

Conservatives the only winners on Afghanistan extension

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The Harper Conservatives surely feel victorious in having successfully secured an extension to 2011 of Canada's mission in Afghanistan.

The last T was crossed last week at a NATO summit in Bucharest when France announced plans to dispatch an additional battalion to the war-ravaged country. The French soldiers will free up Americans who can be deployed to bolster Canadian numbers.

The extension to 2011 was not easily achieved. It came by way of the Manley panel's report in January and a decision two months later by Liberals to reverse their longstanding opposition.

For Conservatives keen on winning a majority government, Afghanistan had to be neutralized as an election issue.

Now it has been. The Dion Liberals, having voted with the Harperites in March to keep troops in Kandahar another three years, no longer can balk over the engagement.

The Manley report was key, stating the mission should continue only if the 2,500 Canadian soldiers got access to more helicopters and aerial drones and another 1,000 soldiers.

Liberals, unprepared for an election and not wishing to have the government fall, opted to use the Manley recommendations to save face. If the choppers and soldiers could be arranged, they'd go along with the mission extension.

When it became clear last week that the Manley demands would be met, Sandra Buckler, Harper's communications chief, crowed: "It's good news for Canada and good news for NATO."

In fact it's good news for the Conservatives.

For NATO, not such good news. Nor for the Liberals. Nor for Canada.

NATO continues to confront a problem best articulated by U.S. Defence Secretary Robert Gates last February in Munich.

"We must not -- we cannot -- become a two-tiered alliance of those willing to fight and those who are not. Such a development, with all its implications for collective security, would effectively destroy the alliance."

Gates elaborated: "In NATO, some allies ought not have the luxury of opting only for stability and civilian operations, forcing other allies to bear a disproportionate share of the fighting and the dying."

Canada is at the top of the list of those doing a disproportionate share of the dying in Afghanistan.

It's generally recognized that NATO members pulling their weight include Canada, the U.S., Britain, the Netherlands, Denmark and Romania.

Many U.S. allies, including Germany, France, Spain, Turkey and Italy, have refused significant deployment in the more dangerous south.

That Canada will continue efforts in the Kandahar region where the Taliban insurgency is strongest is not particularly good news for the Liberals, either.

Canadians opposing the war effort -- a February Angus Reid poll revealed 58 per cent of respondents disagreed with allowing the mission to continue beyond February 2009 -- will be inclined to view the Liberals as sellouts who caved for partisan self-interest. Plainly, Liberals compromised their stand in order not to go to the polls.

The party's stand -- that by 2009, Canadians would have done their share in Kandahar and should redeploy elsewhere in the country -- was highly defensible.

Why is it that Canada, a small country with a modest defence budget and no great historic tie to Afghanistan, should be contributing so disproportionately to the fighting over yonder?

Canada has lost 82 soldiers in Afghanistan, compared to 12 lost by France with a population nearly twice that of Canada.

Would it not be more reasonable for this country to be part of a rotation with other U.S. allies, in which each would be posted to the most dangerous areas for a few years at a time, then be moved?

The National Defence website takes a shot at justifying Canada's outsized contribution, asking the pertinent question "why are we there?" and answering it thus:

"Because the Afghan government asked for our help;

"Because what's good for Afghanistan is good for us all;

"Because it's a tough job and we have the right people to do it."

All those things are true, but they'd be no less true if another NATO country were

to serve in Kandahar in Canada's stead.

The government, for all its effective political manoeuvring on the issue, has failed to provide a badly needed answer to the specific question, "why Canada?"

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