandahar wedding party cost 40 lives, a seven-year-old was publicly hanged as a spy and 50 Coalition vehicles were torched.

General Sir Richard Dannatt, the former head of the Army, dismisses such gloomy signs, pointing to more hopeful omens, such as better links with the Karzai government and Mr Cameron going for a morning run at Camp Bastion before "getting stuck into his duties". This is like saying that Nelson's sailors would have had cause to rejoice if Pitt the Younger had been spotted doing press-ups, except that Helmand is not Trafalgar and never will be.

Sir Richard's view that this is a "war about people" may come as news to the villagers who see Britain's much-vaunted progress evaporating. A senior aid worker in Kabul to whom I spoke this week says that "access to health care and education, if not gone, are fast disappearing. They [Nato] are losing the game, and it's going to get much worse. Near Kandahar, 70 per cent of schools are closed; it's the same in Helmand. Often it's not even about security. Teachers aren't being trained, or they don't show up."

An Oxfam report blames "militarised aid" under which quick fix ploys to win hearts and minds fail to engage communities. With schools standing empty, aid workers say that more could be done with less by supporting indigenous agencies promoting, for example, home-schooling groups for girls. Meanwhile, the British Government promises long-term thinking while shuffling towards the exit.

Politicians are taking the people of Britain and of Afghanistan for fools. With corruption rife, the rule of law still absent, narcotics booming, more than half the country under insurgent control and coffins coming home to Wootton Bassett, there are few signs of hope.

And yet to cut and run would be betrayal. A few months ago I visited a village some hours' drive from Kabul where babies were inoculated in a makeshift clinic sponsored by the Department for International Development and where education was prized. Mr Fox is wrong. If Britain is in Afghanistan for anything, it is to help a nation's children shake off the yoke of medievalism and lead their country to a less dependent future.

Instead of boasting of fresh dawns that will never break, we need to get our troops off the front-line offensive and back to Kabul. The aim should still be to train local soldiers and police, of whom one in five either quits or dies. Scope for political progress also remains, but the time has come to face the truth. Afghanistan has become the disaster it was always going to be, and things will get worse.

Mr Cameron did not engineer this crisis, but nor did he ever gainsay Labour, which along with the US was its architect. A victor's peace in 2001 set the tone, offering no olive branch to the tamer Taliban, no anti-corruption plan and scant attention to state building. Gordon Brown's proclamation that the conflict was being fought to keep terror off the streets of London was risible, given the sinuous and stateless nature of al-Qaeda, but Mr Cameron has adopted that mantra all the same.

So here we are, in a war that we cannot afford and cannot win. That impasse is the shame of the Left, who regard defence in general as a gung-ho, Kiplingesque world beyond their purview. Barring David Miliband, the Labour leadership candidates have been all but mute on Afghanistan and the forthcoming defence review.

Candidates should be calling for a fire sale. Scrap the Tornados and the aircraft carriers, ditch Trident, collapse three Forces into one, if necessary, and abandon the pretence of vanquishing enemies that exist only in Cold War primers or Whitehall fantasies. Our fabled status in the world cannot, with British public services being cut to the bone, be predicated on our capacity to kill. Yes, defence is vital but the conflicts of the future need smarter equipment, better intelligence, more sophisticated generals and a recognition that peace, not victory, is the great premium.

Long after Martin McGuinness came in from the cold, the success of the Good Friday agreement fed Tony Blair's delusion that all wars are winnable, irrespective of geography, history, manpower, logistics and whether Britain should be there at all.

With the Left silenced, Mr Fox's batsqueak of truculence echoes the discredited Blairite credo that Britain should punch above its weight and beyond its purse. Both Mr Cameron and the Opposition owe the country more honesty. We should pay our dues to the Afghans to whom so much has been promised, in training, aid and diplomacy. But, as Lord Saville's report reminds us, some bitter conflicts do produce good endings. Afghanistan is not among them.