

Canada: Electioneering cannot obscure major parties' support for Afghan war

The media's hostile reaction

Keith Jones**13 September 2008**

In a transparent election ploy, Conservative Prime Minister Stephen Harper declared this week that his government is “planning” to end the Canadian Armed Forces’ (CAF) counterinsurgency mission in southern Afghanistan three years hence—i.e., in December 2011—when the mission’s current commitment to NATO expires.

Speaking Wednesday, the fourth day of the campaign for the October 14 federal election and one day after US President George Bush announced US plans to intensify the Afghan war, Harper said, “We’re planning for the withdrawal of Canadian troops from Afghanistan in 2011...

“I don’t want to say we won’t have a single troop there, because obviously we would aid in some technical capacities mission. But, at that point, the mission as we have known it—we intend to end.”

Later Harper added that he doubted there “will be much appetite among Canadians ... even among the armed forces themselves” to see the CAF’s Afghan counterinsurgency role continue beyond six years.

Harper has championed the colonial-style war being waged by 2,500 CAF troops in support of the US-installed government of Hamid Karzai, saying that it exemplifies the more muscular foreign policy Canada needs to assert its interests on the world stage.

Earlier this year, he threatened to call an election if the Official Opposition Liberals refused to support his minority government’s proposal to extend the CAF deployment in Afghanistan’s Kandahar Province from February 2009 through 2011.

The corporate media, for its part, demanded in no uncertain terms that the Liberals join hands with their Conservative opponents, while counseling the latter to make cosmetic changes to their parliamentary resolution prolonging the CAF deployment so as to secure Liberal support. The Canadian elite feared that an election campaign in which the Afghan issue would play a central role would fan antiwar sentiment and give the Canadian people too much influence over the government’s ultimate decision.

Polls have consistently shown that a majority of Canadians want a quick, if not an immediate, end to the CAF combat mission in Afghanistan. This is especially true in Quebec, where the Conservatives are hoping to win a large swathe of the additional seats they need to secure a parliamentary majority. Canada’s only majority French-speaking province has a long pacifist and nationalist-isolationist tradition stretching back to the beginning of the 20th century.

Till Wednesday Harper had consistently refused to stipulate any firm end date for the CAF mission in Afghanistan. His remarks came the morning after US President Bush announced that the Pentagon

would be shifting troops from Iraq to Afghanistan in pursuit of an Afghan “surge” strategy. The intensification of the war will undoubtedly have a huge impact on the people living, and CAF personnel deployed, in Kandahar. It has been widely anticipated in the press that during the current election campaign the CAF will suffer its symbolically significant 100th Afghan fatality.

Also Tuesday, many of the country’s newspapers featured prominently a Canwest news report on a meeting organized by the International Development Research Center, a federal agency. The former Canadian ambassador to Afghanistan, Arif Lalani, told the meeting that the insurgency was gaining in strength and argued that it is “essential” for more US-NATO troops to be “deployed on the ground.”

Fred Hampson, head of Carleton University’s School of International Affairs, predicted Canada’s next prime minister would almost certainly be faced with a demand from Washington to expand the CAF’s role in the counterinsurgency war. Said Hampson, “One of the questions that’s going to be absolutely critical for the next government in Canada is when that call comes from Washington: ‘We know that 2011 is your exit date. Are you prepared to stay? Are you not only prepared to stay, but are you willing between now and 2011 to build up some of your capabilities?’ That’s going to be an enormously thorny, difficult issue for the next government of this country.”

In apparent response to Hampson’s remarks, Liberal leader Stéphane Dion reiterated Tuesday that a Liberal government will end the CAF counter-insurgency mission in Afghanistan in 2011. “And after that,” said Dion, “the mission in Kandahar will be terminated for the government of Canada and for our troops. We’ll have other missions to do in the world.”

Harper and Dion are both pulling their punches to appeal to the electorate. Their talk of ending the CAF mission in Afghanistan is meant to obscure the fact that both of their parties—one the government, the other the official opposition—are fully committed to waging war in Afghanistan for the next year three years. And so as to sustain in power a US-imposed government notorious for its corruption, brutality and hostility to basic democratic principles and so as to project Ottawa’s and Washington’s influence into oil-rich Central Asia.

The war, it need be added, is about to expand dramatically, as the US implements its “surge” strategy and asserts the right to carry out military strikes in Pakistan in flagrant violation of that country’s sovereignty.

The US is currently in the process of deploying 900 troops to Kandahar to fight alongside the CAF in pacifying what Harper himself has termed Afghanistan's most dangerous region. The CAF, meanwhile, is dispatching an additional 250 personnel to Kandahar to service the military helicopters that Ottawa recently acquired to bolster the counterinsurgency campaign.

