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'Afghanistan Has Affected Everything'

by Lee Berthiaume



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David Mulroney, deputy minister of the Privy Council Office's Afghanistan task force, says increasing the number of civilians working on the mission is essential.

On the 15th floor of an office building in downtown Ottawa, more than 10,000 kilometres from the heart of Kandahar city, a group of public servants dressed in business attire is managing Canada's war in Afghanistan.

Twenty-four men and women comprise the Privy Council Office's Afghanistan task force. They are the conduit between the political masters who set the direction of Canada's engagement in Afghanistan, and the hundreds of bureaucrats, both in Ottawa and abroad, responsible for making it happen.

The task force represents one of the most visible and significant evolutions in Canada's Afghanistan mission over the past year. That year has seen the mission made a true priority of the government, with more resources and personnel devoted to it.

However, the changes have been met with grumbles and concern within the public service and outside as Afghanistan is seen as beggaring other important initiatives and traditional areas of Canadian involvement of both money and, arguably more importantly, personnel.

And experts warn that with an economic crisis on the horizon, and government budgets expected to shrink, the bite will

likely hit other areas first, and exacerbate the drain.

Heart of the Operation

While a large part of the 15th floor at 55 Metcalfe St. is occupied by the Privy Council Office's human resources section, another section used to be the domain of Canada's deputy prime minister, back when the country's political circles included such a lofty position.

John Manley occupied an office here from 2002 to 2003, followed by Anne McLellan, until the Conservative Party came to power in January 2006. At that point, Prime Minister Stephen Harper decided not to appoint a deputy prime minister, and the space fell into disuse.

When Mr. Harper established a panel headed by Mr. Manley in October 2007 to examine Canada's future role in Afghanistan, before the mission was extended to 2011, the space got a new purpose.

Ironically, for the next three months, Mr. Manley took over his old office as the panel conducted its work, which culminated in a major report in January. That report paved the way for the mission extension, and saw the government take a number of major steps to alter the Canadian effort in Afghanistan.

After Mr. Manley and the four other members of his panel wrapped up their work and vacated the premises, they left behind a number of public servants who had been tasked with helping them conduct their study. From this group, which included panel secretary David Mulroney and director of operations Sanjeev Chowdhury, sprang the start of the PCO Afghan task force.

According to Mr. Mulroney, who is now the task force's deputy minister, the 24-member team has two jobs. The first is to support the Cabinet committee on Afghanistan, which was also established after the Manley report came out. The second is to co-ordinate all departmental efforts on Afghanistan.

"We spent a lot of time in the spring on the policy agenda, making sure that we had policy coherence," Mr. Mulroney said in an interview with *Embassy* last week. "And now we're working very hard on implementation.

"So we work very hard with departments and with the field, with Kandahar and Kabul, to make sure we are all working together."

One of the major recommendations issued by the Manley report—and it's one of the points the former Liberal minister continues to reiterate—was the need to address the "imbalances between the heavy Canadian military commitment...and the comparatively lighter civilian commitment to reconstruction, development and governance."

Mr. Mulroney said the major challenge in Afghanistan is bringing together a military effort and a civilian effort in the face of an insurgency to achieve real, measurable changes on the ground.

"And I think the answer to that—I mean, it's not easy—but first you need the policy clarity," he said. "That's what the Cabinet committee gave us in the spring is the clarity. Second, you need the people, and one of the things we've been working hard on is to put the right people into place."

According to government figures, there are 50 officials from the Department of Foreign Affairs and 80 from CIDA working exclusively on the Afghanistan file in Ottawa. There are another 74 federal non-military civil servants deployed in Kandahar and Kabul, while Mr. Mulroney says the government plans to have about 100 deployed in theatre by early next year.

At the same time—or perhaps in advance of this—the government is actively trying to recruit more civil servants to become engaged on the file.

"We've been working with departments to develop a plan to ramp up civilian staffing in fairly dramatic ways," Mr. Mulroney said. "And doing that with a view to implementing the priorities. So getting the right people in place and figuring out how they work together and how they're managed and networked has been a real challenge."

