

Canada: Government panel urges increased Canadian role in Afghan war

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A government-appointed advisory panel on Canada's intervention in Afghanistan has urged that the current Canadian Armed Forces' counterinsurgency mission be augmented and extended indefinitely.

The Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) have deployed 2,500 troops and some 15 Leopard tanks to Afghanistan's Kandahar province, making it far and away the biggest CAF mission since the Korean War.

Headed by former Liberal deputy prime minister John Manley, the advisory panel also called on the Conservative government to press Canada's NATO allies to deploy more troops to Afghanistan and accept a greater share of the blood-price that must be paid to sustain the country's US-installed government.

Since the summer of 2005, the CAF has led NATO's counterinsurgency war in Kandahar province, the traditional center of Taliban support. In May 2006, the minority Conservative government, with parliament's approval, extended the CAF deployment to February 2009.

The Conservative government appointed the Afghanistan advisory panel last October as part of its preparations to push through, in the face of massive public opposition, a further extension of the CAF counterinsurgency mission.

Given its composition, it was never in doubt that the purportedly nonpartisan, "wise persons" panel would conclude that the CAF should continue to play a leading role in the war in Afghanistan. Manley and the other four panel members—former Conservative cabinet minister Jake Epp, former CN Rail CEO Paul Tellier, one-time US ambassador Derek Burney, and Pamela Wallin, a former Canadian consul general in New York—were all on record as strongly supporting the CAF mission in Afghanistan and closer cooperation with Washington.

Nonetheless, the Conservative government didn't even wait for the panel's report before announcing in last fall's Throne Speech that it would be seeking parliament's approval in early 2008 for the CAF mission to be extended to 2011.

The panel has given Stephen Harper's Conservative government everything it was asking for and more.

The panel has called for the Canadian role in Kandahar to continue indefinitely, arguing, along the same lines as the US

political elite does in respect to Iraq, that Canadian troops should be withdrawn only when the country is pacified and the imperialist-sponsored Afghan state is capable of suppressing all challenges to its sovereignty. In an interview Tuesday, Manley said this should be possible within a decade.

The report has also provided the government with a means of placing leverage on Canada's NATO allies.

The panel says its support for the CAF mission continuing past February 2009 is conditional on the Canadian government providing the CAF with medium-lift helicopters and unmanned aerial surveillance vehicles and convincing NATO or other allies to deploy 1,000 additional troops to Kandahar to bolster the counterinsurgency campaign.

The panel further recommends that the Canadian government delay a promised House of Commons vote on extending the CAF mission in Afghanistan until after a NATO meeting in Bucharest in early April.

Harper can be expected to use Manley's report to pressure NATO countries—especially France, Germany and Italy—to lift restrictions on the use of their troops in combat missions, with the claim that an increased willingness on the part of Canada's NATO partners to shoulder the fighting in Afghanistan is necessary to maintain public support for the pivotal CAF deployment in Kandahar.

At the same time the panel's condition is loosely enough worded that were the US to agree to deploy to Kandahar some of the 3,200 additional troops it recently announced it is sending to Afghanistan, the Harper government could argue it has been fulfilled.

The report has been written with the aim of providing the Conservative government with political ammunition in arguing for an unlimited extension of the CAF deployment. It claims "an immediate withdrawal from Afghanistan ... would squander our investment," "dishonour" the "sacrifice" of the 78 CAF troops killed in Afghanistan, and "undermine our influence in the UN and in NATO capitals, including Washington."

The report's authors go to considerable lengths to argue that the US-led NATO occupation of Afghanistan is very different from the US occupation of Iraq. In reality the two are of a kind. Both invasions were launched by the US with the aim of expanding its geo-strategic hold on the world's oil resources.

Al Qaeda and the Taliban, moreover, arose from the US's organizing and arming of Islamic fundamentalists as part of its reactionary Cold War drive to undermine and overthrow the Soviet Union.

The Conservative government, led by Prime Minister Harper, has placed the expansion and rearmament of the CAF at the center of its agenda, arguing that Canada's military will be fundamental in the decades to come in asserting Canadian interests—that is, the interests of Canada's corporate elite—on the world stage. The Conservatives have championed the CAF deployment to Afghanistan, using it to revive a Canadian militarist tradition and acclimatize Canadians to the shedding of blood.

