



Westminster bill will inhibit examination of British army behaviour

ONCE Upon a Time in Iraq may sound like the start of a fairytale but is in fact the stuff of modern nightmares. The book by James Bluelmel and Dr Renad Mansour formed part of my lockdown reading, written to accompany the landmark BBC series of the same name.

If you haven't already watched it I suggest you do as it is one of the most remarkable pieces of journalism I've ever seen. Over half of those interviewed were ordinary Iraqis, voices we don't often hear in the west but really should listen to more.

The so-called war on terror was a huge failure and destabilised the world in a way that threatens us all, causing a refugee crisis as desperate people flee Islamic State, whose power increased dramatically, feeding on an anti west movement caused by the decision to invade both Iraq and Afghanistan.

The horror stories from the book, based on 100 hours of conversations with Iraqi people, former soldiers, journalists and the families of dead veterans were fresh in my mind as I watched politicians debate the second reading of the Overseas Operations Bill. Clauses

Allison MORRIS

in the service personnel and veterans bill would stop serving and former military personnel from what defence secretary Ben Wallace claims are a "vexatious" cycle of claims and re-investigations.

The British government has been concerned for some years over what some legal experts say is a potential tsunami of civil and criminal cases against soldiers who served in Iraq and Afghanistan by the people of those countries.

Last month, as the bill went through its second reading in Westminster, Labour sacked three junior shadow ministers who joined with Jeremy Corbyn and 14 other Socialist Campaign Group MPs in breaking the party's whip by voting against the controversial legislation. If passed, the new law means presumption against prosecution applies to offences such as war crimes and torture. The Labour rebels say this is a breach of international humanitarian law.

The bill only covers overseas territories where an official war was declared. There was an attempt by some MPs in the early days of the legislation to include the actions of British soldiers in Northern Ireland in the bill. It was seen as an easy way to prevent legacy

investigations exposing the actions of the army during the Troubles. However, this fell at the first hurdle.

For those of us who grew up in this place in those dark days it certainly seemed like a warzone but our conflict was never classed as a war. Given successive British governments claim Northern Ireland as a valued and cherished part of the union, it would be difficult to explain why they fought a war against their own citizens.

The bill, despite its controversial nature, is almost certain to pass and is part of a direction of travel for this government that many see as heading only one way.

Theresa May was a Remainer but as home secretary argued that Britain should remain within the EU economic bloc but leave the European Convention on Human Rights. The convention, which is separate from the EU institutions, was incorporated into UK law by the Human Rights Act.

The Conservatives pledged to replace the Human Rights Act with a "British Bill of Rights". Mrs May argued that it was the convention that had caused delays to the extradition of extremist Abu Hamza and almost stopped the deportation of Abu Qatada. Such a change to legislation would have faced much greater scrutiny in normal times but is being passed through parliament with minimal opposition as minds are distracted elsewhere by the ongoing pandemic.

Among those interviewed in *Once Upon a Time in Iraq* is war reporter Dexter Filkins. His book *The Forever War* is a graphic and disturbing account of the grim reality of the war on terror, based on his years working the frontline for *The New York Times*.

His account of covering the war in Iraq and how the rules of engagement "were dialled really far back" make for grim reading but also could go some way to explaining the thinking behind legislation that will in effect prevent any further legal scrutiny of that unjust war.

ON THIS DAY

OCTOBER 1 1920

'Reprisals a Disgrace'

THE Times of London, under the heading 'A National Disgrace' says: 'Day by day the tidings from Ireland grow worse. The accounts of the arson and destruction by the military at Mallow in County Cork as revenge for a Sinn Féin raid which caught the 17th Lancers napping must fill English readers with a sense of shame. Despite the efforts of the local police force whose members spared no efforts to try to check the soldiers in their mad orgy of destruction, the population were driven to seek safety in flight...

The authorities would have been truly entitled after the raid on the military barracks which cost the life of a British sergeant to arrest on suspicion of complicity any townsfolk against whom a prima facie case could be established. No complaint could have been made had they dealt summarily with any insurgents caught in possession of arms. But they were not entitled to reduce to ruins the chief buildings of the township and to destroy the property of the inhabitants merely as an act of terrorism. The name of England is being sullied throughout the Empire and throughout the world by this savagery, for which the Government can no longer escape, however much they may seek to disclaim, responsibility.

"We shall doubtless be told, with the inimitable cynicism that "it seems improbable that many innocent people have suffered" by the reprisals. Apologies of this description only deepen the discredit of the Government. Unless we are mistaken, the Government have not yet declared war upon the people of Ireland. Yet these "reprisals" are acts of war and a very ugly war too. The wrecks at Balbriggan, Tuam, Trim and Mallow are but the most flagrant instances of a system deliberately organised. ... These reprisals are a confession that the Government are either unable to control their own forces or they have abandoned the duty of government altogether. Every fresh reprisal puts a new obstacle in the path of any real Irish settlement.'

Chief Secretary Rejects 'Reprisals'

THE following telegram has been issued from Dublin Castle by the Chief Secretary for Ireland [Sir Hamar Greenwood MP]: 'There is no truth in the allegations that the Government connive at or support reprisals. The Government condemn reprisals...and have taken steps to prevent them. The number of alleged reprisals is few and the damage done exaggerated.' **When such a leading pro-government newspaper as the London Times could stigmatise the Reprisals policy as 'a national disgrace' and mock the hollow denials of ministers, it was clear that the Lloyd George government was losing the propaganda war. But the worst had yet to come.**

EDITED BY ÉAMON PHOENIX
e.phoenix@irishnews.com

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