No credence, moreover, should be given to the claims of Harper and Dion that they will end the CAF's combat role in Afghanistan in 2011.

The very same day that Harper purportedly pledged to withdraw the bulk of the CAF troops from Afghanistan in 2011, he delivered a bellicose speech meant to demonstrate that the Conservatives, unlike their electoral opponents, are ready to aggressively assert the interests of Canadian big business on the world stage.

"As prime minister," declared Harper, "I believe our foreign policy is not just about getting along and going along. It is to use this country's assets and goodwill to stand for something, to stand up for our most fundamental interest and our most basic values."

Harper then cited a long list of instances where his government had taken "strong" stands—for the most parts aligning itself full-square with the Bush administration—including cutting off aid to the Hamas-led government in Gaza, "warn[ing] about the dangers emerging in Russia, ... and ... assert[ing] our sovereignty over own Arctic." In particular, Harper singled out his government's enthusiastic support for the 2006 Israeli invasion of Lebanon.

As for the Liberals, they have a long and notorious record of denouncing the policy prescriptions of their right-wing opponents, only to subsequently implement them.

It was the Liberal governments of the first half of this decade that implemented the largest overseas deployment of the CAF since the Korean War in support of the US's 2001 invasion of Afghanistan and later tasked the CAF with a leading role in the counterinsurgency war in southern Afghanistan.

In the last parliament, the Liberals twice came to the Conservatives' aid to push through extensions and expansions of Canada's role in the Afghan war. On the second occasion, last winter, Dion, after weeks of asserting that the Liberals would not extend the CAF deployment in Kandahar beyond February 2009, bowed before the wishes of big business (and his own front bench) and joined hands with his Conservative rivals to prolong the mission for another two-and-a-half years.

The Liberal-Conservative bipartisan war resolution—with its claim that the extension of the CAF mission was "conditional" on another country deploying 1,000 troops to Kandahar—was subsequently used, as its authors had intended, by the Bush administration to pressure other NATO countries to increase their involvement in the Afghan war.

Given the unpopularity and political isolation of the Karzai regime and the crisis facing the US-NATO occupation, to say nothing of the intensifying great-power conflicts globally, there is every reason to expect that the next government, whether Conservative or Liberal, will claim that changed conditions have made the government's "plans" to withdraw the CAF obsolete.

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The extent of the pro-war consensus in the Canadian elite is further illustrated by the hostile reaction of the country's most influential newspapers to Harper's less than iron-clad pledge to withdraw most of Canada's troops from Afghanistan by the end of 2011. The *Globe and Mail*, *National Post*, and Montreal's *La presse* all criticized the prime minister for pandering to public opinion, making clear in the process that they very much support readying the CAF to keep waging war in Afghanistan after 2011.

"Afghanistan ... is not some glorified public relations matter in which positions can be shifted based on the latest opinion polls," asserted the *Globe*.

Eager to insulate the formulation of Canada's foreign policy from the will of the populace, the *Globe* added, "Further decisions about our future role in [Afghanistan] must be made in a sober fashion, removed—as much as possible—from the partisan pressure of a federal election campaign."

The rabidly pro-Conservative *National Post* was even more biting in its criticism of what it termed "Stephen Harper's Afghan retreat." After decrying "an official pull-out date" as "the last thing we should do," it urged Harper "to emulate Messrs. McCain and Obama and announce his intention to bulk up Canadian forces in Afghanistan."

La presse lamented that "this absolute deadline fixed by Harper deprives him of a margin of maneuver that may be necessary for him ... if he is reelected."

The three other parties—the social-democratic NDP, Quebec *indépendantiste* Bloc Québécois (BQ) and the Greens—have all changed their position on Canada's participation in the Afghan war to curry favor with the majority antiwar electorate.

The Greens, who have never elected a member of parliament, did not even mention the word "Afghanistan" in their 2006 federal election platform.

Till August 2006, that is for a few months short of five years, the NDP supported Canada's participation in the Afghan war, including the CAF's assumption of a leading role in the counterinsurgency war in southern Afghanistan.

The BQ has repeatedly denounced the NDP's call for termination of the AF deployment to Kandahar prior to the previous February 2009 termination date as "irresponsible."

Whatever their formal positions on the CAF mission, bowing before the bipartisan pro-war consensus of Canada's ruling elite, none of these parties is making Canada's participation in a colonial war in Afghanistan a major focus of its election campaign. NDP leader Jack Layton failed to even mention the war in his opening election address.



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