

Canada's Conservative Government Gets Advice on Prolonging the Afghanistan War

Manley Report

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Troubled by the failures of the U.S./NATO war in Afghanistan, the Canadian government commissioned a review last October of the war and Canada's participation. A panel of five corporate and political figures was cobbled together in an effort to reach broader consensus among the war's proponents.

Canada is an enthusiastic partner in the war, but there are growing concerns among the country's elite over the failure to defeat the patriotic resistance in Afghanistan, and a slim but stubborn majority of the Canadian population remains opposed to what increasingly appears to be a futile and criminal war.

The review panel's report, delivered January 22, has sparked an intense and ongoing political debate.

What the report says

The governing Conservative Party chose a prominent figure in the opposition Liberal Party, John Manley, to head the review panel. The Liberals took Canada into a more aggressive combat role in Afghanistan in May 2005, in the southern province of Kandahar, but some Liberals are getting cold feet and others are tempted to use the failure of the mission for short-term political gain at home.

The mandate of the mission is due for renewal in 2009. The Conservatives hold only a minority of seats in the federal parliament and would require Liberal support to get parliament to vote an extension.

The government gave the review panel four options for the future of Canada's role, all of which involved some variant of a continued intervention. Manley was already on the record in support of the war and a continued Canadian participation. Two other panel members—Derrick Burney and Paul Tellier—have served on the boards of directors of two of Canada's arms manufacturers, the aerospace companies CAE and Bombardier. So it was no surprise that the panel recommends that participation in the war continue.

Among the proposals contained in the report are:

- Continued commitment to the combat role in Kandahar until at least 2009.
- Insistence on more support from other NATO countries as a pre-condition for

Canada to extend its combat mission beyond 2009. The report says at least 1,000 more troops are needed. With such increased support, Manley says the war can be won “in less than ten years.”

- Acquisition of helicopters and unmanned aerial vehicles at an additional cost of hundreds of millions of dollars. Currently, Canada relies on NATO allies for air support to its ground troops.

Gloomy outlook

The report has been welcomed enthusiastically by the war’s proponents. An editorial in the January 23 *National Post* urged Harper to use the report as a basis to launch a “reinvigorated mission” in Afghanistan.

But many supporters are less than enthusiastic about the war’s accomplishments to date.

Paraphrasing the report, *National Post* columnist Don Martin says Canada’s “too-few-by-half combat troops” are, “ill-equipped, poorly coordinated and losing the battle to the enemy while failing to deliver adequate humanitarian aid or reconstruction help to average Afghans.” Martin, who has travelled extensively in Afghanistan, says the failure of the U.S./NATO war is a “sad reality.”

The most vocal critic among backers of the war has been the Senlis Council, a European-based think tank that conducts extensive surveying as well as charitable work in Afghanistan. In a series of detailed studies of the Canadian role in Afghanistan issued in 2006 and 2007, it flatly states that the war will be lost unless new approaches are made to win friends among ordinary Afghans.

“The fact stands that Canada is losing its war in Afghanistan,” writes Martin. “It’s high time other nations measured up as worthy allies against global terrorism—without being blackmailed by our bluff.”

Focus on NATO

The “other nations” referred to by Martin are Canada’s European allies in NATO. Their role in Afghanistan is a central focus of Manley’s recommendations, and a controversial one. The report says Canada should vigorously pressure and shame its allies in Europe into committing more troops to Afghanistan and engaging more actively in combat.

In a January 23 editorial entitled, “Demand the help of NATO partners,” the *Globe and Mail* writes, “What Mr. Manley proposes is a game of diplomatic chicken, but it is one that Mr. Harper cannot avoid.”

The editorial continues, “...it is a pitiful abdication of responsibility for larger countries such as France and Germany to refuse to assign another 1,000 (soldiers)...”

But what if the “allies” are not persuaded, or if they don’t take kindly to being blamed for the war’s failings? It’s a dilemma that Manley and the government are acutely aware of. They are careful to avoid describing their demands on NATO as blackmail or threats. The preferred term is “applying leverage.”

Canadian aid

Two issues particularly troubled the review panel—the failure of Canadian “aid” in Afghanistan, and the failure of the government to effectively “communicate” the good news of the war to the Canadian population. The report makes some frank criticism on these two fronts.

“Talk to CIDA (The Canadian International Development Agency) and you will hear all manner of good things about the work it is contributing to in Afghanistan,” wrote the *Globe and Mail* on January 24. But those seeking specifics on what Canada’s “aid” has accomplished “are left exasperated.”

The newspaper echoes what the Senlis Council has reported for several years, which is that Canada has nothing to show for the more than one billion dollars in “aid” money it has spent in Afghanistan since 2002. Ordinary Afghans remained mired in a terrible poverty, and they are frequent victims of indiscriminate bombings and military offensives by Canada and other NATO forces.

