

Canada's Liberals rally behind plan to expand Canadian role in Afghan War

Keith Jones
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The Liberals, the official opposition in Canada's parliament, are supporting the minority Conservative government in extending the Canadian Armed Forces' counter-insurgency mission in Afghanistan and in pressing NATO to expand the Afghan war.

On Tuesday, the Liberals submitted a lengthy amendment to a Conservative motion that seeks parliament's approval to extend the Canadian Armed Forces' (CAF) deployment to Afghanistan's Kandahar region till at least the end of 2011.

The Liberal amendment, as Prime Minister Stephen Harper was quick to observe, accords in its essentials with the Conservative government's plan. "I welcome the greater clarity in the Liberal position," said Harper. "I think this is important progress ..."

So taken was Harper with the Liberal amendment, he suggested that the Conservatives might withdraw their own motion so as to co-author one with the Liberals.

Later, in response to a speech by New Democratic Party leader Jack Layton that attacked the Liberal stance, Harper told parliament, "It's not my habit to defend the Liberal Party ... but the parties that run this country understand that in a dangerous world, you sometimes have to use force to defend peace."

In the past Harper has smeared the Liberals as Taliban-appeasers and apologists.

The Liberal amendment puts paid to the oft-stated claim of Liberal leader Stéphane Dion that his party opposes any extension of the CAF "combat mission"—that is, its leading role in the counter-insurgency war—beyond February 2009.

(This claim, as Dion himself always insisted, never implied anything other than full support for the US-NATO occupation of Afghanistan and the US-installed government of Hamid Karzai. It was the Liberal governments of Jean Chrétien and Paul Martin, as Dion repeatedly noted, that dispatched Canadian forces to Afghanistan in the fall of 2001 and later tasked the CAF with assuming a central role in the war in southern Afghanistan. Moreover, Dion and the Liberals have repeatedly denounced the NDP for calling, since August 2006, for the withdrawal of Canada's troops from Kandahar, terming their position "irresponsible" and a betrayal of Canada's international obligations.)

The Liberals' now jettisoned call for Canada to take on a "non-combat" mission in Afghanistan after February 2009 was a hypocritical attempt to appeal to popular anti-war sentiment and to hostility to the Bush administration, which is reviled by most Canadians for its belligerence and contempt for international law.

The Liberal call also voiced the fears of a minority section of the Canadian elite that the CAF intervention in Afghanistan has assumed too great a place in Canada's foreign policy.

But Canada's corporate elite, as a whole, strongly supports the CAF intervention in Afghanistan and the Harper government's pledge to use an expanded and re-armed CAF to assert "Canadian interests and values"—that is, the predatory aims and ambitions of Canadian big business—on the world stage.

John Manley, the former Liberal deputy prime minister and finance minister, who chaired a Conservative government-appointed "wisepersons" committee on the future of Canada's involvement with Afghanistan has boasted of the CAF intervention in Afghanistan. "For the first time in many years," he said, "we have brought a level of commitment to an international problem that gives us real weight and credibility."

This is a reference not just to the 2,500 troops Canada has deployed to Kandahar, the historic center of the Pashtun-based Taliban movement, but also to the significant role the Canadian government is playing in the shaping of Afghan government policy through the CAF-led Strategic Assistance Team—advisors "embedded" in key Afghan ministries including President Karzai's office.

The media vigorously promoted the report of Manley's committee. Released last month, it proposed an open-ended continuation of the CAF presence in Kandahar and leading role in the Afghan war, on the condition Ottawa secured some additional equipment and convinced an ally to deploy 1,000 troops to fight alongside Canada's soldiers in southern Afghanistan.

The editorial boards of the country's principal dailies, including the Liberal-aligned *Toronto Star* and Montreal's *La Presse*, were unanimous in urging the Liberals and Conservatives to rise above "partisanship" and come together, in the "national interest," to implement the recommendations of the Manley report.

But to the dismay of many on the Liberal front-bench, Dion refused to endorse the Manley report, even though it had been written with an eye to providing the Liberals with a means of rallying behind an extension of the CAF mission without appearing to be bowing to their Conservative opponents.

Then last week, Harper upped the ante by announcing that the Conservatives will stake their government's existence on passage of their motion to extend Canada's leading role in the Afghan war through 2011.

While the neo-conservative *National Post* proclaimed Harper's

threat of an Afghan war election a “strategic coup,” many other media voices expressed apprehension and trepidation at the possibility that a war highly unpopular among the majority of Canadians but enthusiastically supported by the elite could become the pivot of election debate.

