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The Guardian

Afghanistan: Groundhog day

Editorial

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The dimensions of the unfolding disaster in [Afghanistan](#) are becoming bigger and more daunting by the day. Once-staunch defenders of the "good war" are starting to break ranks. Kim Howells, a former Foreign Office minister with responsibility for Afghanistan and current chairman of the parliamentary intelligence and security committee, [questions in our newspaper today](#) the central tenet of the government's case for fighting in Afghanistan: that it is the frontline of a war that would otherwise be conducted on British streets. Mr Howells said counter-terrorism would be better served by bringing the majority of servicemen home. Better, he argues, to concentrate on protecting our borders and gathering intelligence at home and abroad.

He is saying publicly what many in government must be thinking privately: that troops are dying needlessly in a war that is unwinnable, with a strategy that is unworkable, and that we should be thinking of the alternative now. We do not agree with everything Mr Howells says, but at least he is saying it, which puts him in a class above most other politicians. Mr Howells may have cast the first stone, but the current consensus is wearing so thin that it would not take much to shatter.

Afghanistan is a political failure, a fact over which the international community continue to be in denial. If they were not, neither America nor Britain would be toying with the notion that they can pressure Mr Karzai into forming a clean government. Flanked by two vice-presidents, including a notorious warlord that Mr Karzai accepted as a running mate, Mr Karzai vowed yesterday to tackle corruption. This was rather like a cat promising abstinence on the subject of mice. The election has been more than just [messy](#) – [Barack Obama](#)'s word. It has been oxymoronic. A process run by the UN has made a nonsense of the very standard

the UN exists to uphold. The result has highlighted just how elusive the dream of a working democratic state is. It begs a serious question: what does territory cleared, even temporarily, of the [Taliban](#) look like? The families of the soldiers fighting for this territory are entitled to an answer. So are the Afghans, who have suffered disproportionately more. They are far from getting one.

Mr Obama is now left clinging to one tarnished man – not an institution or national assembly of tribal chiefs – to deliver the central plank of his fight against the Taliban and [al-Qaida](#). And while he clings to him, any hope of recentring aid efforts on local communities or on reforming parliament will be subverted just as the election was. Wait for the next announcement on troop levels. It will be groundhog day – all over again.