

Canada to press ahead with Afghanistan intervention despite mounting casualties

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17 August 2006

Despite rapidly mounting casualties, Canada's ruling Conservatives have made it quite clear that they have every intention of pressing ahead with the Canadian Armed Forces' (CAF's) intervention in Afghanistan.

Aided by a veritable chorus of support from the mass media and the opposition parties in the House of Commons, Prime Minister Stephen Harper, other top Tory ministers, and the military top brass have all emphasized that there can be no turning back from the dramatic escalation of the CAF mission effected by the Conservatives in May. Little more than three months after the minority Harper government assumed office, it brought a motion before parliament extending the CAF mission in Afghanistan until at least February 2009, revealing at the same time that it wants the CAF to assume overall command of the US-NATO counter-insurgency operation for a year, starting in February 2008.

The fervency with which the entire Canadian political establishment has declared the intervention a closed question is a direct reflection of ruling class concerns that CAF casualties will cause popular support for the Afghan mission to plummet still further. A recent Strategic Counsel poll cited in the *Globe and Mail* showed that by July 56 percent of Canadians opposed the intervention in Afghanistan, an increase of 15 percentage points from March.

On the morning of Friday, August 11, Corporal Andrew James Eykelenboom became the most recent of an accelerating number of CAF personnel to lose their lives in the occupation of Afghanistan. A pickup truck full of explosives was detonated alongside the soldier's light utility vehicle as it returned to the Kandahar airfield from the Spin Boldak district in southern Afghanistan.

Following Eykelenboom's death, Colonel Tom Putt, the deputy commander of Canadian forces in Afghanistan, made the barely plausible claim that the attacks claiming an increasing number of Canadian soldiers' lives should be interpreted as a sign of the insurgency's weakness: "We have to acknowledge the fact that the Taliban have largely been reduced to suicide bombings and IED (improvised explosive device) attacks because they cannot defeat the coalition with direct action, which is what they claimed they were going to do."

Two days earlier, Master Corporal Jeffrey Walsh lost his life in what is being investigated by CAF authorities as an accidental shooting. Shortly before that, on August 5, Master Corporal Raymond Arndt was killed and three other Canadian soldiers injured when their armoured vehicle collided head-on with a truck. The deaths of Eykelenboom, Walsh and Arndt brought the total of Canadian soldiers killed in the previous past month to nine, with four of these deaths taking place on a single day.

On August 3, three Canadian soldiers lost their lives when hit by rocket-propelled grenades in a fierce battle on the outskirts of Kandahar. Sgt. Vaughn Ingram, Cpl. Bryce Jeffrey Keller and Pte. Kevin Dallaire were killed in the attack, while another six Canadian soldiers were injured. The attack was reportedly initiated by "Taliban militants" and took place in broad daylight, shortly after midday. One soldier who participated in the battle told the press, "They were targeting us. They were too organized; we had to pull back."

On the same day, also near Kandahar, Cpl. Christopher Jonathan Reid was killed by a roadside bomb. Shortly thereafter, a second roadside bomb injured three Canadian soldiers. Of the 26 Canadian soldiers killed in Afghanistan since CAF personnel were first deployed there in the fall of 2001, 18 have lost their lives since February, when the Canadian intervention was first extended to the far more volatile southern part of the country around Kandahar.

According to the CBC, the British general who currently heads the NATO mission in Afghanistan, Lt. Gen. David Richard, made the following tacit acknowledgment of the widespread hostility of the Afghan population to the occupying force: "If it doesn't visibly improve soon, people are going to say we'd rather have the certain security—albeit the rotten life that goes with it—of the Taliban than go on fighting forever. Can they stick with us a bit longer as we give them the confidence or do they really want to go back to the Taliban?"

Mindful of the recent swell in opposition to the operations of Canadian imperialism among the Canadian public, Lt. Gen. Richard singled out Canada for an admonishment not to "waver."

The Canadian government will not disappoint the NATO general. Brought to power in January-February 2006 with the near-unanimous support of the country's corporate media, the minority government of Stephen Harper has made an invigorated Canadian militarism its first priority. Immediately upon taking office, Harper made demonstrative visits to military bases and issued pronouncements defending Canada's claim to sovereignty over Arctic waters. And at every instance in which Canadian soldiers have lost their lives, Harper's government has been quick to emphasize its ongoing commitment to the Afghanistan operation.

Immediately after the four soldiers were killed on August 3, the Defence Minister, Gordon O'Connor, underlined that "our commitment is till February '09, and we are going to continue in Afghanistan both from an aid point of view, from a diplomacy point of view and from a military point of view."

For the Harper government and the Canadian elite as a whole, the CAF intervention in Afghanistan is not only a matter of using military force to win geo-political influence and appease the Bush administration. From the standpoint of the Canadian ruling class, the

operation is a chance to effect a general shift in foreign policy, putting paid to the “peacekeeping” ideology of a preceding period.

