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Armistice, Mr. Harper

Sat Feb 9 2008



PRIME Minister Stephen Harper is anxious to introduce a motion of confidence in the House of Commons in regards to the war in Afghanistan that could force an election if it is defeated. He should not be in such a hurry. There may come a time when such a motion is needed, but that proposal today is not only premature, it risks everything that this country has invested in the Afghan war so far.

Mr. Harper says he wants the House of Commons to vote on extending the military mission in Afghanistan beyond the present expiry date of 2009 under the terms recommended in John Manley's recent report. That supposes that Canada's NATO allies should commit an additional 1,000 troops to the war zone in southern Afghanistan and provide at least eight medium-lift helicopters in support of Canadian troops. Failing that, Mr. Manley argues that Canada should quit its combat role in the war. If NATO comes through, however, Ottawa should extend the mission.

It is understandable that Mr. Harper wants a strong mandate so as to be able to negotiate with confidence, something he cannot do in the present circumstance. But a motion to extend the mission could be defeated in the present climate where Liberal Leader Stephane Dion is more resolutely opposed to any extension than his caucus, the Bloc insists on ending the combat role on schedule in 2009, and the New Democrats want to surrender today.

If such a motion were put to the House and defeated, it would almost certainly mean a confused and premature end to Canada's role in Afghanistan, an abandonment of all the good work that Canadian soldiers have accomplished there and a betrayal of the sacrifices they have made. Every political indicator says that the election that would result from the motion's defeat would produce another minority government, perhaps Conservative, perhaps Liberal, but with the Tories unable to pursue the war and Liberals set on running away from it.

There is a more useful option for Mr. Harper. Since the government adopted the Manley recommendations, it has dogged its NATO allies to come up with the soldiers and equipment that Canada needs to continue its combat role. There are signs now that NATO is beginning to get the message. At the alliance's defence ministers' meeting in Lithuania this week, France, which so far has declined to actually fight in Afghanistan but could single-handedly meet all of Canada's requirements, strongly indicated that it was reconsidering: "I said that we would help the Canadians," said French Defence Minister Herve Morin. "Give it a few more days and it necessarily wouldn't be a bad thing."

Mr. Morin was advising Canada to wait until after the NATO summit in Romania in April, and that is good advice for Mr. Harper. If in April NATO does not meet the Manley demands, the issue is moot --- Canada will leave Afghanistan. If it does, that is the moment to ask the House of Commons for a vote of confidence in the pursuit of the war.

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