

Stephen Harper is Mackenzie King

The House of Commons voted on March 13 to keep Canadian troops in Kandahar until the end of 2011. The vote was 198 to 77, the Liberals aligning themselves with the government. So the issue is decided, and beginning in January 2012 Canada will be out of the long war against the Taliban.

Or will we?

Sometimes politicians plot and connive and sometimes they make mistakes out of naivete and a want of guile. The resolution that the House of Commons accepted shows a combination of these traits. All the guile was on the government front benches. All the naivete was across the chamber.

Prime Minister Stephen Harper's government introduced its initial motion that called for an extension of the Afghan mission on February 8. The heart of the motion said this: "The House supports the continuation of Canada's current responsibility for security in Kandahar beyond February 2009, to the end of 2011," much as the Prime Minister had been indicating for some time. There were qualifying phrases on the role of the troops and clear references to the conditions suggested by Hon. John Manley's Independent Panel, but the nub of the issue was an extension from February 2009 until the end of 2011.

The Liberal Opposition objected to the government position and there were sharp discussions in the party caucus as M.P.s battled for the soul of Stéphane Dion on this issue. The result four days later was an immensely long amendment to the government motion that struggled to balance the many positions held by Liberal members. The key clause, however, was simple and straightforward: "Canada should continue a military presence in Kandahar beyond February 2009, to February 1, 2011." The Liberals, although trying to shorten the commitment by eleven months, had accepted the extension of the Kandahar commitment into 2011 in principle.

The Prime Minister and government ministers were quick to wave olive branches and to praise the Grits for their bipartisan actions in the national interest. On February 21, the government duly introduced its final resolution, the one that was passed three weeks later. Again, the text of the key sections was straightforward: "This extension of Canada's military presence in Afghanistan is approved by this House expressly on the condition that...the government of Canada notify NATO that Canada will end its presence in Kandahar as of July 2011, and, as of that date, the redeployment of Canadian Forces troops out of Kandahar and their replacement by Afghan forces start as soon as possible, so that it will have been completed by December 2011."

The government had held firm on its end date, giving itself what it most wanted, but the government accepted almost everything else demanded by the Liberal opposition. Game over; bipartisan unity achieved.

But what had happened? Did the government commit to getting out of Afghanistan at the end of 2011 as most Canadians and the Liberals appear to think? Or did Stephen Harper yet again snooker Stéphane Dion and his party? The initial government resolution on February 8 had talked about a continuation of Canadian responsibility for security **in Kandahar**, and the Liberals' amendment on February 12, while changing the phrasing, had kept the sense, calling for Canada to continue a military presence in that troubled province. The final resolution as passed in the House made clear that "Canada will end its presence **in Kandahar** as of July 2011," with all troops to be posted out by the end of the year.

Nowhere did the language advanced by the government and tweaked by the guileless Liberals call for Canada to be **out of Afghanistan**, only for our soldiers to leave Kandahar. What does this mean? Clearly, it can only be understood to mean (assuming Prime Minister Harper is in power in 2011) that he could pull Canadian troops from Afghanistan completely or, if the situation warrants, post them to the safer northern regions or even to the more hostile Uruzgan province. The March 13 resolution gave the Prime Minister almost complete flexibility, sanctioned by the House, to do whatever he chooses three years down the road. All he is committed to is to take Canadian troops out of Kandahar.

Stephen Harper has already demonstrated that he is a brilliant political tactician. Now his manoeuvring on this war issue ranks him with Mackenzie King who in 1942 held a plebiscite on conscription for overseas service, won it except in Quebec, and then refrained from action. King's tactics had forced the pro-conscription Conservatives to support him in the plebiscite, however unwillingly. And their reward? His government's policy, King said, was "not necessarily conscription but conscription if necessary." That phraseology stopped the implementation of overseas conscription until November 1944, a political miracle.

Mr Harper's Afghan legerdemain has replicated King's feat. The Liberals, many flatly anti-war and some only grudgingly supportive, had let themselves be manoeuvred into supporting a resolution for extension of the mission. And their reward? Canadian policy on the war is now "necessarily not Kandahar, but anywhere else in Afghanistan if necessary."

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