The panel fully subscribes to this view. Manley, in his forward to the report, hails the CAF mission in Afghanistan for the reputed power and influence it gives Canada on the world stage. "Afghanistan," writes Manley, "presents an opportunity for Canada. For the first time in many years we have brought a level of commitment to an international problem that gives us real weight and credibility."

The report argues, nevertheless, that the current government and the Liberal one that preceded it (and which initiated both Canada's participation in the US invasion and occupation of Afghanistan and the CAF counterinsurgency mission in southern Afghanistan) haven't done enough either to sell the war to the public or to give it the importance it deserves in government decision-making.

The report urges the government to attach even more importance to the war: "To ensure systematic and sustained political oversight and more effective implementation, a better integrated and more consistent Canadian policy approach should be led by the Prime Minister, supported by a special cabinet committee and a single full-time task force involving all key departments and agencies."

The corporate media has strongly supported the CAF's warmaking in Afghanistan and, not surprisingly, has all but universally lauded the Manley report.

The *Globe and Mail*, the traditional voice of Canada's financial elite, said Manley's panel "has made an eloquent and impassioned case for extending Canada's combat mission in Afghanistan."

The *National Post* criticized the Manley panel for placing any conditions whatsoever on the extension of the CAF role in the Afghan war, but concluded its editorial on the report by declaring, "With their report, Mr. Manley and his team have rendered a valuable service to Canada. We urge Prime Minister Stephen Harper to use it as launching pad for a reinvigorated mission in Afghanistan."

La presse, Quebec's most influential daily, proclaimed that the Afghan "file should be beyond partisan politics. It is an affair of state, in the most noble sense of the term, that involves the values, reputation, influence and role of Canada in the world, as underlined by John Manley."

The *Toronto Star*, which is closely aligned with the Liberal Party, urged Harper to use Manley's report and its proposal that extension of the CAF mission past February 2009 be tied to increased NATO assistance to reach out to the Liberal Party.

Trumpeting the report's call for the deployment of 1,000 more NATO troops to Kandahar, said the *Star*, "would go a long way to meeting Liberal Leader Stéphane Dion's demand that our 'combat mission' be wound down early in 2009, and other NATO troops be rotated in.

"This would take more leadership than Harper has yet shown, and compromise from Dion. But both owe it to our troops to craft a bipartisan consensus, if possible, to prevent the mission from becoming a corrosive election issue that further saps public confidence."

The reality is the Liberals are acutely aware of the strong big business support for the CAF's leading role in the Afghan war and many leading Liberals, including Manley and the current Deputy Liberal Michael Ignatieff, have been strongly identified with the Afghan war and Bush's "war on terror." The Liberals are thus badly divided over Dion's attempt to make a calibrated and hypocritical appeal to popular antiwar sentiment.

Under Dion, the Liberals have been calling for the CAF's role in the counterinsurgency war in southern Afghanistan to come to an end in February 2009. But they strongly support a continued Canadian military presence in Afghanistan and other forms of support for the US-installed government of Hamid Karzai. Last week, on returning from a two-day visit to Afghanistan, Dion suggested NATO troops might have to intervene in Pakistan.

Since the release of the Manley report, Dion has repeated his call for the current CAF mission to end in 2009. But there are several ways, as the *Star* editorial suggests, that a continued Canadian presence in Kandahar could be repackaged, including as principally a "training" mission.

For his part, Liberal foreign affairs critic Bob Rae has said Manley's recommendations warrant further discussion.

In May 2006, the Liberals supplied the Conservative government with enough votes to get parliamentary sanction to extend the CAF counterinsurgency war a further two years. With the release of the Manley report, the capitalist press has gone into overdrive to push for a similar bipartisan initiative to indefinitely extend CAF's leading role in the Afghan war. Behind this push lies corporate Canada's predatory ambitions of gaining greater influence in imperialist councils and a role in the reshaping of Central Asia, including the development of its vast oil and mineral wealth.



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