

Canada: Afghan war could cost in excess of \$18 billion

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With just five days to go before Canadians vote in the October 14 federal election, Kevin Page, the Government of Canada's parliamentary budget officer, released a report Thursday that conservatively estimates the cost of the Canadian military intervention in Afghanistan at between \$14 billion and \$18 billion.

Based on data gathered for the period beginning in the fall 2002, when Canadian troops joined the US invasion of Afghanistan, and projecting through to the government's proposed December, 2011 end date for the Canadian Armed Forces' combat mission in Kandahar, the report concludes that the war could cost each Canadian household around \$1,500.

The report, which was released with all-party agreement, had been requested by NDP Foreign Affairs critic, Paul Dewar, via the freedom of information process after stone-walling by the government of Conservative Prime Minister Stephen Harper. But due to "a significant lack of fiscal transparency", faulty accounting practices, and the refusal of several government departments, including Foreign Affairs, Veteran Affairs and the Canadian International Development Agency to share internal data, Page and his team of auditors were forced to rely on general spending estimates from publicly available sources and international allies.

Analysts have commented that Page's estimates of the cost of the war would likely have been significantly higher had he had access to more precise "bottom up" figures. But even the numbers gleaned by Page's team, show the war's costs to be significantly higher than what the government has reported to parliament.

The Harper government has stated that the total cost of the war to date, including military salaries, stands just under \$8 billion. But Page did not include salaries in his totals because those salaries would have been paid even had the CAF not been deployed to Afghanistan. Had Page also factored in salaries, his numbers would have been much higher than the \$14-18 billion estimate. Indeed, a Rideau Institute think-tank report pegs the cost at \$28 billion when these "non-incremental" costs are included. In any case, Page's figure of \$10.5 billion expended to date still outstrips the government total and yet does not include soldier salaries!

Page's report is based on analysis of incremental costs for

military operations, equipment depreciation, death and disability benefits, and reconstruction. As the budget officer's report includes, unlike the government's figures, the extensive costs for equipment wear and tear, Page's estimates are significantly higher than those previously provided by the Harper government.

Furthermore, analysts have pointed out that both Page's report and the official government figures are based on the deployment of 2,500 military personnel in Afghanistan through 2011. However, next summer 350 more soldiers will be deployed along with new battlefield helicopters and unmanned drone planes. And the injection of even more resources on top of this extra deployment has not been ruled out.

Both the Republican and Democratic Party candidates for the US presidency, and especially front-runner Barack Obama, have called for the US-NATO war in Afghanistan to be intensified as well as broadened to include Pakistan's border regions.

The details of the Page report uncover some striking facts about the Canadian military adventure in Afghanistan. Despite the claim that the goal is to build "democracy" and "civil society" in the war-torn country, only ten percent of the expenditures, \$1.7 billion, are being earmarked for development and aid. Even these monies are being pulled from development projects in other areas of the globe, with close to 10 percent of the annual budget of the Canadian International Development Agency or CIDA now devoted to Afghanistan.

Ninety-seven Canadian soldiers, one diplomat and two aid workers have been killed in Afghanistan since the initial deployment some seven years ago. Page expects mortality rates to increase through 2011 based on an examination of trends in 2006 when resistance began to grow in Kandahar province. This escalation seems to have caught the Canadian government completely off guard. Costs for operations during fiscal 2005-2006 were more than 300 percent over budget!

Total casualty figures including injury have not been reported by the military. Page estimates that to date there have been more than 5,100 and possibly as many 7,700 cases of CAF personnel, deployed to Afghanistan, becoming at least temporarily disabled by injury, sickness, or post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). (Troops are currently rotated through

Afghanistan every six months.)

His report goes on to say that the longer term psychological affects on soldiers returning from the war will be significant but those costs are not included in his estimates. Similarly, the long-term costs for the care of soldiers who have received egregious wounds in battle have not been calculated in his report.

