

Canada's Liberals press for extension of Afghan occupation

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Bob Rae, the Liberal Party foreign affairs critic and former New Democratic Party (NDP) premier of Ontario, penned an op-ed column in the *Toronto Star* last week that argued for Canada to continue to play a major role in propping up Afghanistan's corrupt US-installed government. In particular Rae insisted upon the importance of Canada—that is, the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF)—providing military training to Afghan forces when the current CAF mission in the southern province of Kandahar comes to an end in December 2011.

Canada has deployed almost 3,000 troops, backed by fighter planes and Leopard tanks, to support the US-NATO occupation of Afghanistan.

Titled “Why Afghanistan is not Vietnam,” Rae's column argues that the West and Canada have a fundamental strategic interest in subjugating the impoverished Central Asian country and that Canada must resist, therefore, mounting calls to “abandon ship.” “The Taliban,” says Rae, “joke that ‘you have the watches but we have the time’. They are betting on a speedy departure. If the rush to the exits takes hold as the new prevailing orthodoxy, it will mean that extremism has won an important victory.”

Rae's strident “stay-the-course”, pro-occupation stand is all the more noteworthy in that it come at a time when the US-NATO occupation is in manifest crisis and increasingly unpopular in both Afghanistan and the West. Rae's call for parliament to “reengage” with the Afghan issue comes on the heels of the military setbacks that resulted in the sacking of General Stanley McCrystal as the US's Afghan war commander and the release by WikiLeaks of US military documents showing an ongoing pattern of NATO atrocities against the Afghan population.

Rae's pro-occupation position is reflective of the thinking of the Liberal Party establishment. Party leader Michael Ignatieff recently announced that Canada's Official Opposition is appealing to the minority Conservative government to join with it in adopting a parliamentary resolution that would provide for hundreds of CAF personnel to serve as Afghan military trainers once the current Kandahar mission ends late next year.

In a June 15 speech to the National Forum in Toronto, Ignatieff forthrightly stated that Canadian soldiers should be used to train the Afghan army and police in counterinsurgency

warfare in a staff-college setting in Kabul. Ignatieff added that CAF personnel should serve in Afghanistan in such a “non-combat” role for at least three more years, i.e., until at least the middle of the decade.

Ignatieff's position seemingly runs up against the one taken by Conservative Prime Minister Stephen Harper that there will be no post-combat mission for Canada's military in Afghanistan.

Although the Conservatives made the war in Afghanistan a defining policy of their first term in government (February 2006 through October 2008) and continue to press forward with a massive rearmament program, they have been coy in recent months about what role, if any, the CAF should play in Afghanistan post-2011.

On several occasions, Conservative cabinet ministers have made ambiguous statements that left open the door to a continuing CAF in Afghanistan. But when US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton specifically requested that the CAF keep up to 500 military personnel in Afghanistan after its Kandahar mission ends so as to provide counter-insurgency training, Harper said his government stands behind the bi-partisan Conservative-Liberal parliamentary resolution passed in 2008 and has no plans for CAF personnel to remain in Afghanistan after 2011.

Powerful voices within Canada's media establishment, not least the *Globe and Mail* and *National Post*, have continued to press, however, for a significant CAF presence in Afghanistan post-2011, and this for three interconnected reasons: to bolster Canada's claim to be a world power; to strengthen ties with the US; and so that the end to the current CAF mission is not popularly perceived as a retreat, thereby making it more difficult to justify participation in overseas wars in the future.

By “showing leadership on the Afghanistan issue”—i.e., by taking a position that is unpopular amongst working people but strongly advocated by the ruling elite—Ignatieff is trying to prove to the bourgeoisie that he can be counted on to take “tough decisions” and otherwise uphold their interests.

One of the leading liberal advocates of the “war on terror” and the 2003 illegal US invasion of Iraq, Ignatieff clearly hopes that Harper and the Conservatives will take up his offer, now repeated by Rae, for bipartisan action to ensure a post-2011

CAF role in Afghanistan. It should be remembered that there was similar maneuvering in late 2007 and the first months of 2008 prior to the government and the Official Opposition jointly sponsoring a motion to extend Canada's leading role in the Afghan war a further three years.