In the post-Second World War period, successive Canadian governments developed an international role as a mediator in the conflicts between the larger powers, especially those between NATO members-states (e.g., between the US and Britain and France over Suez in 1956). For the Canadian bourgeoisie, peacekeeping was an important part of the multilateralist policy Ottawa embraced as a means of counterbalancing the much greater economic political and geo-political weight of its southern neighbour and principal trading partner, the United States. The notion that Canada was a force for peace in the world and that the CAF had a special mission as a “peacekeeper” also came to be incorporated in a refurbished Canadian nationalism—the ideology that buttresses the Canadian state.

With the emergence, in the 1990s, of a more antagonistic relationship between Europe and the United States and a renewed and increasingly belligerent US imperialism, the historic investment of the Canadian political establishment in multilateral institutions like the United Nations no longer brought with it the same benefits.

Worse still, from the standpoint of the Canadian elite, was the fact that the semi-pacifist rhetoric of the past, because it enjoyed a high measure of support from the populace, became an obstacle to its plans to gain greater influence in world geo-politics by the using the Canadian Armed Forces as an instrument of war.

What most distinguishes the present intervention of Canadian imperialism in Afghanistan from other CAF undertakings (the Gulf War, Somalia, Yugoslavia, Haiti) is the extent to which the mission has been accompanied by explicit efforts to discredit the notion of the CAF as a force for peace in favour of open celebrations of militarism and chauvinism.

Exemplary in this regard is a column by right-wing columnist Christie Blatchford that appeared in the *Globe and Mail* the day after the August 3 deaths of four CAF soldiers. Blatchford bemoaned the fact that “it took but an hour for the open-line radio talk shows in Toronto to fill up with the cries of those who would pull the plug on the mission there, yank the troops home immediately, have the nation revert to its mythical, if cherished, peacekeeping role and go back to that sterling foreign policy of keeping fingers crossed.”

After repeating the by-now-very-familiar rhetorical device of citing some soldier or officer or family member claiming that the mission is to help the Afghan people and protect Canadians from terrorism, Blatchford devoted most of the rest of her column to depicting the conflict in Afghanistan as part of a global conflict with fundamentalist Islam, after the fashion of Samuel Huntington’s “clash of civilizations”.

Wrote Blatchford, “[N]otwithstanding the absence of a formal declaration, Canada is at war. So are the seven other nations of the now-NATO-led coalition in Afghanistan, and so are the Americans and British in Iraq, and so is Israel in Lebanon.”

The *Globe’s* editorial on the same day, although more circumspect in its rhetoric, echoed Blatchford’s manifest concern that the Canadian population is failing to understand the urgent need for the CAF to occupy Afghanistan, saying “It is on the home front that people are having doubts.” After conceding “such qualms are understandable,” the *Globe’s* editors sought to answer them by repeating the usual sophistries about bringing freedom and “good governance” to a lawless part of the world.

The opposition parties in the House of Commons are also very much implicated in the elite’s campaign for an expanded Canadian Armed

Forces and renewed Canadian militarism

In response to each of the recent deaths of Canadian soldiers in Afghanistan, the most that the nominally social-democratic New Democratic Party (NDP) has been able to do is issue *pro forma* statements offering their condolences to the families and celebrating the courage of the soldiers, without so much as a single critical word about the imperialist mission that placed the soldiers in harm’s way.

Within the Liberal Party—together with the Conservatives one of the two traditional “governing parties” of the Canadian state—the mounting death toll of the Afghanistan intervention has become an element in the race to choose a new party leader.

Michael Ignatieff, a vocal proponent of the Bush administration’s illegal invasion and occupation of Iraq and the reputed front-runner in the Liberal leadership race, has been quick to distance himself from any opposition, tepid and contradictory though it may be, to the colonial project of Canadian imperialism in Afghanistan. According to the *Globe*, Ignatieff responded to the death of four Canadian soldiers in one day by declaring, “I don’t think that in a moment of tragedy, when life has stopped for four Canadian families, that it’s an appropriate moment to start re-evaluating the mission.”

Ignatieff’s main competition for the Liberal leadership is Bob Rae, the former NDP Premier of Ontario. Together with the party’s official defence critic, Ujjal Dosanjh, Rae has criticized the Harper government for making the Afghanistan intervention a “combat” mission rather than a “reconstruction” mission. Yet he and Dosanjh stand by the Chretien-Martin Liberal government’s decision to deploy the CAF in support of the US conquest of Afghanistan and last year’s decision that the CAF should assume a leading role in the counter-insurgency campaign in southern Afghanistan.

Rae has also criticized the manner in which the Conservatives rammed the motion extending the Canadian intervention in Afghanistan through Parliament last May after only six hours of debate. But Rae’s newly adopted party agreed to the emergency debate, and the Conservative motion to extend and expand the CAF intervention only passed because more than a quarter of the Liberal MPs, including Ignatieff and interim party leader Bill Graham, voted for it.

What emerges transparently is that every section of the Canadian political establishment insists on the necessity of a continuing CAF presence in Afghanistan. The NDP and the so-called left-wing of the Liberal Party would like this to be given the traditional cover of peacekeeping and parliamentary debate, while the Liberal Party’s right wing concurs with the Harper Conservatives in pushing for a final jettisoning of the pacifist rhetoric and peacekeeping pretensions of yore.



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