

The Afghan mission: Do we settle for a bronze medal or risk going for gold?

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As the tall tale has it, four high-school students were asked to write an essay about elephants.

The British youth chose the title Elephants and the Empire. The French student, predictably, went with Love and the Elephant, and the American opted for Bigger and Better Elephants. For the Canadian, there was no hesitation: He chose Elephants: A Federal or Provincial Responsibility?

Apparently, it was the late Liberal Robert Winters who foisted this pachyderm anecdote on us, his way of illustrating our sober-minded, dullish stereotype.

In keeping, John Manley, no banister-slider himself, has observed that Canadians are burdened by a bronze-medal mentality. In his coming report on our future in Afghanistan, many are betting that Mr. Manley, prodded by his lopsidedly conservative committee, will bring in a go-for-gold recommendation - another extension of our warrior role in Kandahar.

Having tilted the other way some months ago, Prime Minister Stephen Harper now appears to favour a prolongation as well. Over the holidays, he gave an interview in which he sounded puzzled that Canadians didn't understand the significance of the stakes in Afghanistan.

An Angus Reid Strategies poll released this week will leave him more puzzled. It showed 61 per cent of Canadians rejecting a war extension beyond the February, 2009, deadline. Fifty-three per cent wanted our troops to come home before that date.

That, one might say, is bronze-medal Canadian stuff. We've done our thing, our work has been saluted, time to move on before casualties climb.

The poll, reflective of others, poses a potentially knotty problem: public opinion going one way, while Mr. Harper and perhaps Mr. Manley going the other way - with an election imminent.

In the short term, public opinion is not likely to change, and the problem is not, as the PM seems to suggest, that Canadians don't get it. They've had the significance of the Afghan mission drummed into them for two years running. Such has been the tub-thumping to "support our troops" that it is now politically incorrect, if not utterly disloyal, to take issue with any aspect of our military performance.

The Canadian rank and file see the importance of the war, but they see a lot of other things as well. They've seen humanitarian progress in

Afghanistan but not much military progress. They see practically no chance of the Taliban's being eradicated, no matter how many years our troops are there.

They've also witnessed an excess of government bungling and mismanagement on this file. They've seen a defence minister, Gordon O'Connor, dismissed following one stumble after another. They've seen a detainees controversy involving alleged torture and our government's taking pains to hide information about it. They've seen sole-sourced defence procurement being investigated by the Auditor-General. They've seen feuding between Rick Hillier, Chief of the Defence Staff, and the Prime Minister's Office, and politicization of the war in the form of a rushed debate - all of two days - for the first extension of the mission.

In addition, they've seen no push from our Conservative leaders for a diplomatic solution - the type of approach our country has traditionally favoured. Shamefully, there's been zero questioning, only passive acceptance, of Bush administration policy on Afghanistan and Iraq. A major reason for our combat role in the Afghan hot zone was to appease Washington. As is made clear in the book *The Unexpected War*, Liberals were so troubled in having rejected George Bush's missile-defence plan that, resorting to a colonial mindset, they felt they had do something quickly to score points with the White House.

Mr. Harper shouldn't be surprised by Canadians' manifest ambivalence toward the Afghan mission. They've had a lot of time in their sober-minded way to think about it and to draw fair-minded conclusions. They've seen the mission extended once and they appear unwilling to see it extended again. They seem content with a bronze-medal performance.

The problem is, if the Canadians vacate and the Taliban return to power, it's not a medal that will hang proudly on their walls.

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