

**SUBMISSION OF THE LIBERAL PARTY OF CANADA
TO THE INDEPENDENT PANEL ON
CANADA'S FUTURE ROLE IN AFGHANISTAN**



December 1, 2007

INTRODUCTION – RESPONSIBILITY OF THE GOVERNMENT

The Independent Panel on Canada's Future Role in Afghanistan has been asked by the Prime Minister to review, analyse and make recommendations on Canada's engagement in Afghanistan beyond February 2009. The Liberal Party of Canada welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the Independent Panel and we appreciate the time and effort that we know the members of the Panel are dedicating to this task.

We do not, however, believe the final recommendations of this Panel should be viewed as the final decision on Canada's future role in Afghanistan. In our Parliamentary system of government, the final decision, as well as the responsibility for foreign policy decisions, lies with the executive branch of our government, and would, in turn, be debated and reviewed by Parliament. This authority and the corresponding responsibility for the decisions taken can never be delegated or shared. The current government must take full responsibility for whatever decision it ultimately makes with respect to Canada's role in Afghanistan.

The Government of Canada should only take this crucial decision following a thorough and informed debate in Parliament. When the current government made the decision in May 2006 to extend the current Canadian Forces (CF) combat mission in Kandahar for an extra two years, they attempted to deflect their ultimate responsibility for the decision by rushing a vote in the House of Commons on the extension. That process should not be taken as the model for a future debate on the issue. The debate was limited to just a few hours and the government shared almost no information, which prevented a truly informed debate from taking place. Precise questions from opposition members went largely unanswered. Much of the scant information that was provided by the government has, in time, been proven to be false. With the explicit threat of an election if the House did not vote to approve the government's decision to extend the mission, the House did eventually narrowly support the government's motion.

It is our hope that the Independent Panel's recommendations and rationale will be made fully public, that the government will not make a final decision before Parliament is consulted and that it takes all necessary steps to ensure Parliamentarians (and by extension all Canadians) are provided with all the information they require to make a truly informed decision.

DECISION ON CURRENT MISSION

The Panel's mandate clearly requires that it is to make recommendations on Canada's role in Afghanistan beyond February 2009. The date of February 2009 was presumably chosen because of the government's decision to extend the end date of the current CF mission in Afghanistan until February 2009.

The Liberal Party of Canada has consistently said that the deployment of the CF in Afghanistan after February 2009 can only be properly debated and discussed after a conclusive decision has been made on the termination of Canada's current counter-insurgency combat mission in Kandahar. As the Leader of the Liberal Party first articulated in a speech on February 22nd, 2007, we are opposed to the extension of the current combat mission in Kandahar beyond February 2009. We would encourage you to read Mr. Dion's speech for a greater understanding of the rationale behind this decision. It can be found at: http://www.liberal.ca/story_12268_e.aspx.

The government has asked the panel to specifically study four possible options for post-February 2009:

1. To continue training the Afghan army and police so that Canada can begin withdrawing its forces in February 2009;
2. To focus on reconstruction and have forces from another country take over security in Kandahar;
3. To shift Canadian security and reconstruction efforts to another region in Afghanistan; and
4. To withdraw all Canadian military personnel except a minimal force to protect aid workers and diplomats.

We note that none of these options calls for the simple extension of the counter-insurgency combat mission in Kandahar. The first option does call for Canada to "continue" its efforts to train the Afghan army and police. While there are clearly elements of the current CF mission focused on training the army and police, no one truly familiar with our current mission in Kandahar would describe it as primarily a training mission.

It would be a travesty to continue the current mission, and simply to rename it as a "training mission." Neither Parliament nor the people of Canada would tolerate such a deception. That is why we take the position that if the government is actually changing the combat nature of the current mission, this decision should be communicated directly to our NATO allies. Other troops might well be required to take on a role that Canada has decided is not to be part of its core mandate in the country. Failure to notify our allies represents an irresponsible lack of clarity that can only serve to undermine the overall NATO mission in Afghanistan and damage Canada's international reputation as a trustworthy ally. As long as other NATO countries believe that our commitment to continue the counter-insurgency combat role in Kandahar is open-ended, they will never prepare for our departure.

Only once that decision has been clearly communicated can Canadians engage in a truly informed debate on what role, if any, the CF should play in Afghanistan after February 2009.

DEPLOYMENT POST-FEBRUARY 2009

The Liberal Party believes that Canada, together with other members of the United Nations, should remain committed to the people of Afghanistan beyond February 2009. We believe Canada and the rest of the world have an obligation to the people of Afghanistan, to assist them in their ongoing efforts to create a stable, secure and functioning democracy. But we also believe that it is the Afghan people and government that bear the fundamental responsibility for the achievement of this objective.

