

Our Armed Forces and the modern world

An ancient quirk of the British constitution insists, for what once seemed good reasons (but are so no longer), that we do not have a standing army - or for that matter a standing navy or standing air force. So Parliament is still required to validate the Armed Forces on an annual basis - as if we could choose not to have them!

Hence the service discipline Acts are renewed by legislation quinquennially, with in-between affirmative annual continuation orders debated in both Houses. On April 23 the House of Lords gave a second reading to the Armed Forces Bill, which on passing will become the latest quinquennial Act. So we can go on sleeping comfortably.

The debate turned on the how far the condition of our Armed Forces should be modified by current developments readily accepted and welcomed in civilian life, though perhaps not by all. On the traditional side Lord Burnham, who helped run the Daily Telegraph for over 30 years, quoted a recent speech by Lady Thatcher-

"I notice trends which threaten the core of military culture and the whole ethos which sustains it. The values of a risk-averse civilian society are being imposed on a military community to which they are essentially unsuited . . . A refusal to understand the realities of service life leads to unrealistic ideas taking root about how armed forces should be organised."

Lord Burnham reinforced this trenchant wisdom in his own words.

"Political correctness and soft beds are not what the Armed Forces are for. John Major recalls in his autobiography, which I am reading at the moment, that when he visited elements of the Army shortly before the land stage of the Gulf War started, they told him, 'It is why we joined. It is our job'. That is the Army."

Lord Roper echoed this.

"I started my military career not in soft beds, but in a hammock on a mess deck in an aircraft carrier . . . We all served as ordinary seamen and we discovered at an early stage that military life is different . . . We need to decide how and in which ways military society and discipline will evolve as other ideas and thoughts change in society. How should we take into account attitudes towards gender balance and diversity that are part of society today?"

Earl Attlee, grandson of the doughty post-war Prime Minister Clement Attlee, gave his own definition of political correctness. He thought it was marked by or adhering to a typically progressive orthodoxy, often involving issues of race, gender, sexual orientation, ecology and the environment. He added that, when this is applied to the Armed Forces by those with no relevant experience, "there is usually a failure to recognise the realities of warfare involving significant casualties and personal sacrifice".

Lord Monro of Langholm, a former Conservative junior minister, pointed out that females cannot carry weights over the distances a serviceman must nowadays cover. Could women, he

asked, really have been expected to carry heavy haversacks and weapons when yomping over the mountains of the Falklands? Those who wanted women to do everything were asking the impossible.

Replying for the Government, Baroness Symons said a tri-service factual report was produced on March 15. It presents the results of academic and other work that will contribute to an assessment of the impact on combat effectiveness of removing the present exclusion of women from the Royal Marine general service, the Household Cavalry, the Royal Armoured Corps, the Infantry and the RAF Regiment. Moreover the services are conducting a risk analysis, of which the result should be known by mid-summer. On political correctness she added this.

“Nothing should be allowed to compromise the operational effectiveness of the Armed Forces. However, there are matters of respect for other people . . . none of your Lordships would want to sneer at such respect being given where it is properly due.”

This necessary Bill makes minor changes in other areas. Decisions at courts martial will no longer be subject to judicial review in the High Court. The Armed Forces will be empowered to require breath or urine samples to test for drugs or alcohol. Wider powers are given to the Ministry of Defence (MoD) police.

When that notorious mischief-maker the Earl of Onslow observed that MoD police officers were widely known as “Mod Plods” Baroness Symons recoiled.

“I know that the nomenclature that the noble Earl, Lord Onslow, used has common currency but it does not go down terribly well with the Ministry of Defence Police. If the noble Earl can bear to do so, it would be a kindness to refrain from using it.”

The noble earl greeted this feminine manifestation of tenderness and concern for rough hairy policemen with his usual broad grin.

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