

Embassy, June 11th, 2008
NEWS STORY

Special Afghan Committee Gets Mixed Reviews

By Michelle Collins

As author Janice Gross Stein tells it, the political decisions that have led to Canada's deepening combat role in Afghanistan were, for the most part, made in haste with little known about the realities on the ground.

In her book, *The Unexpected War: Canada in Kandahar*, co-authored with Eugene Lang, Ms. Stein calls it the unexpected war because Canada's mission has spiralled from a short-term troop commitment to a now-seven-year-long engagement that will see Canadian troops remain another two years, at least.

During this time, three prime ministers, six defence ministers and six ministers of foreign affairs have had their say.

Not three years ago, the Commons' defence and foreign affairs committees paid little attention to what was unfolding in the Central Asian country. It was not until Prime Minister Stephen Harper chose to extend the mission beyond 2007, even as Canadian casualties multiplied, that most parliamentarians thought to immerse themselves in learning about the troubles that haunt Afghanistan.

Moreover, it was last year's Manley Report that signified a turning point on the Hill around the political posturing over the mission.

Now, as per a recommendation in the Manley Report, a select group of MPs from all parties meets weekly to hear from experts, debate, and eventually to make recommendations to the prime minister. However, not all members are happy with the results to date.

Committee Adds Focus: Rae

One night two Wednesdays ago, parliamentarians gather around the committee table, flipping through the paperwork in front of them as they finish up a quick dinner provided in a

spread at the back of the room.

There is a relaxed camaraderie as MPs exchange greetings, and there is the distinct impression that partisanship is largely set aside in recognition of the matter that's brought them together.

It is the fifth meeting of the Commons' Special Committee on the Canadian Mission in Afghanistan, the newest of 26 committees in this 39th Parliament. As part of their mandate to keep the public informed, all meetings are televised and all transcripts are posted on the Internet.

In the near future, this committee will be the only group studying Afghanistan, as the defence and foreign affairs committees will cease to do so, says committee chair and Conservative MP Pierre Lemieux.

"Because we are a special committee that has been formed from a motion in Parliament, which resulted from the Manley report, we have a lot of credibility and people are very responsive to us," Mr. Lemieux says.

Tonight, the members will hear from two witnesses, former CIA station chief to Afghanistan Graham Fuller and Canada's ambassador to Afghanistan, Arif Lalani. The previous four weeks of testimony have seen other high-profile witnesses, such as UN Special Representative for Afghanistan Kai Eide, Afghan Ambassador to Canada Omar Samad, and the man at the helm of the government's Afghanistan task force, David Mulroney, appear before members.

Tonight, Mr. Fuller's description of Afghanistan paints a negative picture, a worsening situation in which Afghans are driven into radicalism by an anti-Western occupation mentality.

"I just do not believe that the goals that have been established by Washington, NATO, and other participants have been achieved," Mr. Fuller tells the committee. "I wish I could say Canada is appreciated in the region as a totally independent power, unfortunately most Afghans see it as associated with an American project."

In its five weeks of existence, Mr. Fuller is acknowledged as being the first witness to bring such a perspective to the committee. This fact has left some opposition members frustrated at the "rosy" picture they say is too often delivered.

Of their work, all members express hope they will be able to bring about a clearer direction for Canada's mission.

As Liberal Foreign Affairs critic Bob Rae explains, Canada does not have a strong tradition of parliamentary direction over military missions, and this is the first time Parliament has embarked on such a level of accountability.

"The one thing I've heard from people is that I do think the existence of the committee has helped to kind of focus government a bit more on what are we hoping to achieve as a country," Mr. Rae says. "Particularly since the Manley Report, I have sensed a change in the language and in some of the approaches that not just our government, but a number of other governments, are taking as well...I think those military deadlines are becoming more meaningful."

Gerald Keddy, parliamentary secretary to the minister of international trade, says no one believes Canada can unilaterally withdraw all the forces as soon as the deadline hits, so it's important the committee explore what the options will be.

"At the end of the day, the committee's task is to find common and not-common ground that will help us to eventually reduce our commitment in Afghanistan and leave a country that is capable and standing on its own feet," Mr. Keddy says. "I certainly accept the vastness of the task, but I very much believe it's something we can accomplish."

Recognizing that Afghanistan's government remains rooted in Islam and will likely never mirror Western models is just one of the issues Mr. Keddy views as crucial to understanding Afghanistan.

However, when it comes to bringing results for Canadians, some members are less optimistic about the committee.

Bloc Québécois Defence critic Claude Bachand says he has been frustrated with the lack of access committee members are granted to government documents.

"I'm kind of fed up with these briefings where we always have rosy glasses and they say everything's going fine, that progression there is extraordinary," Mr. Bachand says. "I've been there last year and it wasn't improving at all."

The Bloc is opposed to Canada's mission in Afghanistan, and Mr. Bachand says if the reports produced are based largely on government sources who consistently present positive accounts, it will not have his party's support.

Also opposed to the war, NDP Defence critic Dawn Black says she thinks it will be a challenge for the committee to fulfil its mandate if government sources are not permitted to

challenge for the committee to fulfil its mandate if government sources are not permitted to speak freely. She says too often their message is dictated by the Privy Council Office.

"We need the government to be open with this, we hear the same sort of thing, we don't hear the whole picture," Ms. Black says. "Up till now we've had a government that's been selling the war to the Canadian people, I don't think they've been open about the true challenges and if it's in Canada's interest to do so."

Over the summer, the committee hopes to travel together to Washington D.C., and to the United Nations in New York to meet with American, NATO and UN officials.

"I think that trip will give us an opportunity to work together to sort through some issues and some questions that are on peoples' minds and I think those things will help us as we go forward, will help to cement us," Mr. Rae says.

The committee hopes to also hear from Chief of Defence Staff Gen. Rick Hillier, NATO military committee chairman Gen. Ray Henault, Defence Minister Peter MacKay, Public Security Minister Stockwell Day, International Trade Minister David Emerson and International Co-operation Minister Bev Oda.

By the fall, the committee hopes to also travel to Afghanistan to see first-hand the work being done by Canadian forces.

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