Last week, Kevin Lynch, the government's top bureaucrat, issued an invitation to all federal public servants to attend an "Afghanistan job fair" scheduled for today at the Government Conference Centre.

"Serving in Afghanistan is a unique and rewarding experience," the memo reads. "Canadian public servants in Kabul and Kandahar are at the cutting edge of Canada's international work in challenging environments and their contributions will shape Canada's approach to engaging the world for a generation to come."

Mr. Mulroney said one of the things the government is doing is focusing on recruiting, training, deploying and supporting civilians to and in Afghanistan.

"Because Afghanistan represents a special challenge," he said, "one, we need a lot more civilians than we did previously. Two, the postings are shorter. So you're rotating through a lot more of them. And three, the training period is longer. So we should be able to free people up six months in advance."

Top Priority After U.S.

In the PCO task force boardroom, pictures depicting Afghans and Canadians working together in the dusty country line the walls. A large telephone for conference calls sits in the middle of a long oval table. Two clocks on the front wall track the time in Afghanistan and Ottawa.

Mr. Mulroney says that as head of the PCO task force, "I've had a lot of fun putting the task force together."

"I've been able to go and get the very best people from around government—and you give them policy clarity, and you put on top of that political oversight from ministers who really know their files and really care about it, it's a force multiplier and you begin to feel that you're moving in the right direction."

The Manley report really drove home the importance of civilians in Afghanistan, he said, because the skills that are really needed to rebuild the country are in departments like CIDA and Foreign Affairs.

While the number of civilians whose work solely encompasses Afghanistan may not seem huge—especially compared to the 2,750 Canadian soldiers deployed to Kandahar—the government figures make no mention of what these people were doing before taking on the Afghanistan file. As well, they do not take into account the hundreds of other personnel who spend part of their time, no matter how much, working on Afghanistan.

This is where the grumbles have emerged.

As Afghanistan has taken over as the government's top foreign policy priority after relations with the United States, resources have been increasingly focused on it. Aside from dedicating more personnel to the mission, associated costs have increased as well.

Last month, parliamentary budget officer Kevin Page released a report that estimated Afghanistan will cost Canada between \$14 billion and \$18 billion by 2011, though he admitted he did not include all costs.

The government, meanwhile, said additional costs associated with the mission cost Foreign Affairs \$84.91 million for the fiscal year 2007-08, and DND \$967 million over the same period. CIDA's budget for Afghanistan stood at \$280 million last year. However, for all figures, it was unclear what was counted and what wasn't.

One thing that is clear to some public servants, as well as outside observers, is that resources are being moved to the Afghan mission from other areas as the government has not made enough additional investments to adequately cover off Afghanistan.

In fact, while the government cut \$142 million of DFAIT's departmental budget in fiscal year 2007, it only put back \$109 million this year, with no specific mention of Afghanistan in the main estimates.

Meanwhile, CIDA's budget increased by \$35.3 million this fiscal year, which was to be spread around on not only Afghanistan, but Sudan, Ghana, Mozambique and Mali, "thereby contributing to the government's commitment to

double aid to Africa between 2003-2004 and 2008-09," according to the main estimates.

"It's not quite correct that we're not doing anything this year," one Foreign Affairs official said in July when asked about reports of reduced Canadian funding to the International Criminal Court. "But there has been a reduction in funding. But that's across the department for all of the different human security-related programming.

"I think each year there's been a shift generally in funding for things like what we're doing in Afghanistan. And so in any phase, I think, or every year, there's always a reprioritization of where money is going."

Afghanistan has also emerged as Canada's top aid recipient for the past few years, and will likely hold that spot for years to come, or at least until 2011.

According to this year's edition of the Reality of Aid report, which sees civil society groups analyze donor aid programs, increases to Canadian aid levels of eight per cent each year have largely been directed towards Afghanistan. Not only has this meant other countries have not seen increases, despite promises made through the Millennium Development Goals, but it has raised questions about the use of aid as a tool for foreign policy, rather than poverty eradication.

Mr. Mulroney defended the allocation of personnel and monetary resources to the Afghan mission.

