

As fatalities mount, Canada's Conservative government moves to extend Afghan intervention

Richard Dufour
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Canada's minority Conservative government and corporate media had long planned to use this past week's 90th anniversary of the First World War battle of Vimy Ridge to whip up public support for the Canadian military and, above all, to promote the Canadian Armed Forces' (CAF) intervention in Afghanistan.

But the elaborate ceremonies and official invocations of sacrifice, duty, honor, and Canadian nation-building have been overshadowed by a series of deadly reversals for the 2,300 strong CAF contingent serving in southern Afghanistan. Six CAF troops were killed last Sunday when their armored vehicle was destroyed by a roadside bomb and two more were killed Wednesday in a wave of Taliban bomb-attacks.

The eight fatalities are the largest the CAF has suffered in a single week since the Korean War and raise the total number of CAF personnel to die in Afghanistan to 53. Most of these fatalities have come since the spring of 2006, when the CAF first assumed a leading role in the US-NATO counter-insurgency war in the Kandahar region of southern Afghanistan.

There are parallels to be drawn between Canada's role in Afghanistan today and the role it played in World War I, but they are most assuredly not the parallels drawn by Canada's Prime Minister Harper, the Queen, and other dignitaries in their Vimy Ridge commemoration speeches.

In 2007, as in the years 1914-18, the Canadian government and elite are trying to camouflage a drive to bolster their predatory interests on the world stage by portraying the waging of imperialist war as a crusade for liberty. And then as now, the Canadian ruling class, is undeterred by mounting casualties and growing popular opposition. On the contrary, it is intent on perpetuating and escalating the war.

On Thursday the Conservative government announced that it will spend \$650 million to purchase a fleet of 100 Leopard II tanks from Holland and that, pending the 2008 delivery and refitting of those tanks, the CAF will lease 20 Leopard II tanks from Germany. The German tanks are to be deployed this summer to Afghanistan, where they will replace the 17 Leopard I tanks the CAF deployed there last fall.

The tank purchase is only the latest signal from the Conservative government that it is preparing to extend the current CAF mission in Afghanistan well past February 2009. (The CAF participated in the US conquest of Afghanistan in the fall of 2001 and Canada has maintained troops there ever since. In May 2006, the Conservatives rushed a motion through the House of Commons endorsing the government's decision to extend Canada's participation in the south Afghanistan counter-insurgency war—a one-year deployment ordered by the previous Liberal government—for two years, until February 2009.)

The deputy Canadian commander in Afghanistan, Mike Cessford responded to the latest CAF fatalities by stressing the protracted character of the conflict and in so doing shed light on the strategic thinking of Canada's top brass. "This is a long war," Cessford told the *Globe and*

Mail, "you have to think in terms of years, and generations."

Last week Defense Minister Gordon O'Connor gave a speech to the *Conseil des relations internationales de Montréal* (CRIM- Montreal Council of International Relations) in which he suggested that the Canadian mission in Afghanistan may well continue indefinitely, that is for years to come. "This government," O'Connor told CRIM "will support the mission—by our words and by our actions—until the progress in Afghanistan becomes irreversible."

The lack of precision in O'Connor's remarks—he gave no definition of "progress" or how it would be determined to be "irreversible"—was deliberate. The Conservatives are acutely aware that there is growing public opposition to Canada's involvement in a colonial-style, US-led war in Afghanistan and much public skepticism to their claims that Canada is ensnared against its will in an undefined, open-ended "war on terror."

While signaling to the military, the corporate elite, the US and other NATO allies that it plans for Canada to play a leading role in the occupation of Afghanistan for years, possibly even decades, to come, the Conservatives want to keep the Canadian people in the dark for as long as possible as to their plans for extending the CAF presence in Afghanistan.

The Conservatives fear that if they are too open about their intentions it will damage, if not scuttle, their bid to win a majority in the next federal election. But this deceit has a further function: to disarm popular opposition to their efforts to revive Canadian militarism, dramatically expand the Canadian Armed Forces, and deploy the CAF in Afghanistan and other US-led wars. Since coming to office in February 2006, the Conservatives have announced some \$17 billion in new military procurements, while undertaking a propaganda offensive aimed at putting paid to the 1970's liberal Canadian nationalist notion that UN peacekeeping is a core CAF function.

When reporters questioned the minister of defense after his speech as to exactly how long Canada would stay in Afghanistan, O'Connor was evasive. "We will monitor the state of progress throughout the year," he said. "Next year, at a certain point, the government will need to make a decision."

Recognizing that the public does not at all share the press and politicians' enthusiasm for the glorification of militarism, O'Connor sought to paint the Canadian military intervention in Afghanistan in colors of social progress. He told the CRIM audience that he had seen signs of such progress on his most recent trip to Afghanistan, "This time, villages appeared more active," while in the southern capital of Kandahar, "there are now traffic jams." Enthusiasing over the appearance of outdoor advertising, the defense minister said, "This means that business is picking up."

No doubt aware of the paucity of his arguments, O'Connor admitted that "our progress ... seems slow and different than what we could

accomplish here in Canada.” The most he could offer in terms of improvements in the life of Afghans was the building of some new roads, the rehabilitation of schools and an increase in the provision of electricity to rural areas. Eager to characterize this as “a return to normal life in the towns and villages,” he failed to notice the basic contradiction in his argument: If all goes so well in Afghanistan today, why maintain foreign troops, including Canadians, there for an indefinite period?