Page is hardly a virulent critic of the imperialist adventure in Afghanistan. He reserved his most trenchant criticism for an accounting system that "appears to lag behind the best practices of other jurisdictions in terms of quality and frequency of war cost reporting to their respective legislatures." He continued, "To date, Parliament has been provided with only limited information, often after the fact, on these costs, and has not been given estimates on future costs that may be incurred in the support of veterans of these conflicts."

While compiling his report, Page found that the Department of National Defense's own figures reported to parliament, did not match those in its own internal books. Key departments refused to provide the audit team with internal accounts and projections. Even requests for such basic information as the amount of troops deployed at any given time and for the type of equipment issued were ignored by government departments. Page concludes his report with an appeal for better accounting practices.

The response to Page's report on the campaign trail has been quite telling. Taking a page from the playbook of United States President George Bush, Conservative Prime Minister Stephen Harper shrugged off Page's findings and defended the expenditures as necessary, leaving the door open for continued increases. Ignoring the fact that a majority of Canadians favour a quick end to the Afghan mission, Harper intoned, "When we have men and women in uniform, diplomats and development workers who are putting their lives on the line, the government will spend what is necessary to make sure they are safe and successful."

For his part, Liberal leader Stephane Dion-whose party initiated the mission and, who along with Harper, brokered the bi-partisan Liberal-Conservative parliamentary motion extending the mission through 2011-had nothing to say about the carnage wreaked in Afghanistan nor the drain on resources in Canada. Instead his comments were entirely devoted to decrying bad accounting practices, practices that were also the stock-in-trade of the previous Liberal government of Paul Martin.

The Liberal-Conservative consensus in favor of the Afghan war exemplifies the turn of Canada's ruling class toward war as an instrument for asserting its "national interests" on the world stage. Harper, in particular, has touted the Afghan mission and the expansion and rearmament of the CAF as pivotal for Canada to be a "player" in world affairs.

Both the Quebec *indÃ©pendantiste* Bloc QuÃ©bÃ©cois (BQ) and the social-democratic New Democratic Party (NDP) feigned outrage over Page's report. Both parties are complicit in

the war that Canada is waging so as to prop up the US-imposed government of Hamid Karzai.

While the BQ did vote last March against the latest extension in the CAF counter-insurgency war in southern Afghanistan, BQ leader Gilles Duceppe has repeatedly hailed the war as a "noble mission" and attacked the NDP's call for the "immediate" recall of Canadian troops as "irresponsible." (In fact, the social democrats have said any such recall should be coordinated with Canada's NATO allies to ensure that their activities-i.e., the war-would not be harmed.)

Seeking to win votes by currying to the strong anti-war sentiment in Quebec, Duceppe called Thursday for an emergency parliamentary debate to discuss "redefining" or "rebalancing" the mission, to give greater importance to socio-economic development. In other words, the BQ favors Canada continuing to assist the US and NATO in propping up the Karzai government. It only wants Canadian troops to take something less than a frontline role.

In his response to the Page report, NDP leader Jack Layton noted the role Liberal and Conservative governments have played in mounting what is far and away the largest CAF mission since the Korean War. Said Layton, "Whether it was the Liberals that took us into the war, the Conservatives who extended the war with the help of the Liberals, they haven't been straight up with Canadians about the costs."

What Layton omitted to say is that his party supported the CAF deployment to Afghanistan, including Canada assuming a leading role in the counter-insurgency war by deploying to Kandahar Province, for almost five years. And like the BQ, Layton does not envisage a true withdrawal of Canada from Afghanistan, but rather that Canada should emphasize different tactics in supporting the Karzai regime.

While the NDP, with its call for a quick end to the CAF's leading role in the counter-insurgency war, is arguably the major party whose position on Afghanistan most corresponds with popular sentiment, Layton and the NDP leadership have downplayed it throughout the campaign. They have done so out of concern it would cut across their attempts to reposition the NDP as a mainstream, "progressive party," that is, to win sections of the Canadian elite over to the view that the NDP can be trusted with a share of power.



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