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THE AFGHAN MISSION PM's gag order erodes support, Manley says

MICHAEL VALPY The government's decision to gag Foreign Affairs and other departments from speaking to the media has left Canadians with a flawed understanding of what the Afghan mission is about, members of the panel reviewing Canada's role in Afghanistan charged yesterday.

The panel members called the policy unhelpful and said it was undermining public support for the mission and presenting a skewed picture of why Canadian troops are being asked to put their lives on the line in Afghanistan.

Chairman John Manley, a former foreign affairs minister, said the decision taken at the "centre" - in the Prime Minister's Office or the Privy Council Office - to allow only the Defence Department to speak on the mission means Canadians are being told their young men and women are dying without being given "any context in which they can say this is why and this is meaningful and this is tragic but it's worth it." "In Kosovo [where Canada was part of a NATO intervention in 1999], media had regular and frequent briefings on the record from officials in Foreign Affairs and Defence," Mr. Manley said at a meeting with The Globe and Mail's editorial board.

"What we're finding in this conflict is that virtually all your information is coming from Defence. Neither Foreign Affairs nor CIDA [Canadian International Development Agency] nor other government departments that are involved are able to give on the record briefings." Journalists have been aware of the silence that has shrouded Foreign Affairs since Stephen Harper's government took office in February, 2006, but this is the first time an official body has reported on it. The Afghanistan panel was established by Mr. Harper in late 2007.

The muzzling of Foreign Affairs and other departments has led to Canadians being confused about the mission, said panel member Derek Burney, a former ambassador to Washington.

"They support the troops almost by instinct . . . [but] they hear different stories about what [the mission] is there for, what it's doing. Lots of Canadians are saying 'Please, just tell us what it is we're doing, why we're there.' " Mr. Burney, whose reputation for bluntness has accompanied him throughout his diplomatic career, talked about too many people in official Ottawa trying to pull the wool over the public's eyes by presenting the Afghan mission from their own points of view.

"If it's a political thing in Parliament it goes one way," he said. "If it's a military thing it goes another way. All we're saying is that it's bigger than the military. There's a lot more involved than the military." It was his "fervent wish," he said, that some of Canada's ambassadors would have more flexibility in being able to speak.

"It was certainly the case in my day that ambassadors were allowed to speak to the media . . . and I would like to see our distinguished ambassadors - the one to NATO, the one in Kabul, the one in Washington, the one in London, I could go on - having greater latitude to express the government's total position in a place like Afghanistan.

"There are problems with governance. There are problems with development.

There's a lack of international co-ordination which is abysmal, from the UN, from NATO.

"These are real problems that need to be addressed, and we think as a panel that Canada has a right and a credible voice to exercise in addressing those kinds of problems in a way that we don't have in a lot of issues that we like to dabble in around the world without any interest or contribution." Mr. Manley, Mr. Burney and Pamela Wallin, a broadcaster and former consul-general in New York, cited the salacious story of the Corrections Canada officials' boots as an example of what can go awry when Foreign Affairs is muzzled.

According to government documents released in November, Corrections Canada officials inspecting Afghan jails asked for special boots because they were walking through blood and fecal material - the implication being that detainees handed over by the Canadian military to Afghan jailers were treated in a horrid manner.

What the Afghan panel members learned in private meetings with Foreign Affairs officials - and which the officials were barred from explaining to journalists - was that the blood and fecal material could be explained by a

combination of inadvertent food poisoning and a blocked sewage system.

"I'm not opposed to a more controlled message," said Mr. Burney, "but it's got to be a more complete message. And it's not going to be complete if one department has the latitude to speak openly but others don't. It's as simple as that."