A Canadian military presence to train the Afghan National Army and police, or a commitment to assign troops to protecting Afghan civilians and reconstruction projects in other parts of the country are both possible. However, Canada should not commit to any such roles in a vacuum. Any decision made about a further deployment of Canadian troops must be made after multilateral discussions with our NATO allies. These discussions must set out a clear timeline for the Canadian mission that will be respected and must include preparations for a rotation of troops from other countries at the end of that timeline. The mission must also be structured with NATO in such a way that it has clearly defined and measurable goals so that Canadians and NATO can continually assess its success.

It must be understood that the current three-year campaign in Kandahar represents an enormous sacrifice by Canada, particularly by the men and women of the CF. The current mission is one of the largest, longest and most dangerous missions undertaken by the CF since the end of the Korean War. We must be realistic about our ability to continue such a mission. The CF simply cannot continue to engage in an extremely dangerous combat campaign of this scale for an indefinite period of time. The strain that such an indefinite commitment will place on the CF, both in terms of personnel and equipment, will eventually begin to undermine the very purpose of our presence there.

Since the Government of Canada decided to extend the mission in May 2006, it has also become clear that Canada's ability to deploy troops elsewhere in the world has become severely limited to the point of being virtually impossible. An ongoing military commitment in Afghanistan on the same scale as the current mission limits our ability to pursue Canadian interests elsewhere in the world. Our involvement in Afghanistan was never intended to be Canada's sole foreign policy commitment. While we believe that we can continue to have a military presence in Afghanistan, it should be modeled in such a way as to ensure that other significant CF deployments are possible.

We must not allow ourselves to be so short-sighted as to believe that the only contribution that Canada can make in Afghanistan is military in nature. Development and diplomatic efforts must also be at the core of Canada's role in Afghanistan. The Liberal Party believes that Canada should build on our traditional strengths as a nation when determining our development and diplomatic goals. Specifically, Canada should invest heavily in pursuing a "good government"

strategy on the ground in Afghanistan. This would allow Canadian expertise in the development of sound judicial systems and strong political institutions, which has been so successfully deployed around the globe, to flourish in Afghanistan. We should also examine a greater role for Canada in addressing the chronic fresh water shortages in the country. Canada is world renowned for bringing simple yet effective solutions to countries struggling with water management issues. We should not miss an opportunity to share this expertise in Afghanistan where it is so desperately needed.

The Liberal Party believes that lasting peace and security cannot be achieved in Afghanistan by military force alone. The ultimate purpose of any military mission to which Canada commits must be to create the necessary space and conditions to allow the Afghans themselves to achieve a political solution. Canada should never stand in the way of efforts by the Afghan government to secure a peaceful end to the insurgency and to bring security and stability to their country.

We also believe the Canadian people are entitled to a more candid and realistic assessment of the political context for the military mission. The border with Pakistan is porous, and tens of thousands of people cross it every day. There is clear evidence, now supported by UN reports, that Taliban fighters and suicide bombers are being trained, indoctrinated, and equipped in Pakistan and are able to pass with relative ease into southern Afghanistan. It is impossible to see how anyone can speak with certainty of a "military victory" as long as this is the case. The Pashtun tribe straddles the border between Pakistan and Afghanistan, and the Taliban are rooted in both countries, to say nothing of Al Qaeda. These facts must be taken into account in any review of the prospects for a decisive military advantage for the NATO mission.

Nor has there been any candid assessment by the Canadian government of the fact that Afghanistan has now become a virtual "narco-economy," with most estimates putting the contribution of the poppy and heroin trade to the GDP at over 50 percent. This reality points to another enormous challenge to democracy in the country, and that is corruption. Again, our own government has chosen not to discuss this difficult reality in any assessment of the prospects for success of the current mission.

This lack of information, realism, and candour is a fundamental flaw in our current approach. Support for the current mission is painted in terms of patriotism, support for our troops, and the notion that nothing but military force will succeed in the so-called war on terrorism. Canada has paid a price for this simplistic approach, and we hope that the panel will not persist in painting the choices in these ways. There has to be a change by Canada, and a change by NATO, if we are to be successful.

DOMESTIC MANAGEMENT

Regardless of the decision of what the specific mission in Afghanistan will be beyond February 2009, we need to change how the file is managed domestically. We have witnessed an almost complete breakdown in the ability of the various governmental departments, primarily National Defence, Foreign Affairs and CIDA, to work together towards a coherent vision of the mission. This is a structural problem that has been exacerbated in recent months by weak political leadership. The Liberal Party believes that we need to establish a strengthened cross-departmental Afghan Secretariat to improve the coordination among the relevant domestic government institutions. The Secretariat, within the proper accountability framework, should be able to make budgetary decisions for all aspects of the mission so as to ensure that Canada is making the best possible use of every dollar spent in Afghanistan. No future mission will fulfill its potential for success if this issue is not addressed immediately.

