
Rt. Hon. Mark Francois MP
Minister of State for the Armed Forces
Ministry of Defence
Floor 5 Zone B, Main Building
Whitehall
London SW1A 2HB

6 November 2013

Open letter on armed forces recruitment age

Dear Mr Francois,

At this time we remember those killed and afflicted in the First World War, including Servicemen and women. Among these we lament the deaths of the very youngest, many of whom had barely emerged from childhood. In so doing, we turn our thoughts to the young men and women serving in the British armed forces today, and question the Ministry of Defence's continued reliance on teenagers to fill some of the most dangerous armed forces roles.

During the First World War, the minimum armed forces recruitment age was 18 years and only those aged 19 or over were sent overseas to fight. While it is known that many younger boys slipped through, the nation held to the principle that only adults should be recruited into the armed forces.

Since that time the standards have fallen. In the Falklands, the Balkans, the Gulf War and at the start of the present war in Afghanistan and the recent war in Iraq, 17-year-olds were routinely deployed into combat. Some were killed. Today, the Ministry of Defence enlists soldiers at 16 and deploys from age 18. It still refuses, however, to implement a total ban on deployment of under-18s and at least 20 have been sent to Afghanistan and Iraq accidentally between 2005 and 2010.

We commend the Ministry of Defence for having ceased routinely deploying children into conflict, but challenge its failure to stop recruiting them. Current recruitment policy channels the youngest, most disadvantaged recruits into the most dangerous frontline combat roles. Those recruited at 16 have faced double the risk of fatality of adult recruits throughout the conflict in Afghanistan.

While we do not all hold the same views on the military, we are united in respecting past and present Servicemen and Servicewomen and we are united in opposing the recruitment of children. We call for the minimum recruitment age to be returned to 18 years. This would be a fitting memorial to those thousands who, whether unlawfully recruited as minors during the First World War or recruited to fight in other conflicts, were exposed to death, injury and trauma that no child should ever experience.

Yours sincerely,



Richard Clarke
Director, **Child Soldiers International**

On behalf of:

Most Revd Dr Barry Morgan, Archbishop of Wales
Rt Revd John Davies, Bishop of Swansea and Brecon
Rt Revd Richard Pain, Bishop of Monmouth
Rt Revd Gregory Cameron, Bishop of St Asaph
Rt Revd Wyn Evans, Bishop of St Davids
Rt Revd Andy John, Bishop of Bangor
Rt Revd David Wilbourne, Assistant Bishop of Llandaff
The Church in Wales

Rev Sally Foster-Fulton
Convener, **Church and Society Council of the Church of Scotland**

Derek McAuley
Chief Officer, **General Assembly of Unitarian and Free Christian Churches**

Helen Drewery
General Secretary, **Quaker Peace and Social Witness**

Marie Dove
Secretary, **Methodist Peace Fellowship**

Paul Henstock
Secretary, **Baptist Peace Fellowship**

Pat Gaffney
General Secretary, **Pax Christi**

Christine Trevett and Ros Morley
Clerks, **Cyfarfod y Cyfeillion yng Nghymru, Crynwyr (Meeting of Friends in Wales, Quakers)**

Millius Palayiwa
Director, **The Fellowship of Reconciliation (England)**

Rev.Guto Prys ap Gwynfor
President, **Cymdeithas y Cymod yng Nghymru (The Fellowship of Reconciliation, Wales)**

Anne Peacey
Chair, **National Justice & Peace Network**

Matt Jeziorski
Chair, **Peace Education Network**

Claire Poyner
Coordinator, **Network for Peace**

Jon Nott
General Secretary, **Woodcraft Folk**

Jan Melichar
Coordinator, **Peace Pledge Union**

Emma Sangster
Coordinator, **Forces Watch**

Jackie Brock
Chief Executive, **Children in Scotland**