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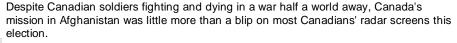
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Where Did the Mission in **Afghanistan Go?**

The war, and foreign policy in general, had virtually no impact on voters, experts and pollsters say.

By Jeff Davis



Throughout the 37-day campaign, the word "Afghanistan" rarely crossed the lips of the federal party leaders, who instead did battle on the economy and how to cope with the global economic slowdown.

According to pollster Nik Nanos, president of Nanos Research, Afghanistan wasn't a big part of the election simply because the major parties didn't want it to be.

"One of reasons it didn't have a major impact is because the Liberals didn't want to make it an issue," he said.

"For something to have an impact on the campaign, usually it takes someone to want to make it an issue," he continued. "Obviously the Conservatives didn't want to make this a key issue in the campaign. Likewise the Liberals, because of their past support for the mission, didn't want to make it an election issue. Hence it was not an election issue."

Antonia Maioni, director of the McGill Institute for the Study of Canada, said Afghanistan was a neutered issue due to the relative similarities in the Liberal and Conservative positions on the mission.

The last major political juncture for Canada's mission in Afghanistan was in March, when the Liberals backed the Conservative push to extend Canada's mission till 2011.

"At one point it was thought it might be an issue because of the problem of Afghanistan and some of the controversy about Canada's mission there, but that was effectively taken off the table by the bipartisan support for Manley's report and for continuing the mission," Ms. Maioni said.

It's still an issue in the minds of many Canadians," she added. "But clearly for the major" parties, for the Liberals and the Conservatives, it was really no longer that salient an issue."

Despite this, the mission did make a few appearances during the campaign. The first political maneuver on the Afghanistan front came from the prime minister, who changed his tune on the duration of the mission in the early stages of the campaign. Prior to the campaign, Mr. Harper shied away from a firm end date for the mission, insisting the



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mission would end when the desired "end state" was reached.

"You have to put an end date on these things," Mr. Harper told reporters on Sept. 10. "By 2011, we will have been in Kandahar, which is probably the toughest province in the country, for six years.... At that point, the mission, as we've known it, we intend to end."

Liberal Senator Colin Kenny characterized this as an attempt to sweep the issue off the election table.

"The first thing Harper did was try to diffuse the issue completely right at the very beginning by saying he was definitely going to get out in 2011," he said. "That left what was an unappealing issue to most people a decidedly unnecessary issue. That was his effort to push it off."

Afghanistan next bubbled to the surface weeks later during the televised leaders' debates, in which 10 minutes of each two-hour debate was devoted to the mission. While the leaders of the Bloc, NDP and Green parties critiqued the mission's rationale, execution and duration, Mr. Harper and Liberal Leader Stéphane Dion played their cards close to their chests.

Debate on the mission then receded into the background, arising next when parliamentary budget officer Kevin Page released a report on the total cost of the mission. After a day of media shock at the reported \$18-billion price tag, which differed greatly from Mr. Harper's \$8-billion estimate, the mission again slipped out of view.

What didn't happen also played a role in keeping Afghanistan off voters' minds, experts

occasion, major Canadian media have prepared in advance feature content on the mission and its multifaceted cost to Canada and its military families.

Canadians will have laid down their lives for the mission. In preparation for this somber

As it turned out, Canadian soldiers sustained no combat casualties during the campaign, causing some to suspect Canada's soldiers were intentionally kept from harm's way.

"My feeling sitting here in Canada is that the Canadian army has been sitting in its foxholes inside the wire the whole campaign," said Nelson Wiseman, a professor in the political science department at the University of Toronto.

Despite these few reprises of media coverage of the mission as an election issue, a range of pollsters, political scientists, senators and historians consulted by Embassy figured it played only a small role at the ballot box.

Instead, they agreed that the election was waged mainly on the economy, an issue chosen by both Messrs. Dion and Harper and magnified by the Wall Street meltdown that coincided with the campaign.

Canadian historian Jack Granatstein said foreign policy issues played essentially no role in the campaign.

"Trade was never mentioned, Europe was never mentioned, Asia was never mentioned; I thought it was simply extraordinary," he said.

Mr. Granatstein added he could not recall an election so devoid of foreign policy debate.

"I can't think of one [election] that has had quite this vacuum in this area," he said. "What makes it even more extraordinary is we're fighting a war and even the war wasn't a major issue. It's just extraordinary to me."

Pandering to the Polls?

Senator Kenny expressed his dismay and amazement that such ranges of important foreign affairs issues were left by the election wayside.

The senator said that that the reason lies in politics, and that foreign affairs issues are just not winners at the ballot box.

Rather than discussing important issues, he said, parties just play to voters' tastes.

"The parties do focus groups and surveys, and then sit down and try and find the issues





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2 of 3 16-10-2008 07:17 that are going to move somebody's vote," Senator Kenny said. "They look for wedge issues. They aren't interested in talking about how they're going to govern for the next four years, they're interested in winning the damned election. So they're going to go for the issues they think are going to help the win."

Last week, Nanos Research conducted a poll looking at which issues are most important to Canadians.

When asked "What is your most important issue of national concern?" only 1.6 per cent of respondents said "the war." No other foreign affairs issue made the list.

Meanwhile, jobs, the economy, health care and the environment netted almost 67 per cent of voters' responses.

Senator David Smith, one of the co-chairs of the Liberal campaign, told Embassy that the Liberals did not focus their campaign exclusively on what the polls told them were the issues that connected with Canadians.

"We're not Machiavellian," he said. "The positions we take on something are taken because they reflect what we think is good public policy for Canadians.

"Stéphane is a staunch advocate and supporter of not going down any policy road unless it represents good public policy for Canadians," he added. "Sometimes you can be aware of what the impact will be, and if its beneficial to you, that's fine."

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