

Canada: The uncensored Afghan Torture Documents. The Liberals Have Sabotaged Parliament

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The agreement reached at the 11th hour on the uncensored Afghan torture documents is hardly a victory for democracy. It is precisely the opposite and it is the Liberals we have to thank for it. We have come to expect nothing better from the Harper Conservatives – the most dishonest, anti-democratic and arrogant government in living memory.

The Liberals – fearing the possibility of an election and too cowardly to face down the bully Stephen Harper – went along with what will be a terrible precedent: allowing three outside “experts” to vet the documents that MPs and Canadian citizens had a right to see. The ruling of the Speaker was absolutely clear: MPs had an absolute right to view the documents. Full stop. No qualifications. That’s what absolute means.

The Liberals and the NDP early on allowed the Conservatives to frame the argument as one involving national security and then further allowed them to suggest that MPs are so irresponsible that they can’t be trusted to read the documents and not reveal national security secrets to the Taliban.

This is sheer idiocy on both counts.

First, if there are 10 pages out of the 40,000 in question that have anything to do with genuine national security I will eat all of them. These documents were identified because they related to the torture of war prisoners – not our strategic approach to the war. Did any of the opposition parties do any kind of analysis of this spurious argument? Did they decide that Canadians were too dull-witted to understand the arguments? Had they immediately ridiculed this obvious red herring as they should have we wouldn’t have been through this humiliating (to our democracy and the opposition) process.

The final result is a precedent that puts the judgment of MPs in their own House of Commons, second to so-called experts. What experts? And who will define national security? The “experts” or Parliament? The whole question revolves around this definition and yet we have heard virtually nothing about what it might mean.

The fact that the Conservatives will very likely get to choose one, and the opposition another (with a third to be agreed upon by both) demonstrates that there is no such thing as neutral experts. The whole process is totally political – which is why it should have stayed in the House of Commons and the final decision made by MPs exclusively.

Now we have a new definition of the absolute right of Parliament - the almost absolute, the not quite absolute, the nearly absolute, the absolute except when the executive branch of the day says no. This is the fault of the Liberals. The NDP and Bloc fought til the end against the panel of experts and finally caved in order to advance the Afghan torture issue. It was a hard choice. The NDP and Bloc knew that Harper was quite capable of calling an election on the issue - one too distant from the immediate concerns of Canadians to fight an election on - an election that would deny the NDP the opportunity to run on substantive issues.

Ultimately, of course the responsibility for this latest assault on democracy lies at the feet of Stephen Harper. His efforts to emasculate parliament are legion - including earlier appointment of yet another third party - former SC Justice Frank Iacobucci - to vet the documents. It will take years for our tattered democracy to recover from the ruthless violations visited on it by this, the worst prime minister the country has ever had.

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