

# Canada: Liberals and Conservatives join forces to extend intervention in Afghan war

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Responding to repeated demands from the Canadian establishment, the minority Conservative government of Prime Minister Stephen Harper and the official opposition Liberals have agreed to extend the Canadian Armed Forces' (CAF) mission in southern Afghanistan for another two-and-a-half years.

Under conditions where the Canadian public is overwhelmingly opposed to Canada's leading role in the Afghan war, the country's two principal parties claim to have set aside their differences in the name of the "national interest"—in other words, to jointly pursue a policy opposed by the populace. The House of Commons is slated to vote on the joint Liberal-Conservative motion authorizing the CAF mission's extension on March 13.

"I agree with the Prime Minister that what we have now is neither a Conservative motion nor a Liberal motion. It is a Canadian motion," declared Liberal leader Stéphane Dion after the war motion was tabled in the House of Commons. Harper had made similar comments several days before.

The new motion would extend the Canadian army's counter-insurgency mission in Kandahar province from February 2009 until July 2011. As a condition for the extension, the popularly-elected lower house of Canada's parliament will demand that Canada's NATO allies deploy at least an additional 1,000 soldiers to fight alongside the CAF force in Kandahar and assist Canada in equipping the CAF force with helicopters and drone airplanes. These conditions follow the recommendations of a Conservative-appointed "wise-persons" committee tasked with considering Canada's future role in Afghanistan. Headed by former Deputy Liberal Prime Minister John Manley, the committee issued a report, which has come to be popularly known as the Manley Report, that was strongly supportive of extending the CAF intervention in southern Afghanistan indefinitely.

2,500 Canadian troops and a squad of some 15 Leopard tanks are deployed to the southern Afghan province of Kandahar, which historically has been a bastion of the Taliban and is currently the frontline in the US-NATO counter-insurgency war in support of Hamid Karzai's US-installed government. Since 2005 more than 60 Canadian soldiers have lost their lives in Afghanistan and another 650 have been injured. Taking into account the number of soldiers deployed, these casualty figures represent a substantially higher percentage of dead and wounded than the US army has suffered in Iraq, and represent a substantial portion of the total casualties that NATO forces have suffered in Afghanistan.

On March 3, yet another Canadian soldier was killed by a roadside bomb, just days before the scheduled end of his tour of duty.

In joining with the Conservatives to prolong the CAF's leading role in the Afghan war for a further 25 months, Liberal leader Dion has repudiated the position that he advanced since shortly after he won the Liberal leadership in late 2006. Dion had been demanding that the CAF should hand over the Kandahar counter-insurgency operation to another

NATO country after February 2009, and that the Canadian army should thereafter limit its role to providing security for reconstruction efforts, to the training of Afghan security forces, and other forms of non-combat assistance. (A team of some 20 Canadians, most of them CAF officers, are directly advising the puppet government of Hamid Karzai.)

Despite the vociferous support of the ruling class and all the major media outlets for the Canadian military's leading role in the Afghan war, polls indicate that a substantial majority—over 60 percent—of the Canadian population is opposed to the CAF intervention.

In order to garner votes, the Liberal Party during 2007 hypocritically tried to differentiate itself from the Bush-allied Conservative government by demanding the withdrawal of Canadian troops from Kandahar Province when the current mission expires in February 2009.

However, the distinction between the Liberal and Conservative Parties on the question of the Afghan war has always been more verbal than real. It was the Liberal government of Jean Chrétien that first sent CAF troops to Afghanistan, in Canada's largest military operation since the Korean War, and it was Chrétien's Liberal successor, Paul Martin, who authorized the sending of troops to Kandahar. The Liberals have never demanded more than a rotation among the NATO states of the responsibility for manning the Kandahar front and have always unconditionally supported the Karzai government and the Afghan war. While the Conservatives have placed support for the Afghan war at the center of their political program, the Liberals have attempted not to draw too much public attention to their advocacy of the same policy.

Had the Liberal Party chosen to oppose the Conservatives' efforts to extend the CAF intervention in Afghanistan, the minority government of Stephen Harper would have been brought down, because Harper has made the extension of the Canadian military mission a parliamentary "confidence vote." This would have raised the possibility of an election in which the Afghan war would have been the central issue, a situation judged too politically dangerous by the Canadian bourgeoisie due to the huge opposition to the war within the working class.

Since the Manley report was issued in late January, the major dailies have been filled with editorials and commentary calling on the Liberals to change their position and support a prolongation of the CAF mission in Kandahar—calls to which the Liberals rapidly acquiesced. (See: Canada's Liberals rally behind plan to expand Canadian role in Afghan War)

In order to maintain the pretence that they differ with the government, the Liberals responded to the initial Conservative motion to extend the CAF mission by putting forward an alternate motion that also proposed extending Canada's leading role in the Afghan war. The Liberal motion proclaimed that the main goal of a continued CAF deployment to Kandahar should be to train Afghan security forces. But Dion made sure to stipulate that training would include mounting combat missions alongside Afghan forces and that the CAF top brass, which is strongly supportive of the CAF's role in the counter-insurgency war, would be given a free hand in deciding what combat is necessary for effective

training. The Liberals, Dion declared, have no intention of “micro-managing” the military.

The Conservatives responded by withdrawing their motion, so as to develop a bipartisan one.

The motion the Conservatives have now tabled in the House of Commons incorporates much of the language of the Liberal motion, allowing the official opposition to claim that it compelled the government to make concessions. But the only substantive difference between the original Conservative motion and the joint Liberal-Conservative motion is that the new motion states that the CAF mission will begin to be wound down in July 2011 and that all CAF forces will be withdrawn from Kandahar by the end of 2011. The original Conservative motion extended the mission until the end of 2011, adding that during that year the government and parliament would deliberate on whether the Canadian presence in Kandahar needed to be further prolonged.

