

Harper wonders if Canadians understand importance of staying in Afghanistan

Murray Brewster, THE CANADIAN PRESS

OTTAWA - Prime Minister Stephen Harper says he's uncertain whether Canadians at large understand the importance of remaining involved in Afghanistan.

His observation in a year-end interview with The Canadian Press comes after almost two years of combat operations in Kandahar, the deaths of 73 soldiers and one diplomat, and bitter, often partisan debates back home.

Parliament will be asked by spring to vote on what kind of mission Canada should undertake after the current mandate expires in February 2009.

Asked whether he believes Canadians truly appreciate what is at stake in the decision, Harper said: "I don't know, the short answer is I don't know."

There were times during 2007 when the Conservatives were almost overwhelmed, under daily attack in the House of Commons and on the editorial pages, over their handling of the war.

Poll after poll made it clear that Canadians believed they were paying too high a price to bring peace and stability to the war-torn region and wanted out.

As the seemingly endless procession of casualties mounted throughout the spring, there was a point in June when it looked as though Harper blinked, suggesting that the combat mission might not be extended beyond the current deployment without a consensus among Parliamentarians.

But after demoting Gordon O'Connor from defence to the revenue portfolio as part of a broader cabinet shakeup, Harper seemed to get a firmer grip on the direction of the war, enough for the Conservatives to boldly suggest in their fall throne speech that Canada should remain deeply involved in Afghanistan until 2011.

"The government understands we took on an important international commitment for important reasons of international security that in the long run impact directly on our country," he said in an interview in the living room at 24 Sussex Drive.

A poll released in the weeks after the throne speech suggested the public was overwhelmingly against continuing for another three years beyond the current mandate.

"So I don't know whether Canadians do - or don't - understand. I think Canadians are deeply troubled by the casualties," Harper said.

In June, a Canadian Press-Decima Research survey found 67 per cent of those asked believed the number of casualties in Afghanistan were unacceptable when weighed against the progress that had been made in reconstruction and keeping the Taliban at bay in Kandahar.

"Nobody is more troubled by that than I am" about the rising number of war dead and wounded, Harper said quietly. "These are our finest men and women. When we lose them these are the worst days I have. I have no worse day than when I get this kind of news."

He said the soldiers and diplomats on the ground understand the importance of staying, despite the heavy price they've paid directly.

In an effort to put some distance between his strong beliefs, opposition critics and public dismay, Harper appointed a blue-ribbon panel, headed by former Liberal cabinet minister John Manley, to review what should come next.

A report is expected in early January.

"All we can only hope from the Manley exercise is that it causes Parliamentarians, particularly in our official Opposition - which as you know commenced this mission - to sit back and think about what is in the best interest of the country before a vote is actually held," he said.

"We really have got to avoid - on this one - taking a decision for reasons of short-term politics. We must take a decision that is in the long-run interest of the country, its international reputation and the respect we should all show for the sacrifice our men and women have made to secure it."

Some critics have argued that Harper could have found no more hawkish a Liberal than Manley to lead the non-partisan panel. They suggest the panel has been rigged to give the Conservatives the answers they want to hear.

Harper bluntly dismissed the notion.

"We will get the report and look at it."

He said he hopes Manley comes forward with a clear, immediate recommendation for the future of the mission. Beyond that, Harper wants to see a sense from the panel of where it sees Afghanistan going in general, regardless of the length of the Canadian deployment.

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