

Give Parliament a vote before future military missions

By Bob Bergen

It's too late for those, who like NDP Leader Jack Layton, are calling for a parliamentary debate and vote on Canada's role in the fight against terrorism in Afghanistan.

A vote should have taken place long ago. What is needed now is Canadians' unwavering support for the military's new deployment to Kandahar.

But, if Prime Minister Stephen Harper really wants to do something to support future deployments of the Canadian Forces and clean up Canada's democratic process at the same time, he will kill the charade known as "take note" debates in Parliament.

A "take note" debate was the insidious parliamentary procedure Prime Minister Paul Martin's Liberal government employed on November 15, 2005, to create a facade of openness and parliamentary accountability six months after its decision to extend the Canadian mission in Afghanistan from Kabul to Kandahar.

Nothing, but nothing, beats "take note" debates when it comes to the formal emasculation of parliamentarians who might otherwise have a meaningful democratic role in overseas troop deployments.

Here is why. Prime Minister Jean Chrétien's Liberal government introduced the "take-note" debate procedure in 1994 to invite parliamentary discussion on the future direction of Canadian peacekeeping policy and operations in the former Yugoslavia.

It was supposed to be an antidote to past governments' practice of neglecting Parliament or treating it as an afterthought in the development of foreign and defence policy.

In theory, that looked good because Parliament has never had a meaningful role in military operations overseas.

But, history teaches that what the Chrétien government did in 1994 institutionalized what governments of all stripes have done regarding military missions abroad since the Second World War.

(During the First World War, Canadians went to war as British subjects and Sir Robert Borden's Conservative government had no say in the matter.)

Liberal Prime Minister Mackenzie King is often remembered for saying that Parliament alone would decide whether Canada would become involved in the Second World War.

The truth was that was an excuse to not make a military commitment to Britain and King kept Parliament in the dark as long as he could.

When the House of Commons was eventually called into a special war session on September 7, 1939, to approve the Governor-General's throne speech seeking authorization for the military defence of Canada, it was too late for independent parliamentary oversight.

Prior to the outbreak of the Korean War, Prime Minister Louis St. Laurent's Liberal government committed three Canadian destroyers to the western Pacific on June 30, 1950, where they would be available for United Nations duty if required. Parliament was then prorogued.

On July 19, the government provided in-theatre air lift to the UN in the form of a Royal Canadian Air Force squadron. On August 7, it raised an additional brigade for the UN operation and, two weeks later, the force was recruited, equipped and was in training.

The St. Laurent government only sought parliamentary approval for its Korean War actions after the fact in a special session which opened on August 29, 1950. Parliamentarians were rightly furious.

It didn't get any better in 1990 when the House was on summer recess and Prime Minister Brian Mulroney's Conservative government committed near-obsolete Canadian warships to the Persian Gulf.

By the time the government's war actions came before full parliamentary scrutiny from January 15 to 29, 1991, Mulroney's government had already committed CF-18 fighter-bombers on January 11 to the effort to drive Iraq from Kuwait.

In power in 1994, Chrétien's Liberal government introduced the previously mentioned "take note" debate process which formalized Parliament's exclusion from any meaningful role in the deployment of troops overseas.

Firmly ensconced in parliamentary procedure, the debates eliminated the possibility of quorum calls, dilatory motions or requests for unanimous consent or, in other words, votes.

Then, in 1998, prior to Canada's participation in the 1999 Kosovo air war, the Chrétien government deployed CF-18s to Aviano, Italy, while Parliament was out for the summer, as it was in 1950 and 1990. See how it works?

When Parliament finally debated Kosovo – as it did three times from October 7, 1998 through to April 12, 1999 – it was in the context of "take note" debates that excluded any possibility of parliamentarians voting. One last opposition attempt to hold an April vote on a potential deployment of ground troops was defeated by the Liberal majority.

It should be no surprise, then, that Paul Martin's government called for a "take note" debate on Afghanistan in November last year after its earlier May commitment to the Kandahar mission.

There could be no parliamentary vote.

The pattern is clear.

When it comes to the deployment of troops overseas, either by practice or policy, Parliament is a toothless, gummy old watchdog howling at the moon.

Prime Minister Harper has a chance to make Canadian history, not for his own sake, but to rectify this sorry democratic deficit now perpetuated by Jean Chrétien's cynical legacy.

Harper's government should rescind the practice of "take note" debates and create a democratic environment in which future military deployments overseas can be debated and voted upon in the House of Commons.

Canadians should demand that their Members of Parliament have the right to vote on the most serious decision a government can make: sending military personnel into combat where they might die in pursuit of its foreign policy objectives.

Bob Bergen, Ph.D., is a Research Fellow with the Canadian Defence & Foreign Affairs Institute (CDFAI) in Calgary. The opinions expressed in this document are those of the author and not necessarily those of CDFAI, its Board of Directors, Advisory Council, Fellows or donors.