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# Embassy, September 17th, 2008 EDITORIAL

# Picking and Choosing from the Afghan Motion



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## Columnists

Leslie Campbell Gwynne Dyer Scott Taylor Richard Gwyn Luke Eric Peterson Vladimir Torres Lunch with Brian Chatter House

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Embassy Archives Embassy PDFs Login Links Classifieds Vacation & Travel Multimedia Archive On Sunday morning, Defence Minister Peter MacKay appeared on CBC to defend Prime Minister Stephen Harper's promise to end the Canadian military mission in Afghanistan by 2011.

In early 2006, weeks after becoming prime minister, Mr. Harper had travelled to Afghanistan where he told Canadian soldiers that anyone who didn't support the combat mission wanted Canada to "cut and run" from its commitments to Afghans.

Of course, that was in the very early days when Canadian casualties were low, general Rick Hillier was spouting off his tough talk about bad guys to great effect, and the prime minister thought embracing the Afghanistan mission and its strong military overtones was the only right thing to do.

More than two years later, public opinion over the mission is at its lowest point and Mr. Harper, long opposed to setting an end date to the Afghan mission, has switched gears in his search for a majority government.

That is why Mr. MacKay was on television, defending the prime minister's pledge and refuting allegations Canada was indeed "cutting and running" from the war-torn country.

The defence minister reiterated that Canadians "have done our share" and he countered arguments that setting an end date would embolden insurgents. "It doesn't take much to embolden the Taliban," Mr. MacKay said. "They've been a very persistent and very aggressive insurgency, which is the challenge itself."

Fair enough. But then came the shocker.

Mr. MacKay said the end of the military mission did not constitute the end of Canada's work in Afghanistan—wait for it—but that the mission would change. Specifically, Canada will "emphasize the humanitarian aspect, continue with training, continue with our people there that are both with the domestic police and maybe on the military side to build...capacity.

"We have combat engineers that are there helping with the Dahla Dam," the defence minister continued. "We have people building roads and supervising some of the training exercises that go on, but the emphasis will change, and that's consistent with the parliamentary resolution."

So let us get this straight: Canadian soldiers will remain in Kandahar until 2011, at which point the majority of them will leave, but Canada will shift the emphasis to humanitarian efforts, training of Afghan security forces and development?

Isn't that supposed to happen starting in 2009?

That, after all, is what the parliamentary resolution actually states.



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Jack Layton and his team of Nunavut New Democrats NDP.ca The motion which was passed by the Liberals and Conservatives on March 13 said Canada's military presence in Kandahar will continue to July 2011 and will consist of training Afghan security forces, providing security for reconstruction and development efforts and continuing the work of the Provincial Reconstruction Team.

Then there were the three conditions that had to be met, namely the procurement of unmanned aerial vehicles and medium-lift helicopters as well as the deployment of an additional 1,000 NATO troops to work with Canadian troops in Kandahar.

Targets and timelines for training, equipping and paying Afghan army and police forces were mandated, and the same for members of the judicial and correctional systems.

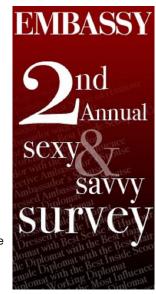
Then came the kicker, namely that Canada's contribution to the reconstruction and development of Afghanistan should "be revamped and increased to strike a better balance between our military efforts and our development efforts."

It would be easy to dismiss Mr. MacKay's comments as simply a case of understating the changes that have already taken place. After all, the government has three signature projects in Afghanistan, new benchmarks for progress and is working to secure UAVs and helicopters. Of course, disregard the fact John Manley says the 1,000 troops promised haven't materialized, and that no special Canadian envoy to the region has been appointed, which was another requirement.

Even with signature projects and benchmarks (which carry no real penalty if they aren't achieved), Mr. MacKay's words suggest the Conservatives are still looking at the Afghanistan mission through a military-first mindset, and that the "revamp" won't happen until 2011.

By promising a military withdrawal in 2011, the prime minister sought to win points with the growing majority of Canadians particularly those in Quebec who are opposed to the military mission there. It's too bad the government is picking to follow parts of the parliamentary motion rather than adhering to the whole thing.

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