There is a further need for accountability, both to Parliament and to the Canadian people. There is little knowledge in Canada about the history and politics of Afghanistan, of the political tensions that currently exist, or of the choices that must be made by the Afghan political structure to improve the current situation.

NATO

The Government of Canada should make it a top priority to lead a debate within NATO about the future of the organization's mission in Afghanistan. Afghanistan is a crucial test for NATO and will determine its effectiveness in addressing the realities of the 21st century. To date, we have seen an unfortunate trend among too many of our NATO allies: a growing disparity between a country's willingness to commit NATO as a whole to a mission and that nation's willingness to commit its own resources to ensure the success of the mission. We acknowledge that not every nation within NATO can bring the same capabilities to every mission, but the experience in Afghanistan to date has resulted in too few members being prepared to shoulder a fair share of the burden. Too often when countries do commit troops to the mission, the utility of the commitment is nullified by the unrealistic caveats the nation places on its involvement.

Membership in NATO has been an important element in Canada's foreign policy, which allows us to exert a greater influence on global affairs than our size might otherwise dictate. We cannot pretend that we can force success solely by "staying the course" in Afghanistan. Due to the extraordinary work of the men and women of the CF over the past decade, particularly in Afghanistan itself, Canada's influence within NATO may never have been as high as it currently is. We must not squander the opportunity our troops have provided us – we must show the courage to push for the needed reforms in NATO itself.

What we have said about transparency and accountability in Canada applies to the NATO mission as well. People say things in private they are not prepared to say publicly. Dire warnings are given, but are not followed by action. The Afghan government's progress on corruption, for example, is decried in private but not in public. All this must change.

Within NATO, Canada must also show the courage to question some of the current counter-insurgency strategies employed by NATO nations both in ISAF and in the American-led Operation Enduring Freedom. In particular, Canada should join with those who question the utility and effectiveness of air and artillery strikes as a counter-insurgency technique. These strikes, which too often result in civilian casualties and damage to civilian infrastructure, undermine local support for the international forces and often drive the otherwise moderate population to sympathize or even join those who oppose the international forces. President Karzai himself has identified the continued use of air strikes as counter-productive and has publicly called on President Bush to stop them. The Government of Canada should be equally bold and challenge our allies to adopt a more effective strategy.

DETAINEES

Finally, the Government of Canada must immediately address the question of the transfer by the CF of detainees to Afghan authorities. The reality that these detainees face a credible risk of torture following transfer can no longer be brushed aside as Taliban propaganda. Continuing to turn a blind eye to this problem harms the international reputation of Canada. Canada must call for an immediate NATO-wide solution that ensures detainees are not transferred into a situation where they could face torture. This may require the construction and maintenance of NATO holding facilities completely under the control and supervision of NATO personnel. There must be constant monitoring and tracking of detainees to ensure that they are never subject to abuse.

The Government must also immediately make available all information it has on this issue that it has thus far refused to provide to the public. The Government has become too comfortable with the claim that information must be withheld for reasons of "national security." We have seen unwillingness on the part of the Government even to share such basic information as how many detainees have been transferred. This represents an abuse of the important national security privilege, which not only erodes the public's faith in the Government's insistence that nothing is wrong, but will also ultimately affect the public's overall perception of our continued presence in Afghanistan.

CONCLUSION

The decision to engage in Afghanistan was made by a Liberal government. It was made, quite simply, because NATO rightly concluded that the 9/11 attack on the United States could only have happened with the support by the Taliban government for the efforts of Al Qaeda.

While the arrival of NATO and American troops in Afghanistan has denied Al Qaeda its previous state-sponsored safe haven, it cannot be denied that the work of Al Qaeda in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and around the world, continues. The Taliban insurgency has not been defeated, and indeed there is evidence that it is growing, not diminishing, in Afghanistan. The situation in northern Pakistan remains unstable, and arguably worsened in the last few years.

We can point to some important successes as well: an elected government, stability in much of the country, improvements in health care and education. It is a complex situation, and one which needs constant assessment and review.

The Canadian combat mission in Kandahar was never intended to be a life-long effort, or even a ten year commitment. It was always intended to be part of a wider NATO and UN commitment to working with the Afghan government. Rotation and change should not be seen as “abandonment” but simply as an assertion of a standard operating practice of both NATO and the UN. To say that the combat mission should conclude in 2009 will send an important signal to the world that we are prepared to do our part, but insist on others sharing in these burdens, and that it is Canada’s view that greater emphasis has to be placed on improving the political and economic context in which the Afghan engagement is taking place. No one will listen to this view unless we make it clear that our words will be followed by action.