

E-POLITIX INTERVIEW



Simpson on bombing Afghanistan

[Why have you called for a pause in the bombing of Afghanistan?](#)

Alan Simpson: Partly because I think the war is wrong full stop. It's just the wrong way of seeking to track down terrorists and bring them to justice. The second is that I am really fearful that we're sitting on the edge of a humanitarian catastrophe in Afghanistan for which the West will legitimately be blamed.

The aid agencies reckon that there's maybe ten more delivery days before the Afghan snow cuts the lorries off. They have fallen behind the delivery rate that they needed to be able to keep people alive through this winter. The current position, irrespective of the numbers who are in refugee camps on the Pakistani/Iranian borders, is that two million people have been displaced inside the country. One

million children are at the edge of starvation. When the winter snows go and we start to count the bodies of those who didn't make it through, I believe the Muslim or Arab countries within the region will blame us for that catastrophe.

It won't wash that it was the Taliban that delayed things. Everyone knows that the aid agencies have delivered food through famine or war zones in the past. They are used to having to pay food taxation, they are used to the delays and frustrations that they've had to face from both the Taliban and the Northern Alliance, and in the past three years under the Taliban governments when the droughts have still been in place, the aid agencies have managed to get the food through.

Simpson on humanitarian efforts

[But the US and UK governments say that the action they are taking is in co-ordination with humanitarian efforts. Does that not wash with you?](#)

Alan Simpson: It doesn't make any sense at all. You can't drop bombs and bread in alternating consignments. The absurdity is compounded by the fact that some of the food packages look like the cluster bombs that have been strewn across the landscape, and children have been sent out to collect them. This is just a wretched and stupid way of trying to deliver humanitarian aid.

We've changed the targets - this is the worst part about the strategy. All of a sudden we talk about this war with the Taliban - it has become a war with Afghanistan. We're not pursuing Bin Laden in the mountains where he is, we're bombing the plains and the cities, and we're taking out the power and the infrastructure, the fragmented infrastructure that existed to prop the country up. And the people on the frontline are those who are homeless, starving, or living on grass. They are the frontline of reprisals and the rest of the world knows this. In fact large numbers of people in Britain know this, which is why I think that the whole momentum of public opinion has shifted dramatically over the last couple of weeks. There is now a majority of people who oppose bombing. They want to let the food get through to the

people of Afghanistan who really need it.

What's your proof of that?

Alan Simpson: The opinion polls in last week's press found that 54 per cent of the population in Britain currently favour halting the bombing to get the food through.

Simpson on the role the UK should be playing

So how do you think the US and UK should have reacted to the atrocities of September 11?

Alan Simpson: I think the role the UK should have played was to rescue America from a mindset that makes it its own worst enemy. At the moment it's almost as though if America can't bomb, it can't think. And our own experience of terrorists' attacks and atrocities across mainline Britain has given us definite experience of how you deal with terrorism. It never made the outrages any more acceptable. Never once did we say that the sensible strategic response was saturation bombing of Dublin, or if the killings and atrocities were committed by protestant paramilitary groups, that we should flatten the protestant communities in the North to 'smoke out' the terrorists. We have learned that the way you tackle terrorism is by a combination of infiltrating the networks, undermining their credibility, attempting to close off the financial and arms supply routes. And creating a space somewhere in that domestic agenda for a peace dialogue between the majority sections of communities who are looking for a solution of some sort that isn't found down the barrel of a gun. Now we have done this with heroic patience and resilience in relation to Northern Ireland. We are still in the process of doing that. No one ever pretends that there is a quick fix solution to be found just by nuking North or Southern Ireland. It is that we have learned to deal with this in a different manner and that is what we should have been saying to the USA. The mistake was even talking about it as a war - it was a horrendous act of terrorism that should be pursued and tried as an international crime, but it wasn't an act of war by one country on another. And there is nothing in human history that ever shows that you can successfully bomb an idea or an ideology out of existence.

Simpson on an international court

But some would argue how do you manage to get hold of suspected terrorists through an international court because the Taliban are not going to release them?

Alan Simpson: Early on in the proceedings Pakistan made a call not for international leaders to see the evidence against Bin Laden and Al-Qaeda but for an independent, international panel of judges. And I believe we should have taken them up on that offer because at the moment it is still a question of those of us who were involved in perpetrating the bombing response saying we have incontrovertible evidence that proves we're right. We've now become a hanging that dispenses with a trial.