The truth is, for the majority of Afghans life is radically different than the image painted by O'Connor and the government.

As noted by the Senlis Council, an international policy think-tank that has investigated the situation in Afghanistan by dispatching survey teams throughout the country, “Despite five years of international military operations in Kandahar and Lashkar Gah, the hospitals remain in a state of complete decay and are seen as a glaring symbol of the international community’s lack of concern for the Afghan people”.

Both infant and maternal mortality rates at birth have reached astronomical levels, while per capita spending for public health is practically zero. Life expectancy in Afghanistan is 43 years, compared to 80 years in Canada.

The Senlis Council, which has an Ottawa bureau, recently produced a report on the purported Canadian reconstruction effort in Afghanistan. “So far,” concluded the report, “the Canadian mission has not made a sufficiently large contribution in providing immediate humanitarian aid, poverty relief and essential development projects in Kandahar.”

The Canadian intervention in Afghanistan has nothing to do with humanitarian aid or the promotion of democracy.

The Karzai government that the Canadian troops are helping sustain in office is a puppet regime established by Washington and is crumbling under the weight of its own corruption. The Afghan parliament, this supposed symbol of a democratic rebirth after the overthrow of the Taliban, is mostly comprised of war lords and opium barons. The number of civilian victims of American bombardment and of the bullets of Canadian and other occupation forces is growing.

By participating actively in the war launched by Washington in Afghanistan, the Canadian ruling elite seeks to curry favor with the US ruling class, with which it has for decades maintained a lucrative partnership, and thereby gain a share of the spoils in a US-led revision of the world. By proving itself, to use the words of Conservative Prime Minister Stephen Harper, to be a “player” on the world arena, Canadian big business is also seeking to assert its own geopolitical interests in the oil- and gas-rich region of central Asia, for which Afghanistan is a pivotal entry point.

By intensifying the military operations launched in Afghanistan by the previous Liberal government of Chretien-Martin, the Harper Conservative government is pursuing the agenda and ambitions of the most powerful sections of the Canadian ruling elite, as attested by the lavish and immensely favorable treatment the corporate media has given not only to the Afghan mission, but also to the attempt to use the Vimy Ridge celebrations to revive a bellicose, Canadian military-patriotic tradition.

The reservations the various opposition parties—the Bloc Québécois (BQ), the social democrats of the NDP and the official opposition Liberals—have expressed over the Conservatives’ Afghan policy are of a tactical, not a principled character. All three claim the right for Canada, that is to say, its ruling class, to send young Canadians thousands of miles away to kill and to be killed to defend the economic and geo-strategic interests of Canadian big business.

Liberal Party leader Stéphane Dion defends the Afghan missions launched by preceding Liberal governments as “destined to guarantee conditions of life of Afghans, world peace and Canadian security” and has pledged to keep Canadian troops in Afghanistan until February 2009. The Bloc Québécois, as its leader Gilles Duceppe reaffirmed in a major address last month, “has supported from the beginning and will continue

to support this international intervention.” According to Duceppe, the CAF’s war on behalf of the US-installed Karzai regime is a “noble cause” aimed at “helping a people among the most destitute on the planet.”

After five years of supporting the CAF intervention in Afghanistan, the NDP reversed itself last September and announced that it favors the withdrawal of the CAF troops deployed in southern Afghanistan. But it has since made clear that this stance is not meant to be a barrier to its otherwise working with the Harper government. And Layton has been at pains to promote the NDP’s support for the Canadian military and to argue that Canadian imperialism can be a force “for good” in the world. “There will be times,” said Layton recently, “when Canada is required to fight battles. When these are the right battles the NDP will support them with conviction. We have done so in the past—in World War Two, in the Korean War and in dozens of UN-sanctioned peacekeeping missions—and we will do so again in the future.”

If the opposition parties have sought to distance themselves somewhat from the Conservatives’ Afghan policy and in particular its plans to extend the CAF intervention beyond February 2009 it is for two reasons. First, because they hope to benefit electorally from popular antiwar and anti-Bush sentiment. And second because, with varying degrees of intensity, they view an extended Canadian role in a US-led colonial war in Afghanistan as an incorrect utilization of Canada’s limited military capacity and fear that, in aligning Canada so closely with Washington, the Harper government is undermining the geo-political influence of Canada’s elite.

This is what Layton means when he proposes to rethink “Canada’s role in George Bush’s war” and mourns the “tarnishing of Canada’s international credibility in international law.”

Duceppe of the BQ worries that “by tacking so close to the policies of the Bush administration,” the Harper government has “isolated Canada from many of its former partners on the international scene.”

Thus the concerns of the opposition leaders are not with how the US intervention in Afghanistan, an intervention that dates back to its promotion of armed Islamicist groups in the late 1970s, is bringing war and suffering to the Afghan people, but how the Harper government’s policies are damaging the strategic interests of Canadian capital.

Not one single voice has risen from among the established political parties and the official media to demand the immediate withdrawal of all the Canadian and foreign troops that have occupied Afghanistan, nor to demand that those responsible for this war of aggression against an impoverished country be brought to justice.



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