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## What diplomacy looks like in Afghanistan

*No chandelier-lit treaty negotiations or canapés—but Karen Foss provides illuminating, refreshing details on the work of Canada's reconstruction team in Kandahar*

John Geddes | Jan 15, 2008 | 3:37 pm EST

The news coming out of Kandahar often seems to me as featureless as the khaki-coloured landscape in the background, the voices as interchangeable as those of the military public affair officers who read us the names of the latest casualties.

So it's a relief to occasionally hear an individual's take that conveys more texture than the flat institutional version of what's going on there, or the bleakly familiar another-roadside-IED storyline. Karen Foss, the deputy political director with Canada's Provincial Reconstruction Team in Kandahar, offered such a point of view last week, at once professional and personal, in a seminar hosted by Carleton University's Centre for Security and Defence Studies.

I sat in, and found her description of her job mercifully free of vague generalities. Foss didn't stray from the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade line; she's a foreign service pro. But she offered anecdotes and shading that struck me as revealing, touching on everything from why Canadian-supported projects in Kandahar have not been the target of Taliban attacks, to what it's really taking to make the Afghan-Pakistan border a bit more secure.

Foss was back in Ottawa briefly at about the midway point of her one-year posting to the so-called PRT, which is a team of about 330, made up mostly of troops, but also aid workers, police and diplomats like her.

She's just six years into her career in diplomacy, and if that word conjures up images of chandelier-lit treaty negotiations, you've got the wrong idea. The most notable entry on Foss's short resume, before Kandahar, is that she set up Canada's field office in Indonesia's devastated Aceh provincial just after the 2004 tsunami.

Not a lot of canapés, then, in her diet. Yet she wasn't playing up hardship. At the Carleton seminar, Foss was mostly upbeat in sketching the PRT's work for the assembled professors and students (a group that included a retired Air Force general in the former category and a newly enlisted reservist in the latter).

I liked her description of a key meeting room in the PRT's Kandahar compound: "lots of carpets and cushions, and very good tea." She emphasized that the PRT, while heavily guarded, is intentionally more than accessible the rather sealed-off main Canadian military base at Kandahar Air Field. In fact, the PRT's compound is 15 km away, right in Kandahar city itself. And in Kandahar, she told us, 15 km can be "very, very far," a trip that takes 45 minutes and requires a military escort.

At the PRT, Foss said, spontaneous drop-ins by locals are common. But figuring out exactly how a given visitor fits into Kandahar's complex social networks and power structure can be a challenge. She showed a slide photo of a group of turbaned men, some of them labeled: "former governor," "cousin of governor," "tribal elder of 25,000."

On a map of Kandahar, she pointed to a district where a single tribe holds sway. No problem figuring out who matters there. But next door is another district where, by her count, 19 tribes jostle for clout. In yet another, she joked, the sparse population is reckoned at "14 police officers and a goat."

Foss punctuated a lot of her points with a laugh. Normally, I wouldn't bother making notes about a basically anonymous public servant's manner or appearance, but I found myself wondering how much a fair, blonde woman with a casual confidence stands out in Kandahar. I'm guessing that a self-effacing manner and a broad smile translate well across most cultural boundaries.

She's far from a one-woman show, of course. We think of Canada's 2,500 troops as our main presence in Afghanistan. But Foss pointed out that as one of five diplomats attached to the PRT alone, she's actually part of a

"robust, aggressive deployment." Five might not sound big. But look at it her way: that's five for Kandahar's population of less than one million, compared to the staff of three political officers she served on a few years back in Jakarta, assigned to sort out Indonesia, with a population of 235 million.

What do Canadians get for their government's disproportionate efforts in Kandahar? Well, don't look for a lot of projects—wells or schools or what have you—with big maple leaves stenciled on them. The PRT tries to support Afghan-led initiatives, often through something called the National Solidarity Program, an Afghan government fund under which villages first elect councils, then pick small-scale projects, and finally get money and other assistance to complete them. Thus, the new irrigation ditch, say, won't end up being labeled the foreigners' canal.

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Whatever's built tends to last longer that way. Asked how many Canadian-supported projects in Kandahar have been targeted by the Taliban—a problem reported elsewhere in Afghanistan—Foss said she didn't know of any cases. "If there's greater local ownership," she said, "there's a greater incentive to protect it."

She also boasted that Canada has been singled out by the UN for its practice of hiring more locals at more senior positions than other countries' PRTs (there are about 25 scattered around Afghanistan, run by various NATO and coalition members). I've often heard CIDA, in particular, criticized for not putting enough Canadians in the field in Afghanistan, and not keeping Canadian aid sufficiently separate from the huge, internationally organized funds that ultimately flow through the Afghan government. But Foss suggested that in Kandahar, at least, it would be foolish not to rely largely on locals. "The internationals are few and far between," she said. "The local staff understand the area."

She said locals bring invaluable insights and their own contacts. As for being slowed down sometimes by the need to organize local buy-in or involve the Afghan government before pushing ahead with a project, Foss said: "When you rush the process, with the best of intentions, you can do more harm than good."

Her observations often seemed to contain a plea for Canadians back home not to expect too much too soon. On the infamously porous frontier between Afghanistan and Pakistan, for instance, she noted that only recently has a Canadian army initiative provided phone links between Afghan and Pakistani posts on opposite sides of Kandahar's southern border. That such a basic element in managing the border didn't exist until recently is a reminder of the magnitude of the task: this is not just a war-torn country, it's the fourth poorest in the world.

Most of what she said about what works was quotidian. Get to know the place. Accept its complexity. Be accessible. Work with locals. Progress by small steps. It doesn't reach for the visionary, but who could argue with any of it? Foss struck me as a practical person, although she did mention in passing that some outsiders fall hard for the province, remarking, "Kandahar is a kind of magical place, the land of poetry and pomegranates." Then she laughed.

It would have been interesting to know what she would like John Manley's panel to recommend for Canada's military mission in Afghanistan, when it reports to Prime Minister Stephen Harper by the end of this month. Everything she said leaned toward hoping Canada stays active in Kandahar, one way or another, long after the current military commitment runs out about a year from now.

But when asked, Foss wasn't about to expose herself on such a hot political issue. "I'm very much looking forward to the Manley panel's recommendations," she said. Then in a wry aside, "Was that diplomatic?"

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