Consequently, the corporate media redoubled its demands for a “bi-partisan” Liberal-Conservative agreement on the Afghan war. While both Dion and Harper were criticized by the editorialists, they left no doubt that they were demanding that the Liberals provide the Conservatives with the votes to secure parliamentary passage of a motion extending the CAF war mission.

The military, for its part, openly intervened in the debate, pouring scorn on the Liberals’ claims that the CAF could be redeployed elsewhere in Afghanistan or remain in the south without waging war.

Dion quickly found himself threatened with a rebellion of his front-bench.

In May 2006, Michael Ignatieff, who finished second to Dion in the race to succeed Paul Martin as Liberal leader and who currently is Deputy Liberal leader, and the then-interim party leader, Bill Graham, led more than a quarter of the Liberal MPs in supporting an emergency Conservative motion to extend the CAF mission in Kandahar for two years, to February 2009. (Most of the Liberals who opposed the motion, it should be noted, did so on procedural grounds.)

Joining Ignatieff over the past two weeks in demanding the Liberals’ again rally to the government’s support was Bob Rae, the former Ontario NDP premier and the third-place finisher in the most recent Liberal leadership contest.

Many of the differences between the original Conservative motion and the Liberal amendment are, as the *Globe and Mail* observed, “a matter more of semantics than substance.”

Earlier Dion had said that if Canadian troops remained in Kandahar after February 2009 they should not engage in combat unless attacked, and eschew search and destroy missions.

The Liberal amendment, like the original Conservative motion, proposes that the CAF give increasing importance to training Afghan forces—which has in fact always been an important and stated aim of the CAF mission.

But Dion made clear that the Liberals now concede that the CAF will be waging war. Whatever they say about whether the CAF is or is not on a combat mission, the Liberals have spelled out that they are not going to place limitations on the Canadian military’s ability to employ force, such as Italy and Germany have placed on their troops serving in less politically turbulent parts of Afghanistan.

“We are not speaking of caveats,” said Dion. “We will not micromanage the military. It’s up to them [the military] to decide” their tactics.

If there was any doubt of the Liberals’ meaning it has been dispelled in various off the record discussions between leading Liberals and reporters. According to the *Toronto Star*, Liberals involved in the drafting of their party’s motion “said they would not object to Canadian soldiers training their Afghan counterparts to conduct offensive operations that they would also take part in, provided that the operation is Afghan-led.”

The principal difference between the Conservative motion and the Liberal amendment is that the Liberal amendment stipulates that Ottawa inform NATO the CAF deployment to Kandahar will begin to wind down in February 2011 and that all Canadian troops will be withdrawn from there by the beginning of July 2011. The Conservative motion calls for the deployment to continue until at least the end of 2011.

The Liberals have also said the yet to be found, future CAF partner in Kandahar should assume the leading role in the counter-insurgency war. Harper has indicated that he might be amenable to this. “We want to get those extra troops and I think if we phrase this right we certainly are making it clear to allies that Canada’s looking for partnership. Partnership, typically in these situations, involves some kind of rotation of the lead.”

The Afghan war is only the latest instance in which the Liberals have given the minority Conservative government urgently needed support.

Last fall the Liberals abstained on the Conservative Throne Speech, allowing the Conservative minority government to escape defeat. Last week they joined with the Conservatives to pass legislation aimed at providing a constitutional cover for “national security certificates”—a program that empowers the government to detain non-citizens alleged to have terrorist ties indefinitely, without trial, and without the right even to know the evidence the government has against them.

The capitalist press largely explains the increasing bi-partisan unity of the Liberals and their ostensible Conservative rivals from the standpoint of a Liberal Party leadership crisis. Dion, a former university academic, is said to lack charisma and good political instincts.

The Liberals, who during the 20th century were the principal governing party of the Canadian bourgeoisie, certainly are in political crisis. But the source of this crisis is the growing popular alienation from the traditional parties, which for the past quarter century have pursued an unrelenting offensive against the social gains working people made in the decades immediately following World War II, and the current strong support of the corporate elite for the Conservatives and their right-wing agenda.

The Liberal leadership supports many of the Harper government’s policies and actions, rightly viewing them as a continuation of the course charted by the Chrétien-Martin Liberal government of 1993-2006, which in terms of social and fiscal policy was Canada’s most right-wing federal government since the Great Depression.



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