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January 14 2009 - <http://embassymag.ca/page/printpage/rock-1-14-2009>

How Solid is the Government's RoCK?

by Lee Berthiaume

The creation last year of a senior diplomatic post in Kandahar to provide increased civilian leadership to Canadian efforts in the province has had a positive impact on the mission as a whole, diplomats and experts say.

What's unclear is how much of the apparent success was driven by personalities who are starting to rotate out of the country, how much can be sustained with the arrival of new personnel, and where these people will take the mission.

When the Manley panel released its report on the Canadian mission in Afghanistan last January, one of its criticisms was the lack of co-ordination in the field and back in Ottawa.

At the same time, the panel's members repeatedly highlighted the fact that the mission was severely imbalanced in favour of the military.

The government, both before a vote in Parliament to extend the mission to 2011 and after, began deploying more civilians to Afghanistan and made several changes to better manage the mission.

One of those changes was the creation in March 2008 of a civilian post in Kandahar that would be staffed by a senior diplomat who would work with the military leadership on the ground to co-ordinate all aspects of the mission. As well, the diplomat would serve as the eyes and ears of the Canadian ambassador in Kabul.

Former Canadian ambassador to Afghanistan Arif Lalani, now a senior fellow at the University of Toronto's Munk Centre for International Studies, said the position was necessary.

"You know, normally we can run everything out of the capital. But when we have so much invested in a particular part of the country, it's very important that we have a senior civilian there who helps co-ordinate the civilian effort."

Elissa Golberg, who served as executive director of the Manley panel's secretariat after working for more than 10 years at Foreign Affairs, mostly on peace, conflict, human rights and humanitarian affairs, took over as the first Representative of Canada in Kandahar, or RoCK.

Over the next 10 months, Ms. Golberg became one of the most visible Canadians working in Afghanistan, which sent a message that the government was serious about addressing the imbalance.

"It's changed people's perceptions about how [the mission] should work," said Paul LaRose-Edwards, executive director of CANADEM, which has been working with the Canadian and Afghan governments to place civilian experts in Afghan ministries.

Afghan Ambassador to Canada Omar Samad said the benefits have gone beyond perceptions.

"From the Afghan perspective it has made a difference in terms of our side dealing with the various components of the

Canadian presence in Kandahar," he said. "We have better co-ordination, better dialogue and also better planning for various facets of the engagement there."

While more co-ordination at the national and international levels is needed, Mr. Samad said at the provincial and local levels, "I think we have a good balance."

One thing that made the whole arrangement easier was the fact that the officer in charge of the Canadian military contingent in Kandahar, Brig.-Gen. Denis Thompson, had spent time working at the Department of Foreign Affairs before taking command, where he interacted with Ms. Golberg and Mr. Lalani.

"We sort of knew each other and that helped," said Mr. Lalani. "I kind of think you've really seen the results of that operation in this last rotation with Gen. Thompson and with Elissa."

Mr. LaRose-Edwards said personalities determined success.

"It worked very well with the Canadian commander down there, Denis Thompson, because Denis Thompson really was inclined to giving a lot of authority and involve the civilian side of the operation," he said.

Mr. LaRose-Edwards, a former soldier who has worked for numerous international NGOs, said it's very easy for the military to bully the civilian side or push it out of the way if it wants to.

"In other words, if Elissa had been the wrong person and the military had determined in their minds that she was an idiot then they would have found ways to marginalize her," he said.

"So there was a bit of an alignment of the stars there," he said.

It will be important to see how Ms. Golberg's successor, fellow career diplomat Ken Lewis will mesh with not only Brig.-Gen. Thompson, but the general's successor, who will likely be appointed in a few months.

Mr. Lewis took over from Ms. Golberg in a ceremony at Kandahar Airfield on Saturday.

Unlike Ms. Golberg, who brings an array of experience in peace and conflict issues, Mr. Lewis's career has generally centred around economic matters in the Asia-Pacific region.

Mr. Lalani, who was involved in the process to find a new RoCK, said Mr. Lewis was actually selected several months ago, and he was confident the new representative has the experience needed to fill the position.

Mr. Lalani acknowledged that personalities are extremely important to conducting a successful mission, but he was confident Mr. Lewis would gel with Brig.-Gen. Thompson and the general's successor.

"He's had a chance to work with people on the ground already," Mr. Lalani said. "So I'm not worried about that part. I think we've really developed something here that's going to last."

Mr. Lalani said Mr. Lewis's appointment was designed to signal continuity at the most senior levels of the Afghan mission.

But Mr. Samad was hopeful the new RoCK's economic and commercial experience was an indication of more attention on those issues in Kandahar.

"I hope to see more focus [on economic issues]. Given the security conditions, we hope to see more activities in the spheres of economic growth, job creation, infrastructure building, agriculture, education and attending to the basic needs of the Kandaharis alongside the provincial government."

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