



## **Afghan war debate haunts all NATO partners; Dutch, German support for war fading in polls**

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By James McNulty

Canada is not alone in the emotionally-charged debate on the war in Afghanistan and whether our troops should stay or be pulled out.

The same discussion, with its many complexities and opinions, is under way in Holland, Germany, Poland and other NATO countries partnered on the mission.

Canada's divided public opinion, measured in numerous polls taken before a roadside bomb killed six Canadian troops Wednesday, is similar to that found in Holland and Germany.

Poland is another story, with 78 per cent of respondents in a recent CBOS poll opposed to the mission, and 81 per cent opposing a Polish military presence in Iraq.

In Canada, a recent Strategic Counsel poll showed 57 per cent of respondents oppose the combat mission, with 36 per cent in favour.

A Dutch poll reported on the Angus Reid Global Monitor shows that while 54 per cent of respondents support the mission, 51 per cent do not want Holland to extend its two-year, 1,400-troop commitment in Afghanistan beyond the expiry date of August 2008.

Even though a majority of Dutch support the scheduled mission, only 31 per cent think it has "proceeded successfully," with 46 per cent saying it hasn't.

A recent German poll by Infratest-Dimap showed that 54 per cent of respondents want German troops pulled out of Afghanistan, with 44 per cent disagreeing.

In Canada, some of the more vocal elements of the minority backing a combat role take great pleasure in castigating NDP Leader Jack Layton for suggesting Canadian troops be withdrawn before the current mission's scheduled end in February 2009.

In hard right-wing circles, Layton's call for dialogue and talks with the Taliban have earned him the title "Taliban Jack."

Perhaps the critics are unaware that even the Afghan Senate has called for talks with the Taliban.

The anti-Jack crowd also appears to be completely oblivious, or in denial, about recent polls showing that more Canadians agree with Layton than disagree.

A Strategic Counsel poll in May showed that 63 per cent of respondents thought negotiations with the Taliban were a "net good idea," with 32 per cent opposed.

Another late-May poll by Angus Reid Strategies showed that 50 per cent of respondents think Canada should pull its troops home before the mandate ends in 2009; 32 per cent disagreed.

If Layton is "Taliban Jack," does that make the majority of Canadians who agree with him "Taliban Canadians?"

Is it possible in Canada to have a rational, reasonable discussion around these thorny issues without resorting to juvenile name-calling?

Not for some people, too busy firing cheap shots to notice the real mood of the country.

Layton was even criticized for allegedly trading on the deaths of the six soldiers Wednesday with a press conference the same day reiterating his long-held position on the conflict.

The fact is that Layton announced his press conference Tuesday, for 11 a.m. Eastern time the next day -- roughly the same time word of the fatalities came down.

Stephen Harper recently vowed to sit down with opposition parties for talks on the mission before any House vote is taken on whether to extend the combat mission beyond February 2009.

The talks will be useless if they continue to be marked by patriot-infused blackballing and partisan jingoism.

One thing Canadians agree on, in a Strategic Counsel poll, is that they have less trust in the House of Commons (58 per cent) than the military, Canada Post, and the RCMP.

House muckrakers, take note.

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Voice mail: 604-605-2094;

E-mail: [jmcnulty@png.canwest.com](mailto:jmcnulty@png.canwest.com)