If we want other countries to sign up to a framework of international law, we also have to be seen to be acting within it ourselves. We should have taken up Pakistan's offer to set up a panel of judges; we should then have set up an international court. If they'd said there's a prima face case against Bin Laden then that case should have been referred to an international court. It is possible for courts to try people

in their absence and that would be the worst-case scenario but we could still do that. It wouldn't stop us continuing to pursue Bin Laden. We already have shown on our screens evidence of satellite photographs that have Mullah Omar talking to a group of people, there were two clear identifications of Bin Laden once in Sudan and once in Afghanistan, so the technology of surveillance from space is so sophisticated today that with patience, we could do that. We could also send special units into the mountains of Afghanistan in pursuit of him and his guards. If we had been serious about that, we could have gone to the UN Security Council in the very early ages and secured an international mandate for the international coalition to do precisely that.

Simpson on the chief whip and Paul Marsden

[How did MPs react to the reported 'strong-arm' tactics of the Chief Whip against Paul Marsden?](#)

Alan Simpson: I think there were mixed feelings: about whether those sort of strong-arm tactics were acceptable but also whether it was sensible to report it across all the front pages of the national newspapers.

I expected, when I came into Parliament, that it was going to be a robust environment and if you had strong beliefs then it was your job to stand up to them. And whatever rough housing you got from the Whips, it was up to you to decide whether you slunk away to hide somewhere or whether you stood your ground. I just think that the public have a right to expect that the MPs they select and elect have enough about them that they stand their ground.

In terms of whether this is a sensible strategy from the position of the party, the answer has to be no. It is an extremely counter productive one because all that that leaves the public with is the strong belief that the issues don't count. It's a question of enforced loyalty rather than a willingness to practise the democracy that we say we're attempting to defend.

Simpson on the Commons vote

[There was a recent Commons vote on the campaign and it was 373 votes to 13 in favour of the government's approach. Therefore the vast majority of the Parliamentary Labour Party supports it?](#)

Alan Simpson: Let's look at that vote. The first thing you have to say is a huge number of MPs just weren't there at all. And the second thing you have to face is if you look at the vote, one of the issues that makes a lot of MPs very cross, whatever position they take on the war itself, is that Parliament has denied the right to vote on any substantive resolution of whether you support the war, or whether you are opposed to it. The resolution that was voted on was that the House do now adjourn. Well what difference is that going to make to someone sitting under the shadow of a B-52 bomber in Afghanistan? They'll think that's great news the House of Commons has adjourned, or tough luck it hasn't adjourned. It's a nonsense vote but it was the only way that MPs could, in frustration, force a recognition that genuinely does divide the House and that we are in a minority of international Parliaments that doesn't have the right to vote on issues of war and peace. So I think there are constitutional issues here about whether this is a Prime Ministerial or Presidential right to declare war in the name of the country or whether this is a Parliamentary right where we have both an opportunity and a duty to try and represent the views of

the constituents who elect us. It's a big issue not adequately addressed on voting whether the House should adjourn or not.

Simpson on the Prime Minister's style of leadership

[There have been newspaper reports describing the Prime Minister's 'presidential' style of leadership. Are there concerns amongst the backbenchers over Tony Blair's leadership style?](#)

Alan Simpson: It's a very easy style to support if it's a consistently winning style, but the risk that it runs is if it all goes pear-shaped for you, then you're pretty much out on your own. And one of the fears that have been expressed over the last few days is that the experience of this recent visit around the Middle East and discussions with other European leaders has left the Prime Minister in a fairly isolated position. There was a consistency of outcome in the trip to the Middle East in that the Arabs didn't want to talk to him and nor did the Jews, that he will have come back from there having been sand bagged by almost everyone, and that really raises some serious and ominous questions not only about the viability of holding the coalition together but the implications for the stability of the region after the bombing stops. And I think it's at that point that those big international issues will become much harder to deal with inside the House of Commons.

But in a practical sense you know, it is always the case that a Government can only conduct a war whilst it has the support of the population. During the Norway Debate in 1940, we saw that although Chamberlain won a majority vote in the Commons, the scale of public opposition to the strategy that he was pursuing meant that his tenure as a government became impossible. Now I don't think that it is of the same proportions because technically Britain is not centrally involved in a war to defend our own shores. But there are going to be very serious ramifications that run back through the way our society works if we are seen to be responsible for

- having polarised one of the poorest countries on the planet,
- having left it in a state which is still riven by feudal conflicts,
- having set trains of fundamentalism loose in other countries in the region,
- having left ourselves with more declared enemies in the region than passive friends. All of these issues are going to roll back into the standing of the UK government within the international community, and will affect domestic relations with people within the UK of different faiths and races.

Simpson on racial tensions in the UK

[But do you feel that the government's involvement in the bombing of Afghanistan has added to racial tensions in the UK?](#)

Alan Simpson: I've spoken to a lot of people in mosques and Muslim communities around the country and I don't think Parliament properly understands the nature of the divide that they are trying to prevent from opening up. I have yet to come across any part of the Muslim communities that are in favour of the bombing of Afghanistan. There are substantial numbers who are fearful of where it will take us but who wish to remain quiet for fear of making it worse. And there are growing sections of their

own communities that are openly saying what are we doing standing around giving tacit support to the saturation bombing of innocent people, our people, who are no closer to terrorists than you or I, and this display of overwhelming American military power has to be challenged, and that is the new evil. And we're in real danger of opening up a divide where the on going battles after the bombing of Afghanistan ceases, will end up being fought within our own communities here.

