

John Manley's Afghanistan Panel

Opinions by Erika Simpson and Steve Staples

The Independent Panel released its report on Afghanistan this week (www.independent-panel-independant.ca) so Mike Byers, Erika Simpson, and Steve Staples have been busy over the last couple of days commenting on television, radio, as well as writing opinion pieces. We are sending you some of our spoken and written commentary so you can forward this to others who might share our critical viewpoints. Please feel free to forward this email to others and send us your ideas. Or better yet, use the weblinks below so your comments are read by others.

Here is Steve Staples writing in this week's NOW magazine:

News Feature

The case for more war

Panel on Afghanistan gives PM a rationale for dragging out the conflict

By Steven Staples

Ottawa – John Manley and his panel on the future of Canada's military mission in Afghanistan have delivered a late Christmas gift to Stephen Harper.

Their report hits all the right notes, endorses the government's conduct of the war and calls on Canada to keep doing the same thing it has been – just more of it.

No rebranding of the mission is on offer.

Pre-release speculation was that Manley would urge a shift in the mission away from combat to training Afghan troops. Call the war training instead of combat, even though there is little difference, and maybe the Liberals will come on side.

At his press conference Tuesday, January 22, Manley sat in front of a photo of Afghan children and declared that the mission should continue indefinitely beyond 2009, until the Afghan army is able to continue the fight on their own, on condition that NATO provide an additional 1,000 troops to Kandahar province to assist Canadians, and the government acquire helicopters and unmanned surveillance aircraft.

There was some mild criticism of the government's current approach, identifying a need to focus more on diplomacy and reconstruction, and calling on the prime minister to play a more active role in pressing for greater support from NATO.

But this is really just window dressing around what is a major endorsement of the current military mission.

The demand that more troops be deployed by NATO or else Canada will withdraw next year is likely a bluff, since an additional 1,000 troops could easily come from the U.S., which is already sending over 3,000 more Marines to Afghanistan.

The report and press conference were largely a rehash of previous government announcements and demands. They had the requisite finger-pointing at NATO for not providing enough troops and at Pakistan for not securing its border where insurgents cross freely into Afghanistan, and the obligatory tribute to the bravery of our soldiers.

Was there any real possibility that Manley would come out with any new ideas to end the war, now dragging into its seventh year at a cost of \$100 million a month, with Canadian casualties approaching 80? Probably not.

The panel itself was unbalanced, consisting of hawks from the Conservative and Liberal parties whose shared area of expertise is not the needs of Afghanistan but the desires of Washington.

Even more disappointing, the panel held its interviews with government and military officials and a smattering of development groups behind closed doors. Sure, individual Canadians concerned about the war were welcome to

send them an e-mail, but that's the modern equivalent of slipping a letter under the locked doors – hardly a legitimate public process.

The government and opposition parties will respond to the report in coming days, laying the groundwork for the return of Parliament next week.

Harper will no doubt use the report to argue that the military mission should be extended to 2011, two years beyond its current commitment to February 2009. The NDP and the Bloc Québécois will no doubt oppose the report's recommendations.

Attention will focus on the Liberals now. After all, Harper has promised to put the extension of the military mission to a vote, and he needs at least some Liberal support. Stéphane Dion has repeatedly said he will not endorse an extension of the Kandahar combat mission beyond 2009.

When Harper set up the Manley panel last October, he had several objectives in mind. First was to delay having to make a decision on the Afghanistan conflict, and the panel has bought him time to rebuild support for the unpopular war. Second was to gain approval for the war and its extension, which Manley delivered nicely.

But Harper, in appointing a former Liberal MP to head the panel, probably hoped Manley would be able to reposition the mission in a way that might win the government some support from the Liberal benches in a vote on extending it to 2011.

And on this point, Manley has probably let Harper down. In reading through the report and listening to the press conference, I didn't find much the Liberals could vote for.

Manley was clear that training did not mean abandoning combat – a central Liberal demand. As well, there was no mention of reducing or moving troops in Kandahar, another key Liberal demand.

In this regard, one can commend Manley for not trying to falsely portray training the Afghan national army as something distinct from combat, because it is not. In fact, the way the Canadian Forces train Afghan soldiers is by engaging in combat, fighting side by side.

When Parliament returns, the report will ensure that the issue continues to be a key part of parliamentary debate.

Even more, the war may play a role in spurring on an election. If Harper moves quickly to a vote on extending the mission without assured Liberal support, Canada's combat role in Kandahar will be a key election issue.

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Here is an article by Erika Simpson in this week's Embassy magazine:

Canada's foreign policy weekly.

Afghanistan panel recommends re-orienting Canada's mission but staying the course

A high-profile panel appointed by the Prime Minister recommends that we stay the course in Afghanistan. "To pull out now or even to partially reduce would cause more harm than good." As the five-member panel warns, "To withdraw now would make futility certain, and failure inescapable." Instead of a radical rethinking of Canada's goals and objectives in Afghanistan, we have been advised to preserve the status quo.