By all accounts, humanitarian conditions are deteriorating. Malalai Joya, the suspended member of the Afghan parliament, recently gave a grim picture of ordinary life in her country to the British newspaper *The Independent*. “The economic situation is also terrible – official figures put unemployment at around 60 percent but in reality it is much closer to 90 percent. Hundreds died in the winter from hypothermia, and women were so poor that they tried to sell their babies because they could not feed them.”

Senator Colin Kenny, chair of the Standing Senate Committee on National Security and Defence, says getting explanations from CIDA is like grasping at air. He told CBC Radio’s *The Current* on January 22, “We haven’t been able to find out what they (CIDA) are doing,” despite extensive research by his committee. When members of his committee went to Afghanistan to examine aid projects firsthand, they were prevented from doing so by the Canadian military, who said it was “too dangerous” to venture outside the barbed wire military compound where they were housed.

Kenny said that when his committee met the government minister for CIDA, Beverley Oda, last year, they heard nothing but “gobbledegook.” They “didn’t get a straight answer from her in an hour and half.”

Manley’s report proposes that CIDA create a “signature project” such as a school or hospital that could be used to showcase Canadian “aid” to the Afghan people.

The report comes down hard on the government’s mishandling of the information and propaganda side of the war effort. As criticism of the war has mounted, including from its supporters, the government has reacted by closing down access to information. Panel member Derek Burney, a highly placed official of the governing Conservative Party, said, “I’m not opposed to a more controlled message.” But he and the commission are concerned that a total clampdown on information does more harm than good.

Torture

By far the most serious political damage to the war effort has been done by non-stop revelations of the use of torture by Canada and NATO as a weapon of war. A damning editorial by the *Globe and Mail* on January 30 listed no less than seven occasions in 2006

and 2007 when the Conservative government lied about or misrepresented the Canadian military's collusion with torture agencies of the Afghan government, police and armed forces.

The government's latest subterfuge was an announcement on January 23 that as of November 2007, the Canadian military is no longer turning over prisoners to Afghan authorities because of the latter's record of applying torture to its prisoners. The announcement baffled observers who wondered why it was not announced when it supposedly came into effect. The government answered by saying that it was not told of the change by the military. But this story had to change because military leaders reacted angrily to the implication that they are operating outside of the control and direction of the government.

The announcement begged a series of questions. If it was true, what is the military now doing with those it detains? Releasing them? Has it created its own detention facilities in Afghanistan? Is it turning prisoners over to the U.S.? The answer to these questions may lie in a February 4 report in *La Presse*. The Montreal daily reported that the Canadian military is secretly opening its own detention facility in a wing of the notorious central prison in Kabul.

Canada is already deeply implicated in the torture center operated in Guantánamo, Cuba, because of its refusal to seek the release of a Canadian citizen, Omar Khadr, an inmate since he was imprisoned there five years ago at the age of 15.

In December, army officials argued publicly that any relaxation of the detainment policy would gravely compromise the safety and security of the Canadian mission. Speaking to a committee of the Canadian Parliament on December 14, Brigadier-General André Deschamps, army chief of staff to Canada's mission in Afghanistan, declared, "The insurgents could attack us with impunity knowing that if they fail to win an engagement they would simply have to surrender...."

But controversy over the torture policy will not go away. On February 1, the *Globe and Mail* reported that the governor of Kandahar province, Asadullah Khalid, has personally tortured prisoners; that the Canadian government knew of this since at least the spring of 2007; and that it has kept the information hidden. The following day, the newspaper reported that the head of Canada's armed forces, Richard Hillier, praised Khalid as a good friend and ally of Canada and that it was up to the government of Afghanistan to investigate any allegations against him.

Government faces severe dilemma

The January 23 announcement of a supposed change in torture policy stems from the government's growing concern about a legal challenge in Canada's federal court brought by the British Columbia Civil Liberties Association (BCCLA) and Amnesty International that would oblige the military to treat prisoners according to the post-World War Two Geneva conventions. Like the U.S., Canada says its operations in Afghanistan are not bound by the conventions.

The government is trying to negotiate an end to legal challenge. The sticking point is the insistence by Amnesty and the BCCLA that any change to detention policy must be publicly announced seven days in advance.

The Manley report recommends strongly against any vote in the Canadian parliament on the future of the war. The Liberals say they want a withdrawal from the combat mission in Kandahar by 2009, but the review panel wants the Liberals and the governing Conservatives to reach an agreement to continue selling the war by “leveraging” more commitment from Canada’s imperialist allies in Europe.

Manley believes that the best outcome to hope for is a shattered Afghanistan where imperialist interests are nonetheless preserved. “We’re not going to have a VE day here with parades in the streets,” he cautioned journalists on January 23.

The furore over the Manley report can only increase the number of Canadians who question the war’s aims and rationale. Many more can be won to the view that the only principled and humanitarian end to the carnage is withdrawal of foreign occupation forces and recognition of the right of the Afghan people to freely determine their political future.

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