"I think when something like Afghanistan comes along, it's a clear priority," he said. "And as Manley said, it's at the request of the UN, delivered through NATO, for a democratically-elected government, it's something that Canada should do. When that kind of challenge comes along, it becomes a priority and you've got to devote priority resources to it.

Mr. Mulroney said when he was assistant deputy minister responsible for bilateral affairs—essentially the whole world except the United States—he was clear with his directors general that priorities had to be set.

"I said 'You know, we have to make some choices. Good management isn't allocating everything equally to everybody,'" he said.

"An agile and successful government identifies its priorities and quickly puts in place the resources it needs to succeed. And the key to Canada's ongoing influence in the world is to be able to select the right priorities and to reinforce and to be present. And that means making choices. And I think Afghanistan is absolutely where we have to be."

Mission has 'Affected Everything'

But one senior government official said the situation has gotten to the point where departments are trying to hoard any public servant who has expertise on Afghanistan so they can accomplish their mandates in the country.

"Expertise on Afghanistan is limited," the official said, adding that an "expert" can have as little as one year of experience on the file.

While noting the Afghanistan mission has "affected everything we do," the official said departments aren't on the verge of mutiny. Rather, it makes everything else harder to do.

"So you're robbing Peter to pay Paul," the official added. "This hampers us. We can't fulfil the mandate that has been assigned to us."

Anthony Salloum, program director at the Rideau Institute, said these reports of "internal bleeding" in the public service are worrying, and the impacts are starting to be felt.

"It's a shortsighted approach on the part of the government because there's more to the world than Afghanistan," he said. "Canada is being called upon to play an important role in various areas, and already we're hearing grumblings and embarrassing commentaries about Canada's neglect of Africa, for example.

"We can't turn our back on other files, we can't turn our back on other crises around the world. So we can't simply move staffing positions away from key files and put them on the Afghanistan file and not think there's consequence in terms of our international relations and our international obligations."

Mr. Salloum said, as an important file to the government, dedicated funding for Afghanistan is necessary. That money, he added, could come from the hundreds of billions set aside for defence procurement over the next few decades.

Fen Hampson, director of the Norman Paterson School of International Affairs at Carleton University, said it's not surprising the Afghan mission is commanding more resources than almost anything else, given that it's Canada's largest foreign policy commitment.

However, he expected the holes left in other areas at Foreign Affairs and CIDA to become even larger in the face of shrinking budgets and hiring freezes if the economic crisis hits the country hard.

"There have already been some cuts to Foreign Affairs and that's only going to get worse in the current fiscal climate as the federal budget heads into deficit territory," he said.

"And so I suspect the grousing will increase because what will get cut is not Afghanistan but other line items in other departmental budgets."

That's because Canada will not be able to afford making cuts to the mission in Afghanistan because of its importance to the U.S. and, especially, the Obama administration.

"Canada's major foreign policy priority is going to be to make inroads with the new administration," he said. "The fact that we are one of the major players in Afghanistan, alongside the Americans, is a very important card and, I would say lever of influence with the incoming Obama administration, Mr. Hampson believed.

"We're not just investing in Afghanistan's future, we're also investing in the Canada-U.S. relationship and partnership. So when you do the accounting you have to include that political calculation into the equation."

Errol Mendes, a law professor at the University of Ottawa, also foresaw the Obama administration asking for more help in Afghanistan from Canada, at a time when the coffers are empty.

However, Mr. Mendes said aside from the United States, "Afghanistan is really the only foreign policy of this government, as compared to the very large and ambitious foreign policy of Paul Martin." As a result, it's likely the government hasn't felt any need to invest more resources to ensure departments can continue their work in other areas.

Keith Martin, the Liberal Party's CIDA critic, alleged the Conservative government's decision not to invest more resources into the public service to ensure the focus on Afghanistan doesn't impact other areas may have been calculated.

"I think this is a deliberate attempt on the part of Mr. Harper to significantly narrow Canada's foreign policy into a small number of areas, in particular Afghanistan, Canada-U.S. relations, and he claims Latin America," he said.

"It's goes beyond the redirection of resources. The new foreign policy that Mr. Harper is embracing is exceptionally parochial and narrow and is at odds, I believe, with what most Canadians see our Canada can do."

lee@embassymag.ca

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