The panelists, led by former Liberal Foreign Minister John Manley, counsel maintaining the status quo contingent on two strong recommendations. They insist on intensified retraining of the Afghan army and police, particularly Afghanistan's officers. This could be interpreted as a cynical attempt to rebrand Canada's peace enforcement efforts in Kandahar to focus more on 'peacebuilding' than 'peace enforcement'. It does allow Prime Minister Harper to highlight his government's peacebuilding efforts in any forthcoming federal election. It will be easier to oppose Opposition leader Stéphane Dion's repeated promise that, if he becomes Prime Minister, he will

withdraw Canada's combat forces in February 2009, at the same time as Canadian efforts will continue in training, reconstruction, and aid. The independent panel's chief recommendation dovetails with Dion's emphasis on peacebuilding, rather than peace enforcement, and it gives Prime Minister Harper a face-saving method of presenting his government's future military efforts in Afghanistan.

The panel did not hold public hearings about where, how, and why Canada will retrain Afghan's own army and police officers. They cannot be trained at the recently-defunct Lester B. Pearson Peacekeeping Training Centre in Nova Scotia. Our Canadian soldiers deployed in Afghanistan are professionally trained, combat-capable fighting forces who now, apparently, will be expected to train Afghani officers as well as deliver more humanitarian aid. These tasks are already partly the responsibility of officials from the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA), who are understandably reluctant to deploy their personnel for humanitarian purposes because it remains so dangerous. The panel should have had a longer time mandate in order to properly hear across the country from more Canadians about our training expectations and about our ideas as to whether there needs to be a concomitant readjustment of the mission's objectives and goals before February 2009. Training and building up the Afghani army will be difficult in any gradual transition out of lead responsibility, and this task will be made all the more difficult by confusion within the Canadian Forces about their exact role-peace enforcement or peacebuilding?

The panel's second strong recommendation was that Canada conditionally extend its military mission in Kandahar beyond Feb 2009 contingent on the provision of additional troops and more equipment by one or more NATO countries. A battle group of 1000 soldiers must be promised from another NATO country, and presumably it will be the Canadian government that must purchase new medium-lift helicopters and high performance unmanned aerial vehicles. These are easily obtainable goals. Currently the 26-member alliance of NATO deploys 11,700 soldiers in a region where Canada has 2,700 forces deployed (and has endured 77 deaths). While the European allies within NATO seem reluctant to contribute more soldiers, defence officials are adding pressure to the appeal by Canada's Minister of National Defence Peter Mackay to share the burden. For instance, General Klaus Naumann, Germany's former top soldier and ex-chairman of NATO's military committee, recently delivered a blistering attack on his own country's performance in Afghanistan. "The time has come for Germany to decide if it wants to be a reliable partner." By insisting on "special rules" for its forces in Afghanistan, he said the Merkel government in Berlin was contributing to "the dissolution of NATO." We can expect an announcement of a few thousand more troops at the big NATO summit in April, and if that is not sufficient, the recent announcement by the U.S. that it will send 3,200 Marines into the south of Afghanistan should suffice to fulfil the panel's second strong recommendation.

Along with Canada, the British and the Dutch already contribute mainly 'counterinsurgency' forces. Despite U.S. Secretary of Defense Robert Gates' off-the-cuff comments last week that NATO forces "don't know how to do counterinsurgency operations", a chastened Gates is now fervently praising Canadian, British, and Dutch soldiers for their "valour and skill in combat." However, Canada's independent panel is now recommending more training and peacebuilding. In the final analysis, it will probably be the Canadian Forces' personnel currently deployed in Afghanistan that decide if they actually want to take on a more 'peaceful' role. Counterinsurgency, ground infantry operations, and armed patrolling are more dangerous tasks-it will always be difficult to avoid casualties-but unfortunately Canadian soldiers seem to prefer these exciting sorts of tasks compared to the more mundane responsibilities of peacebuilding. Yet at the same time, while the majority of serving officers and reservists seem to prefer peace enforcement to peacebuilding, public opinion in many NATO member states (including Canada) increasingly favours a reduced military emphasis and presence in Afghanistan, with a strong preference for more civilian involvement. In the collision of these different trends and preoccupations against each other, the only sure guarantee is that the debate about Canada's future in Afghanistan is nowhere near over.

Dr. Erika Simpson is the author of *NATO and the Bomb* and co-authored the original reports to establish the Lester B. Pearson Peacekeeping Training Centre in Nova Scotia. She is the vice-chair of the Canadian Pugwash Group, the national affiliate of the International Pugwash conferences on World Affairs and an associate professor of international relations in the department of political science at the University of Western Ontario in London, Ontario, Canada. She can be reached at simpson@uwo.ca

Your comments are welcome.

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