While appealing to Harper to take up their offer, the Liberals are criticizing him for not showing "leadership." The Liberal's recent foreign policy statement, "Canada in the World," criticizes Harper personally, stating that the country is "governed by an ideological tactician who did not travel outside North America before becoming Prime Minister", suggesting that Harper is too provincially-minded to be running an effective foreign policy on behalf of Canadian big business.

There are two reasons that Harper and his Conservatives have thus far proven reluctant to take up the US request for the CAF to lead an Afghan military training mission post-2011. First, there is the question of the minority government's political vulnerability. Harper's actions have been constrained by the popular opposition to the war, an opposition that has grown as the public has learned more about the corruption and venal character of the US installed puppet government in Kabul and about Canadian complicity in the torture and abuse routinely carried out by Afghan security forces.

Second, the government is resentful of the opposition for seeking to score political points over the Afghan detainee issue, rather than meekly submitting to the government's and CAF's palpably false claims that they had no reason to believe that Afghans handed over to Afghan security forces by the CAF would be tortured. The Conservatives, working in league with the military brass, have gone to extraordinary lengths to derail any investigation of the Afghan detainee issue for fear that this would damage their effort to revive CAF military interventions as a major instrument of state policy. To prevent parliament from investigating the detainee issue, the government prorogued or shut down parliament for two months last winter, then provoked a constitutional crisis by defying a House of Commons resolution to allow access to uncensored documents pertaining to the Afghan detainee issue.

Harper and his Conservatives may well be using the question of the CAF's post-2011 role in Afghanistan as a bargaining chip—demanding the Liberals provide further guarantees that they will help to contain the detainee crisis and protect the CAF's reputation before agreeing to join hands with the Official Opposition in extending the CAF presence in Afghanistan.

From within the Liberals' ranks there are already powerful voices complaining that Rae and Ignatieff went too far when they hinted that the CAF might have been implicated in war crimes in Afghanistan, even if they did hasten to proclaim their support for the CAF and to dismiss the possible transgressions as little more than technicalities.

Bill Graham, who as Liberal Defence Minister oversaw the deployment of CAF personnel to Kandahar in 2005, recently

complained to the Special Parliamentary Committee on the Canadian Mission in Afghanistan that he has been accused of complicity in war crimes. Said Graham, "The Internet, being what it is, and people being what they are, people have stopped me on the street and said 'What were you doing? Are you a war criminal?'"

"That's the way people talk. That's the type of language we're living in today. I mean, we were accused of it in Vancouver by a group of young students; being in Afghanistan, we were war criminals."

Canada's social democratic party, the NDP has attacked Ignatieff and the Liberals for calling for a continued Canadian military presence in Afghanistan after 2011, calling it a "flip-flop."

But the NDP, despite its ostensible "antiwar" position, announced in December 2008 that it was ready to join a Liberal-led coalition government committed to waging the Afghan war through the end of 2011. In this it was fully supported by the Canadian Labour Congress and the Quebec-based labor federations. Then when the coalition gambit failed, federal NDP leader Jack Layton hailed US President Obama's strategic review of the Afghan War, no matter that from the outset it was obvious that its sole purpose was to pave the way for an "Afghan surge" and for an expansion of the war into Pakistan.

And while the NDP formally opposes an extension of a CAF presence in Afghanistan, it otherwise fully supports working with the US, Britain and the other NATO powers in pacifying Afghanistan and propping up the current US-imposed government in Kabul.

Jack Harris, a leading NDP MP, joined with the other members of the Special Committee on the Canadian Mission in Afghanistan, in lauding the work of the CAF in Afghanistan following a trip there in June. Echoing Harper's famous comment that Canada would never "cut and run" from Afghanistan as long as he is prime minister, the committee's report said, "We have come too far, and sacrificed too much to abandon the people of Afghanistan."

The struggle against the Afghan war cannot be entrusted to any section of the political elite. Rather it requires the independent political mobilization of the working class in struggle against them.



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