

Canada's Conservative government threatens Afghan war election

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Canada's minority Conservative government tabled a motion in parliament Friday to extend the Canadian Armed Force's combat mission in southern Afghanistan a further 34 months, i.e., until the end of 2011. Currently, 2,500 Canadian troops and a squadron of Leopard tanks are deployed in Kandahar province, the historic center of the Taliban.

Earlier this past week the government announced that it would consider the vote on extending the Canadian Armed Force's Afghan mission past February 2009, which is slated for late March, a "matter of confidence." Consequently should the House of Commons reject the motion to extend the CAF combat mission, the two year-old Conservative government will be deemed to have lost parliament's confidence, necessitating a federal election.

Stephen Harper's Conservative government has made no secret of the importance it attaches to the CAF deployment in Afghanistan, which has seen the CAF take a leading role in the Afghan war and a CAF-led Strategic Assistance Team gain a major voice in determining the policy of Afghanistan's US-installed government.

Canada's corporate elite has strongly supported the Harper government's attempt to use an expanded and re-armed Canadian military as a means of advancing its economic and strategic interests on the world stage. But opinion polls have repeatedly shown that a majority of Canadians oppose the CAF waging war in Afghanistan and that many more strongly favor the withdrawal of Canadian troops from southern Afghanistan by no later than February 2009 then strongly support extending the current combat mission.

Anti-war sentiment has been fueled by mounting casualties. 78 CAF troops have been killed in Afghanistan since 2001, almost all of them in the past two years.

All the opposition parties—the Liberals, the pro-Quebec independence Bloc Québécois (BQ) and the social-democratic New Democratic Party—supported Canada's participation in the US invasion of Afghanistan in 2001 and the deployment of Canadian troops to Kandahar beginning in the summer of 2005.

But beginning with the NDP, which withdrew its support for the CAF combat mission in August 2006, the opposition parties have found it politic to make an appeal, albeit a limited and almost entirely rhetorical one, to popular anti-war and anti-Bush sentiment.

The BQ, whose leader Gilles Duceppe has proclaimed the CAF mission in Afghanistan "noble," has for the past year, nonetheless, been saying it opposes any extension of the CAF combat mission past February.

The Liberals, the Canadian ruling class' traditional party of government, are badly divided over whether to support an extension of the CAF combat mission in southern Afghanistan—a mission that was launched by the Liberal government of Paul Martin.

Cognizant of these divisions, Harper asked John Manley—a former deputy Liberal prime minister and finance minister well-known for his support for Canada aligning even more closely with Washington and continuing to play a major role in the Afghan war—to head a "wiseperson's" committee tasked with recommending what the government should do when the CAF mission reaches the end of its current mandate in February 2009.

Predictably, Manley delivered a report that strongly supported the government's stand that the CAF should continue to wage war in Afghanistan for years to come. But the report was crafted in such a way as to encourage and facilitate a "bi-partisan" Liberal-Conservative stand in favor of an extension of the CAF's counter-insurgency campaign.

Manley's committee criticized the government for not doing enough to rally the Canadian people behind the Afghan war and said its support for extending the CAF mission is conditional on the government providing the CAF with helicopters and surveillance drones and convincing an ally to deploy 1,000 troops to Kandahar.

Despite the misgivings of many in the party leadership, Liberal leader Stéphane Dion has refused to embrace the Manley report. Instead he has stuck to the position he settled on last fall, that the Kandahar-based "combat mission" should end in February 2009. At the same time Dion has

emphasized the Liberals' strong support for both the US-NATO occupation of Afghanistan and a continued large-scale CAF deployment in Afghanistan. Only the CAF troops, says Dion, should focus on training Afghan forces and providing security for various reconstruction and development projects.

If truth be told, the difference between the Liberal and Conservative positions is not that great. Or rather the difference only assumes great importance because of the current state of the US-NATO occupation of Afghanistan—the growing isolation of the government in Kabul and the frictions and divisions within NATO over who is sharing the burden of the counter-insurgency war.

Press reaction to the government's decision to proclaim the vote on the motion extending the CAF combat mission a confidence vote has been divided. The editors of the *National Post*, the voice of Canada's neoconservatives, have declared it a "strategic masterstroke": "The Grits (Liberals) may defeat the motion and force an election they do not want (and cannot afford), abstain and look as pathetic as they did when they sat out last fall's vote on the Throne Speech, or vote in favour of the mission and lose it as a wedge issue when an election finally does come."

But other big business newspapers have criticized the Conservatives for not having done more to reach a bipartisan consensus on an issue of such great "national" importance. They have expressed also apprehensions that the Tory motion could precipitate an election in which an unpopular war would be a pivotal, if not the defining, issue. "The defeat of the government on this issue," declared the *Globe and Mail*, "... would have the Conservatives fighting an election over a mission for which support remains soft. It is a dangerous and unwise strategy."

Large sections of the corporate media would much prefer a bipartisan agreement to extend the CAF mission in Afghanistan, which would largely remove the war from public debate; and even if to secure it the Conservatives have to make some accommodations to Dion's stand, by for example, playing up the "training" aspect of the CAF mission.

That said, there is no question, that there will be a major ruling-class push to pressure the Liberals to vote for the government's motion and "save" the Afghan mission. The *Globe and Mail* flailed both Harper and Dion for having failed to mount "a serious bipartisan effort to find a way ahead." But it concluded its lead editorial on Thursday by warning the Liberals that if they vote against the Conservative motion, they will be "pulling the rug out from under the troops" and be liable to be branded as "the ones responsible for the mission's failure" and as "quitters" and "hypocrites."

The Conservative government's announcement that it will consider the motion on extending the mission a confidence vote is part of a more aggressive Conservative posture that suggests Harper may be seeking to precipitate his own government's defeat.

The Conservatives also announced this week their intention to introduce a motion in the House of Commons making it a matter of confidence if the Liberal-controlled Senate does not adopt a law and order bill, previously passed by the House of Commons, by the end of this month.

Opinion polls continue to show the Conservatives are far from having the popular support necessary to win a parliamentary majority. But the strong signs that the North American economy is going into recession appear to have caused the Conservatives to conclude that they will have a much better shot at winning a majority now, than later.

Given the unpopularity of the Afghan war, it might appear strange for the Conservatives to threaten the opposition with an election over the issue. They calculate, however, that the opposition parties will splinter amongst themselves the "antiwar" vote—although all are in fact complicit in the war—and that with the support of much of the corporate media they will be able to mount an aggressive nationalist and bellicose campaign. Routinely over the past year, the Conservatives have denounced the opposition parties for "letting the troops down" and tarred them for being "soft" on terrorism, even pro-Taliban.

In this regard, it is important to note that Canadian Armed Forces Chief Rick Hillier, who has assumed a major public role in boosting the Afghan mission, last week denounced the Liberal position on the CAF mission. Asked what he thought of the Liberal call for the CAF force in southern Afghanistan to go from a combat mission to a training and security mission after February 2009, Hillier declared, "If you're in Kandahar, you're going to be in combat operations ... the Afghan army is not yet capable enough to be able to handle security by itself."



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