

FEDERAL POLITICS: HARPER HAWKISH ON DEFENCE SPENDING

Compromise on Afghanistan muffles election drumbeat

Prime Minister bows to Liberal demands on withdrawal date

CAMPBELL CLARK

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OTTAWA -- The Conservative government has proposed a firm date of July, 2011, for Canadian troops to withdraw from southern Afghanistan, moving closer to a deal with the Liberals and removing one potential trigger for a spring election.

But even as Prime Minister Stephen Harper offered compromises on the Afghan mission yesterday, he delivered a full-throated call for a strong shooting military and a government willing to deploy it if Canada wants to be taken seriously. He also pledged long-term acceleration of defence spending.

A parliamentary motion unveiled by Mr. Harper both bows to Liberal demands for a firm end date to the Afghan mission and accepts Liberal wording that the combat mission must refocus on training and security for reconstruction efforts.

"It seems clear that we have moved significantly toward the kind of bipartisan consensus that can be presented to Parliament for ratification," Mr. Harper said in a speech to the Conference of Defence

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Associations.

The proposed date is five months later than what the Liberals wanted, but foreign affairs critic Bob Rae said it is unlikely to be a major sticking point.

"It would be churlish for anyone to suggest that the government has not come a long way," Mr. Rae said.

"We're certainly closer than we've ever been."

After a conference call between Liberal Leader Stéphane Dion and a half-dozen Liberal MPs who work on Afghanistan issues, a spokesman for Mr. Dion, Leslie Swartman, suggested that only minor points remain to be bridged.

"I think it's progress," Mr. Dion told reporters in Prince Albert, Sask.

"We welcome this new motion that is based on our Liberal motion. We'll look if we need clarification and amendments and we will participate in this debate."

Debate on the Afghanistan motion starts Monday, but will be interrupted Tuesday afternoon by the budget, which takes precedence over all other business in the House of Commons.

The Liberals could still defeat the government over its budget, but they have recently expressed reluctance to do so.

The government said it plans to have MPs vote on the Afghan motion next month before the Prime Minister heads to a summit of NATO leaders in Bucharest, April 2-4. The government wants NATO to commit another 1,000 troops to Kandahar and help it obtain helicopters and unmanned drones.

The Tory motion adopted almost all of the wording of a motion proposed by Mr. Dion on Feb. 12, but changed a few key points.

It deleted the Liberals' demands that the Canadian Forces refuse to transfer detainees to Afghan authorities. Instead, the government commits to "meeting the highest NATO and international standards" on respecting prisoners' rights.

Mr. Rae said the important point is that the government agreed to accept a firm end date, broadening the mission with more aid and diplomatic efforts, and adopting the Liberal wording on changing the focus of the mission to training Afghan forces and providing security for reconstruction efforts.

"That's what the mission will do. The issue will be if NATO says, 'We want other things to be done,' you say, 'Well, if you want those things to be done, you're going to have to find an additional partner to do that.' "

Also yesterday, Mr. Harper delivered a speech to a defence think tank that stressed the need to be willing to send soldiers to fight to enforce peace in dangerous areas, rather than sticking to classic blue-bereted peacekeeping.

"That is the reality and will be the reality of our world for the foreseeable future," he said. "That means we will need a strong, multifaceted military, backed by the political will to deploy."

He said the world will ignore well-meaning countries without military strength.

"Countries that cannot or will not make real contributions to global security are not regarded as serious players," he said.

"They may be liked by everybody. They may be pleasantly acknowledged by everybody. But when the hard decisions get made, they will be ignored by everybody."

Mr. Harper promised his government would hike the "automatic" increases in military spending in the federal budget starting in 2011, from 1.5 per cent a year to 2 per cent. He said accelerating the increase in defence spending would "thoroughly reverse the so-called rusting out of our Canadian Forces."

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