

AFGHANISTAN

With the recent tragic deaths in Afghanistan, many people are asking if it is worth it. While it is difficult to outline the price we are willing to pay for success in Afghanistan, the price of failure is not hard to describe. If we abandoned our task in Afghanistan today, we would put the security of our own country in greater peril. To abandon Afghanistan at this stage would encourage every jihadist to believe that we lack the moral courage to see through a difficult mission. And it would gravely undermine the credibility of NATO, the alliance that has protected this country for six decades.

There are few people who believe that NATO, as an organisation, has been an unqualified success in Afghanistan. The reluctance of some allies to fund fully their contribution and the restrictions and caveats placed by others on their troops have made some operations more difficult than they could have been. If other members choose not to fight, but have equipment that the fighting nations need, we must make greater efforts to share those assets.

The decision by this Government to reduce the helicopter budget by £1.4 billion whilst funding other parts of the public sector has had catastrophic consequences. It has resulted in a diminished capacity to move our servicemen and women with greater relative safety. I do not claim that helicopters are the whole answer: troops will still need to be present on the ground; helicopters are not invulnerable. But they are fast and less predictable, and reduce the need for lengthy resupply convoys by land. The Government says that it has increased helicopter hours by 84 per cent, and that more helicopters will be coming in the winter. But the fact that three and a half years into this mission, we still do not have enough helicopters available, despite repeated calls for them, is, as David Cameron has said, a scandal.

At a time when our servicemen and women are fighting and dying thousands of miles from home, it is important that they should know they have support not only from the public, but across the political spectrum. We are fortunate that, in a society without conscription, we have people courageous and committed enough to put their lives at risk voluntarily for the security of their country and their fellow citizens. But it is also right that, as the Opposition, we should speak up on our Forces' behalf when we believe that the Government is failing to give them the equipment they need, and to hold the Government to account. That is one of our strengths as a democracy and as a nation. It is a duty we owe to our Armed Forces, whom we all rightly admire so much.



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