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Embassy, October 16th, 2008
NEWS STORY

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

Despite Canadian soldiers fighting and dying in a war half a world away, Canada's mission in Afghanistan was little more than a blip on most Canadians' radar screens this election.

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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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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