

Jackson: 'Government Failing Military'

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General Sir Mike Jackson, a former head of the army, delivered a blistering attack on the government last night, accusing it of failing to meet the most basic needs of the country's soldiers who were risking their lives fighting unpopular wars in Afghanistan and Iraq.

In his first public speech since retiring as chief of the general staff this summer, he said the government was failing to give the armed forces the resources they craved, and warned that the army was in danger of becoming a political football.

"I am confident that the nation trusts the army to do that which it is directed to do, and in which it succeeds," he said. But he added: "That trust must be reciprocated - the nation, represented by the duly elected government of the day, must provide all the tools that the job requires."

In a pointed comment directed at a recent promise by Tony Blair, he said: "It is indeed a great support to hear the prime minister say that 'the army can have everything it needs'. I await with interest the manifestation of that fine sentiment."

Speaking in the annual Richard Dimbleby lecture broadcast on BBC1 last night, he said: "The armed forces' contract with the nation which they serve, and from which they very largely recruit, is to take risks - if need be, the risk of life. But this must be a two-way contract, it has to be reciprocal.

"Military operations cost in blood and treasure, because risk-free soldiering, which some seem to think is possible, is simply a contradiction in terms.

"It is our soldiers who pay the cost in blood; the nation must therefore pay the cost in treasure. Soldiers and their families must be properly valued."

He also said that Britain had a moral obligation not to "cut and run" on its military operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, despite their unpopularity at home.

There was a failure, "even an unwillingness, to understand the fundamental nature of the ethos of soldiering". It was difficult, he said, "to overestimate the importance of ethos: the can-do, the us-us approach, rather than me-me ..."

Gen Jackson has been accused of failing to fight his corner in the Ministry of Defence when he was in office. Yesterday, he reserved his most trenchant attacks for the MOD. It was "the soldiers themselves who will make the endeavour succeed; one's loyalty must be from bottom up. Sadly, I did not find this fundamental proposition shared by the MoD," he said.

He regretted the way the chiefs of staff had been stripped of much of their power,

which had been taken over by centralising civil servants.

"I did not feel that the [MoD] put the soldier, sailor and airman and their families wholeheartedly in the forefront," he said. He added: "And without those soldiers, sailors and airmen - ministers and indeed civil servants, generals, admirals, air marshals are nothing.

"Whilst acknowledging recent modest improvements, not much over a thousand pounds a month for the private soldier for what he or she is doing on operations is hardly an impressive figure. And some accommodation is still, frankly, shaming and hemmed around by petty regulation."

The MoD, he said, "appears to assume that commercial so-called 'best practice', with its proliferation of performance indicators and targets, transfers seemingly without question to defence in general, and to the armed forces in particular".

He found "such an assumption to be without foundation ... we get the Kafkaesque situation whereby the MoD congratulates itself on achieving an accommodation improvement plan defined by itself on what it calls affordability, but which is far from what is defined by the needs of soldiers and their families".

Military chiefs are concerned about the growing unpopularity of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and a debate that is affecting recruitment, but also, they fear, the reputation of the armed forces.

His criticisms have added significance in light of concern expressed - to the government's dismay - in October by Gen Sir Richard Dannatt, Gen Jackson's successor, about the pay, hospital treatment and overall lack of value accorded British soldiers, as well as the situation in Iraq.

The MoD said last night: "General Jackson is fully entitled, after his distinguished service, to voice his opinion on these important issues. While we do not agree with everything Sir Mike has said, we are always the first to recognise - for example in relation to medical services and accommodation - that although we have delivered real improvements, there is more we can do. We are always striving to make things better for our forces."