

## It's time to put aside petty differences

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The Ottawa Citizen  
November 18, 2010

The ultimate test for any democracy, on issues relating to defence and security, is its maturity -- and by this I mean its capacity, on occasion, to set aside pettifogging partisanship in the interest of a higher cause. The coming re-calibration of our Afghanistan NATO deployment will be just such a test of maturity on all sides.

To date, parliamentary deliberations on Afghanistan, while intense and principled, have not been narrowly partisan. As an example, the June report of the Standing Senate Committee on National Security and Defence, comprised of committee members of both stripes, unanimously recommended a continued training mission in Afghanistan post-2011 to assist the stand-up of a national security-capable Afghan army as soon as possible.

This committee is chaired by Senator Pamela Wallin, a Conservative from Saskatchewan, and Senator Romeo Dallaire, a Liberal from Quebec. The former was consul general to New York in the immediate post-9-11 period and a leading member of the independent panel on Afghanistan headed by John Manley; the latter is a former general in the Canadian Forces with multiple mission experience and a leading advocate on issues such as genocide and child soldiers.

On March 30, I made a statement in the Senate appealing for a continued Canadian military presence post-2011 in Afghanistan, which need not in any way violate the terms of the joint parliamentary resolution that mandated the end of combat operations in Kandahar province by July 2011. That statement paid tribute to the prime minister and the Official Opposition leader for their faithful reflection of the 2008 resolution that followed the report of the Independent Panel on Canada's Future Role in Afghanistan.

Much of what was called for by the panel, more helicopters and more NATO re-enforcements in Kandahar for example, has been provided.

And, in fact, one should remember that this deployment originally began under the Chretien and Martin governments and has been continued under the present Conservative administration. It began when a Princess Patricia's battle group joined the initial American and Afghan allies'

assaults on Taliban strongholds in and near Kandahar. Canada then redeployed to Kabul in order to stabilize the city for the establishment of a new government and the first elections. Subsequently, Canada deployed to the toughest part of the country, which was Kandahar, to contain the insurgency and hold the fort so the rest of Afghanistan could make progress.

This was done at a real cost of casualties and capacity but the Canadian Forces, diplomats, police and development people carried on.

Now that large commitments of American forces are helping to change conditions on the ground, the manner in which this NATO deployment ends is very much a factor of how effectively Afghans themselves are trained. That Canadians, who have been in the country for a decade in the toughest of circumstances, should be trusted as trainers by the Afghan Army, its government and our NATO allies, should surprise no one who knows the men and women of our armed forces. Their professionalism, courage, competence, flexibility and determination are legendary and precisely the qualities an experienced training operation on the ground needs.

The recently announced new deployment of Canadians for training purposes is really a non-combat mission that, as Prime Minister Stephen Harper has stated, does not necessarily require parliamentary approval, unlike the dispatch of troops for any major combat mission. Keep in mind that it was Harper who, to his credit, established the principle that a parliamentary vote is required when a major combat deployment is to take place. Training behind the wire, or at a war college facility in Kabul, does correspond to the 2008 joint resolution passed by Parliament and supported by both government members and those in the official opposition.

This is not a time for beggar-thy-neighbour debates about who is for war or who is for peace.

A well-trained and capable Afghan army is both the key and the essential prerequisite for any eventual NATO withdrawal and any authentic, durable peace in Afghanistan. Almost universally when one talks to Canadians who have served, either through the regular forces or the many reserve units that have been vital to the Canadian operation, many who have done several tours of duty, they want Canada to stay until the opportunity for a unified NATO draw down is real. That draw down will be the result of training and capacity building with Afghan forces, police and civil society and an accommodation between Afghans themselves. It is the next crucial objective and Canada's ability to contribute substantially and effectively to its attainment should be endorsed by parliamentarians as soon as possible.

This is not about partisan differences in foreign and defence policy here; it is about Canada as a trusted NATO partner committing to the next central priority in the stabilization and development of Afghanistan.

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