Simpson on British Muslims fighting for the Taliban

[How do you deal with these British Muslims who are going off to fight for the Taliban? Isn't there an issue of religion versus citizenship?](#)

Alan Simpson: I think there are two aspects of this. The first is the great tragedy in respect of however many young Muslim men are willing to go off to fight for Afghanistan, is that we haven't interceded in a way that says if you're willing to put yourself into a zone of such instability, leave the weapons to one side, why don't you drive the lorries to deliver the food? The region is paralysed now because there aren't enough people willing to drive the food lorries through. And so we've had an opportunity to say to people you can be part of the process of keeping people alive by feeding them rather than by becoming embroiled in a war which will only produce losers.

[But their argument is that they have to defend a Muslim nation that's being attacked - this means they must take up arms against the aggressor?](#)

Alan Simpson: And that's the danger about how internationally this is being seen. You cannot say credibly that this is a war in pursuit of Bin Laden when the bombing is not taking place in the mountains but in the plains and the cities where ordinary Afghan citizens live. And if that was happening to us, we would say this isn't a war against the IRA or the UDA, if Britain was being saturation bombed, we'd see it as a war against us as a country. And I think there is a degree of hypocrisy in the language that we have used, that internationally other countries aren't going to sign up to.

The other thing that strikes me in terms of a massive contradiction, is that we have the wretched double standards about this notion of people willing to go and fight for other causes. We have a number of companies openly and legally recruiting paramilitaries to go and fight in other countries, they are based across the UK. There is one in Aldershot which recruits mercenaries to go and train and fight alongside the Death Squads in Colombia, and with the Colombian Government as part of their so-called Plan Colombia, the war on drugs. That's despite the fact that the UN in their last report made it quite clear that the vast majority of drugs coming out of Colombia now come either from government agencies or the Death Squads. Now those people are UK citizens going off killing in other countries are some how legitimate because they are doing it for money - they are part of a market economy. Forget the moral issues, forget the constitutional ones, forget citizenship, this is different because it's for cash. If people are willing to go and kill for conscience or conviction, then you can brand them as traitors. Now I don't favour either of them, I think if we're serious about taking up a moral position that is willing to challenge terrorism, then we have to say that doing it for cash isn't any better than doing it out of conviction. And we tackle the notion of recruitments to kill and we do that on a consistent basis and you don't say that killing for our tyrants is OK, but killing for someone else's tyrants isn't.

Simpson on the Government's response and public opinion

[If you're right and public opinion is changing over this - how will the government respond?](#)

Alan Simpson: I don't know where Britain goes on this. I think the public is moving in one direction and I think the government is continuing in a different direction along with the US. The problem we've seen to have got ourselves into is having tied ourselves so tightly into America and being unable or unwilling to say that this doesn't carry with it an endorsement of the military strategy. We are seen as not the junior partner but the sort of front row PR system for whatever America decides to do. And I think that is going to take the UK government further away from the UK public with every week that the war goes on.

[And what's at stake if that continues?](#)

Alan Simpson: I think that will present real credibility problems for the whole of the government's domestic and economic policies as well. If there is a backlash that withdraws support for the government, then it's likely to be of a presidential scale. If you lose faith in what the President stands for, then you cease making excuses or concessions for aspects of other policies that don't feel right either. It becomes much more openly condemnatory.

So it will present us with real problems as a Labour government getting a whole series of our domestic policies through. The other thing though that it will almost certainly do is it will leave an international vacuum that Britain will find it's incapable of filling, and that is that we will have surrendered the role of diplomats and peace makers, which arguably has been one of Britain's greatest strengths over the last 50 years or so. We have brought a great deal of skill in the peace brokering process, and I think you just throw your credentials in that sphere out of the window if you're simply seen as an adjunct to American bombing policies. And if some of the American generals and the hawks have their way and the bombing, when it finishes in Afghanistan, fails to identify Bin Laden, and fails to satisfy the military personnel that the whole of the Al-Qaeda network has been destroyed, my fear is that on their way back large numbers of the American military would quite like to stop off in Iraq, and several other places and finish off what they regard as unfinished business. Well the international ramifications of that would just be catastrophic. We would have a region, if not a world, at war with itself, for maybe the first quarter of the century. And given that America has a number of strategic interests in access to oil that it's going to run out of soon, to have a whole region that is sitting on oil supplies and deep anti-American hostilities doesn't bode well for anyone.