Bloc Québécois' support for Canada's Afghan war exposed

Guy Charron
27 December 2006

The Bloc Québécois (BQ), the federal party advocating the independence of Québec, has dropped its threat to force a non-confidence vote on the Afghanistan policy of the Conservative minority government, following a general outcry by the corporate media and the categorical refusal of the other opposition parties to lend their support.

The speed with which the Bloc has fallen into line exposes its fundamental support for the counter-insurrectionary operation that the Canadian military is mounting in southern Afghanistan, as part of the occupation force deployed by NATO in support of the US-imposed government of Hamid Karzai.

Two weeks ago, BQ leader Gilles Duceppe declared that the Conservative minority government of Stephen Harper should "rapidly and profoundly alter the Canadian mission" in Afghanistan so as to put the emphasis on "reconstruction" instead of "combat." Otherwise, "we will not hesitate to retract our support. And, if necessary, bring down the government on the Afghan question."

Bloc strategists said that the party was considering introducing a non-confidence motion on the Afghanistan question around February 15, two weeks after parliament reconvenes.

The news that the BQ might bring down the Harper government—and on the Afghanistan question—was very negatively received by the political establishment and the official media.

The chief editorialist for *Le Devoir*, a Montreal newspaper close to the BQ, sharply criticized Duceppe's position, writing: "Since no one has any miracle solutions to propose, bringing down the Harper government over the handling of the mission in Afghanistan would be irresponsible."

The response of the rest of the Canadian political elite was similar.

Underlining that "we've made a commitment to our allies," Conservative Prime Minister Stephen Harper said he was ready to see his minority government defeated on a question that concerns "Canada's role in the world and our strategic and defence interests."

The new leader of the Liberal Party, Stéphane Dion, declared, for his part, that "we can't give up on the mission until we have deployed everything to ensure it works."

The response of the New Democratic Party (NDP), the only party to have demanded the withdrawal of Canadian troops from Afghanistan, is particularly significant. NDP leader Jack Layton rejected the BQ's threat to bring down the government as "political games." According to Layton, it is more important to "get some results out of this Parliament"—a parliament in which the two traditional parties of big business have an overwhelming parliamentary majority.

Rick Hillier, the head of the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF), bluntly rejected any realignment of the Canadian "mission" in Afghanistan so as to focus on "reconstruction." "We're doing the security operations not because we want to do them," said Hillier, "but because they are absolutely essential to do."

Following this dressing down, Duceppe declared last week that his party would not take the initiative on a non-confidence motion over Afghanistan. He tried to save face by adding that "if it were to become a question of confidence, then we would not be afraid to have an election over this."

This exit had already been carefully prepared by Duceppe's lieutenant, the one-time union bureaucrat Pierre Paquette. From the beginning, Paquette sought to temper the threat issued by his leader, declaring that "it was never a short-term question of bringing the government down over the mission in Afghanistan" and that the objective of his party was "for the government to take the time to reflect on the rebalancing of the mission."

This is of a piece with the strategy that Bloc Québécois has pursued since the US, supported by Canadian and NATO forces, invaded and occupied Afghanistan in 2001: to give support to the Canadian Armed Forces' deployment and its fundamental objectives, while posturing as something of an opponent of the Bush administration's foreign policy and militarism.

The BQ tries to distinguish itself from the minority Conservative government that it has, up until now, propped up in parliament, by demanding "a parliamentary debate" on Canada's foreign policy and by urging the "rebalancing of the mission" in Afghanistan.

But in the next breath, the BQ always specifies that "despite these reservations, one must support the presence of the military in Afghanistan" and criticizes other NATO nations for

© World Socialist Web Site

not having enough troops on the ground.

Duceppe has explained that his demand for a "rebalancing of the Afghan mission" means that he would like to see more foreign troops in Afghanistan. "It would involve a new balance for this mission, an appeal to other allied nations to commit more troops on the military side."

Equally emphatically, he has affirmed time and again his opposition to the NDP's call for the withdrawal of CAF troops from Afghanistan: "I'm not going for the Layton option which says a withdrawal, plain and simple. That is to be irresponsible."

In other words, the Bloc Québécois is criticizing the Harper government from the right, for having failed to mobilize other NATO member-states behind augmenting the counter-insurgency campaign in Afghanistan.

Faced with the evident brutality of the Canadian military mission in Afghanistan, with Canada spending nine times more on military operations than on civil reconstruction, Duceppe and the *indépendatistes* call for this imperialist intervention to be covered with the tiniest of fig leaves.

In demanding more "democracy" in Afghanistan—a demand that is left deliberately vague—and more troops on the ground, the BQ is trying to increase public support for a very unpopular foreign military intervention, to distance itself from the Conservatives and thereby bolster its electoral fortunes, and to create conditions for the intensification of the imperialist intervention in Afghanistan.

Three major considerations lie behind the Bloc's position on Canada's participation in a colonial-type counter-insurgency war in Afghanistan.

The first is the strong support within the economic and political elite of Canada and Québec for a changed role for Canadian imperialism within a new world order. The elite wants the Canadian government and the CAF to abandon the guise of "peacekeeper" that they adopted during the Cold War, for it views this posture as an encumbrance to using the CAF to wage war and pursuing a predatory foreign policy more in line with Canada's US allies. In the case of Afghanistan, the Canadian elite hopes that by taking a leading role in propping up the Karzai government, Ottawa will win "brownie points" in Washington, but also become a "player" in Central Asia, a region that is home to some of the world's largest reservoirs of oil and natural gas.

The second consideration is the *indépendatistes'* attempts to court the favour of Washington and Wall Street, an essential element in their long-term strategy. The BQ and its sister party, the Parti Québécois, want to be seen as a strong partner and ally of the US. They have insisted that an independent Quebec would not only remain a loyal partner of NATO, NORAD, and the North American Free Trade Agreement, but would consider replacing the Canadian dollar with the US dollar.

The third consideration is the very weak support for this Afghan intervention among the Canadian population in general and among Quebecers in particular. According to opinion polls, only one person in three supports the CAF mission in Afghanistan, and the percentage is even less in Québec. For obvious electoral reasons, the Bloc Québécois wants to appear as an opponent of the Afghan war, even though it has always supported it.

Affirmed Duceppe in an April 2006 House of Commons speech: "Canada is now involved in an armed intervention in Afghanistan and the Bloc Québécois has supported this from the beginning, and will continue to do so. We have demanded a debate on the Canadian presence in Afghanistan and we will have it, because it is our duty to grasp what is at stake and to inform the population."

In other words, in demanding a debate on the Canadian military mission in Afghanistan, the sole aim of the BQ was to convince the population that the intervention was justified.

At the end of August, the BQ demanded, just as they do today, an increase in the number of NATO soldiers and an intensification of the "anti-Taliban" offensive, saying it was necessary to defeat warlordism and suppress opium traffic.

In September, the *indépendatistes* denounced "the NDP proposal for a unilateral withdrawal [as] irresponsible" and demanded another debate, under the pretext that "Canadians and Québécois can't support the approach of the Harper government...if they don't understand the ins and outs of this operation, as well as other military interventions elsewhere."

In October, the BQ caucus reaffirmed its support for the Canadian mission in Afghanistan.

Taken together, these positions unmask the attempt of the BQ to garner votes by posturing as an opponent or semi-opponent of the US-NATO war in Afghanistan. The *indépendantiste* party is an accomplice in the brutal, neo-colonial intervention that Canada is mounting in Afghanistan.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site