

A New Manley Commission for Afghanistan?

The Afghan War is not going well. Canadian and Allied casualties mount daily, Improvised Explosive Devices and suicide bombers proliferate, and the Taliban seems to be extending its reach across the country from south to north and east to west. The Afghanistan-Pakistan border continues to remain open to reinforcements and weapons for the Taliban, and the hunt for al-Qaeda's top figures, while it has had some successes, remains frustratingly slow. The recent Afghan presidential election still remains unresolved, with the allegations of fraud now being proven. President Hamid Karzai looks to be the winner, but his government is, at best, likely to remain ineffective and corrupt. The war's unpopularity is clear in the opinion polls, each death in the field continues to get extensive coverage, and ministers and the senior leadership of the Canadian Forces have clearly been told to say as little as possible about any matters of significance.

That is not wholly true. The Canadian government has repeatedly stated that it will live up to terms of the February 2008 House of Commons motion that declared that Canada would begin to pull its combat troops out of Kandahar in July 2011 and complete that process by the end of the year. There have been grumbles about this from NATO officials, fearful that other allies, less stalwart than Canada in fighting the war, might follow Ottawa's lead and pull out as well. President Obama has appeared understanding of Canada's position, not least during Prime Minister Stephen Harper's visit to Washington last week, but American pressure on Ottawa to change its position will surely increase if a Canadian withdrawal seems likely to spur other Allies to pull out.

At the same time, the Canadian government has made clear that Canada will not quit Afghanistan completely. In Washington on September 16, the Prime Minister said that "Canada is not leaving Afghanistan; Canada will be transitioning from a predominantly military mission to a mission that will be a civilian humanitarian development mission after 2011." The fighting soldiers will come home, but Canada has more than infantry and tanks there. There is a helicopter squadron of great usefulness, and the 300-strong Provincial Reconstruction Team in Kandahar, helping to improve the local infrastructure and train Afghans. There are diplomats and aid personnel. And there are officers and soldiers in the Operational Mentor and Liaison Teams working directly within the kandaks (or battalions) of the Afghan National Army while others, mainly RCMP and other police, give their advice to the Afghan National Police. What, if anything, of these resources will remain after 2011 when the battle group returns to Canada? What do we want to do? What goals do we hope to achieve? How can the government build a consensus in Parliament and the country for its future course, whatever it might be?

Prime Minister Harper created the Independent Panel on Canada's Future Role in Afghanistan in the late summer of 2007, giving the task of leading it to a former Liberal Deputy Prime Minister, John Manley. After wide but quick consultations, the Manley commission reported in January 2008 its sensible recommendations forming the basis of the government's motion in the House of Commons in February. In a shrewd gesture of bipartisanship, the government largely accepted the Liberal Opposition's amendments to its motion, and the result was Parliament's decision to extend the mission to 2011.

Now the clock is ticking toward the inevitable Canadian withdrawal. Can we not replicate the Manley Commission again to help us prepare the plan for the post-2011 years? This could not happen if the country had been plunged into a general election this autumn, but with some luck, we may avoid this until after the Vancouver Olympic Games conclude. A new Commission set up now could hear witnesses, including Canadian diplomats and aid officials, senior officers from the Canadian Forces, academics, representatives of Non-Governmental Organizations, and others. It could talk to foreign diplomats and politicians and visit Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Such a Commission could consider the key questions. What are Canada's national interests today in Afghanistan, eight years after the attacks of 9/11? What do we want to achieve there? We all likely recognize that Kabul is not going to be the capital of a Western-style democracy, but can we realistically help create a better life for a people who clearly want their daughters to be able to go school? Can we help build an Islamic Republic that is a just society? What are the possibilities of Pakistan sliding further into chaos? Of its nuclear weapons falling into the hands of terrorist fundamentalists? And what are the implications of this for the Afghan war and for future devastating terrorist attacks on the West?

How best can Canada continue to play a useful role in Afghanistan and the region? Do we want to keep our trainers and mentors in the field, knowing that this will mean that Canadian soldiers will be fighting alongside Afghans? Do we want to keep the Provincial Reconstruction Team there, understanding that this will certainly require some troops to protect it and allow it to do its job? How can we improve the distribution and effectiveness of our aid? What can be done to expand our diplomatic efforts? Will civilians alone be able to do the job Canada wants to do?

The reality is that NATO and our friends, engaged in their own planning for the future, need to know what this country will do next no later than mid-2010. A new Manley Commission would allow for a careful consideration of what should and can be done and help chart this country's future course. Too much Canadian blood has already been spilled for us to simply walk away without carefully considering what we leave behind. Canadians want to help build a more peaceful Afghanistan. The real question now is how best to do that.

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