Not only does the Liberal-Conservative motion not prevent the Canadian military from prosecuting the war against the Taliban and other opponents of the Afghan government, the reputed July 2011 end date is completely porous. “[A]fter all,” states a *Globe and Mail* editorial, “there is nothing to prevent a future government from asking Parliament for a further extension.”

In Harper’s announcement accepting the basic outlines of the Liberal motion, he let slip the true imperialist motives of the Canadian intervention in Afghanistan. What was at issue, said Harper, was the need for “a strong, multifaceted military, backed by the political will to deploy” so as to assert “Canadian interests on the world stage.”

“Countries that cannot or will not make real contributions to global security are not regarded as serious players. They may be pleasantly acknowledged by everybody. But when the hard decisions get made, they will be ignored by everybody.”

Predictably, the *Globe and Mail*, the mouthpiece for the Canada’s Toronto-based financial elite, has hailed the joint Liberal-Conservative initiative to extend Canada’s role in the Afghan counter-insurgency war.

“Conciliatory isn’t a word normally associated with Stephen Harper, but this week the word fits,” the paper intoned. “This is an important moment for Canada on the international stage and for its vital mission in Afghanistan.”

“A defeat on the government’s motion could have turned a vital security mission into a messy political fight, undermining troops in the field. A bipartisan motion would allow Mr. Harper to deliver an unequivocal ultimatum to a North Atlantic Treaty Organization summit in early April: that Canada will withdraw from Afghanistan next year unless other nations supply at least 1,000 more troops and more equipment.”

As the *Globe and Mail* has underlined, this agreement between the two parties not only upholds the geo-strategic interests of the Canadian elite in the face of huge opposition from the Canadian working class. It is also meant to contribute to the expansion and intensification of the imperialist intervention in Afghanistan by forcing the hand of the major European powers who themselves face huge domestic opposition to the Afghan war.

To overcome the increased resistance by Afghans to foreign occupation, leaders of the US-NATO occupation are advocating adoption of the “surge” strategy used by the US in Iraq, that is, the sending of more troops and the intensification of military attacks.

The United States has accused the European powers of not being combative enough in Afghanistan, and the Canadian demand for more combat troops in Kandahar is a means of pressuring the Europeans on behalf of Washington.

France is considering sending more than 1,000 soldiers to reinforce US military positions on the Afghan-Pakistani border, which would free up the same number of US soldiers to fight alongside the Canadian troops in Kandahar. The US government has already announced that it will deploy an additional 3,200 soldiers to Afghanistan in the coming weeks,

including 2,200 to the south. These troops will be supported by some 40 flying machines, including helicopters, Harrier AV-83 fighters and drone aircraft. The Franco-American deployment would satisfy the Harper government’s conditions to extend the Canadian mission in Afghanistan.

Chief of Defence Staff Rick Hillier has demanded that Parliament give “overwhelming” support to the extension of the CAF mission in Afghanistan, implying that MPs who vote against the extension will be inciting the Taliban to carry out bomb attacks against Canadian military convoys.

Leaders of Canada’s military and security-intelligence agencies have intervened in the public debate with increasing frequency and aggressiveness in recent years in order to pressure political leaders to increase military and police spending and increase police powers.

These interventions have generally been given a very sympathetic hearing by the press, radio and television. Last October, General Hillier told the Association of Canadian Broadcasters that, “in a way I serve them [the soldiers] as much as I serve the government of Canada and you Canadians and Canada itself.” His speech received a standing ovation from the owners and managers of Canada’s broadcasters.

Because the two principal parties of big business in Parliament have now agreed to press forward with the aggressive use of the CAF to aggressively promote “Canadian interests” on the world stage, the *Globe and Mail* felt free to gently criticize Hillier for his blatant attempt to intimidate MPs into doing the military’s bidding. After showering praise on the general for his public advocacy of the Canadian intervention in Afghanistan, the *Globe and Mail* criticized him for so overtly pressuring parliamentarians. “It is a discouraging prospect,” said the *Globe*, “that our soldiers are so hypersensitive that they require the expressed support of every single Bloc Québécois and New Democratic MP in order to do their jobs.”

Gilles Duceppe, head of the separatist Bloc Québécois, has declared that he will vote against the Liberal-Conservative motion because “we have now had two firm dates [for withdrawal of the CAF from Kandahar] which have been cancelled and postponed. For us it is February 2009, end of story.”

Like the Liberals, the *Bloquistes* are trying to position themselves to gain antiwar votes. But also like the Liberals—at least until Dion joined hands with Harper to extend the CAF intervention for a further two and a half years—Duceppe has only called for Canada to pull back from the Kandahar front and never for an end to the Afghan occupation and war. In a long policy speech on Afghanistan given in 2007, Duceppe insisted that the US-NATO occupation constituted “a noble cause.”

The social-democratic New Democratic Party (NDP) supported the CAF’s participation in the Afghan war from 2001 through the summer of 2006. Today it calls for the withdrawal of Canadian troops from Afghanistan in order to send them to other parts of the world such as Lebanon, Haiti, or Darfur. The NDP wants NATO to transfer responsibility for the war in Afghanistan to the United Nations, pretending that the UN—dominated by the United States and the great powers of Europe—would play a role different than that of NATO, which was given the mandate for the Afghan occupation by the United Nations in the first place.



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