

Vote on Afghanistan mission a Canadian democratic triumph

By Bob Bergen

Stephen Harper's Conservative government made history this week by putting the extension of Canada's military mission in Afghanistan until February 2009 to a House of Commons vote.

This is an unprecedented democratic triumph and its significance should not be overlooked or under-appreciated by Canadians from coast to coast to coast.

Not since the Second World War – and even then only marginally – has Parliament played a meaningful role in the deployment of combat troops overseas.

Here is why.

From the Korean War to the 1991 Gulf War to Somalia, successive Canadian governments only engaged Parliament in debate or sought its approval for troop deployments long after the fact.

In each and every House of Commons debate about Parliament's marginal role in the deployment of troops, the arguments, the language – right down to the precise words – have been virtually the same since 1950 and the Korean War.

Then-Prime Minister Louis St. Laurent's cabinet committed Canadian destroyers, air lift and a special brigade of troops to the United Nations "police action" in Korea while the House was out of session.

Parliamentarians were outraged when they were called back into special session to give consideration to Korea after the fact, but were lectured that they ought to trust cabinet decisions.

Conservative Opposition Leader John Diefenbaker was livid, arguing that Parliament's lack of involvement amounted to a negation of democratic oversight.

He said in part: "If cabinet is to be trusted; if we are to accept at face value what ministers say, then we had better all be absent from this House. We would need no Parliament."

That was virtually the same argument the Liberal Opposition made when Brian Mulroney's Conservative government committed ships and CF-18s to the Persian Gulf War in 1990 and 1991.

In 1994, Prime Minister Jean Chrétien's Liberal government went one step further, formally undermining direct parliamentary involvement in military deployments by introducing "take note" debates.

"Take note" debates abolished the possibility of quorum calls, dilatory motions or requests for unanimous consent, meaning that they exclude parliamentary votes.

A series of "take note" debates in 1998 and 1999 eliminated votes on the Chretien government's commitment of CF-18s to the Kosovo air war.

In an October 2001 "take note" debate, Chrétien's government outlined Canada's contribution to Operation Apollo, Canada's contribution to the war on terrorism in the wake of September 11, 2001.

Parliament was similarly excluded from voting during a "take note" debate on Canada's deployment of the 3rd Battalion Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry Battle Group to Afghanistan in 2002.

The charade continued last year after then-Prime Minister Paul Martin's government extended and increased Canada's contribution of combat troops to Kandahar in May, but only held "take note" debates in November months after the fact and again in March of this year with the Conservatives.

In each and every case, the Opposition lament over the lack of a meaningful parliamentary role mirrored that of John Diefenbaker's in 1950.

As a result, the Harper government's decision this week to overturn decade after decade after decade of abuse and to restore a meaningful role for Parliament by allowing a vote on the extension of Canada's mission in Afghanistan is a breath of fresh democratic air.

What was hypocritical during the debate was some Opposition members' criticism of the process, saying they wanted to know why there was a rush to hold a vote.

Harper announced on Monday that he was putting forward a motion asking for Parliament's support for the mission's extension, giving Opposition MPs 48-hours' notice.

That was the most notice Opposition MPs were ever given prior to a "take note" debate. Most of the time, they were given a lot less and little or no notification of the subject to be debated.

It would have been equally refreshing had Opposition members decided to place greater emphasis on the national and geo-political interests that necessitate Canada's presence in Afghanistan, rather than concentrate on the process, but that is perhaps asking a little too much.

Partisan politics aside, the precedent this week's vote on the Afghanistan mission extension sets is a heady gold standard against which future government decisions about overseas deployments ought to be measured.

Sending military personnel into combat where they might die in pursuit of its foreign policy objectives is the most serious decision a government can make.

The recent deaths of Canadians in Afghanistan underscore that point in dramatic and painful fashion.

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