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## New Afghan Team, New Afghan Tasks

by Jeff Davis

If Canada's mission in Afghanistan had a brain, it would be the Privy Council Office's Afghanistan Task Force. The primary nexus for Canada's most significant foreign policy project in decades, it is home to a small and elite coterie of civil servants and diplomats who have shaped and moulded Canada's role in the wartorn country since the Manley panel redefined the mission two years ago.

Now, however, major changes are afoot.

The team's exhausted senior ranks, many of whom cut their teeth on Afghanistan as members of the Manley panel's secretariat, have moved on to posh promotions. Yet the departure of many top bureaucrats from the mission's top echelons represents not just a roll over of personalities, but also the beginning of a distinctly new phase of the mission.

Taking over the reins is a new class of bureaucrats that will grapple to make some development headway as the clock ticks down to 2011, all the while trying to keep their heads above a tidal wave of incoming American troops.

### Team Manley Moving On

For the past three years, there have been a many civilian personalities deeply intertwined with Canada's mission in Afghanistan. Chief among them was David Mulroney, formerly Canada's top bureaucrat on the file, and Canada's next ambassador to China.

Mr. Mulroney was tasked with co-ordinating all government efforts in Afghanistan in January 2007 when he was made assistant deputy minister for Afghanistan at the Department of Foreign Affairs. Previous to that he had served as Prime Minister Stephen Harper's foreign affairs and defence adviser.

The appointment was met with some raised eyebrows as experts questioned the wisdom behind placing such interdepartmental duties at DFAIT instead of in the Privy Council Office. However, in October of that year, Mr. Mulroney was pulled out to be the executive secretary to the Independent Panel on Canada's Future Role in Afghanistan, chaired by former Chrétien-era minister John Manley.

Mr. Mulroney was not alone in assisting the Independent Panel. Also on the job were career diplomats Sanjeev Chowdhury and Elissa Golberg, who worked slavishly for months preparing the influential report.

One major recommendation of the panel was greater co-ordination within government, and Mr. Mulroney was soon promoted to deputy minister and given a fiefdom of his own: the newly created PCO Afghanistan Task Force.

With the new job, Mr. Mulroney faced the daunting task of following the government's orders and making the many recommendations of the Manley Panel a reality. The laundry list of tasks included procuring helicopters and UAVs; designing a system of benchmarks to quantify the effectiveness of aid efforts; increasing the civilian presence in Afghanistan; coming up with signature projects; and refocusing Canadian efforts on police and army training.

To help realize what amounted to a major restructuring of Canada's mission, Mr. Mulroney began assembling his team. Two top positions went to his subordinates from the Manley Panel, with Mr. Chowdhury becoming the task force's director of operations, and Ms. Golberg becoming the first Representative of Canada in Kandahar. Mr. Mulroney also reached into other departments, pulling in Steve Hallihan from CIDA and Col. Brett Boudreau from the Defence Department to serve in senior positions.

Other up-and-comers also soon joined the file, including former ambassador to Afghanistan Arif Lalani and his successor current ambassador Ron Hoffman.

Fast-forward to today and many of the tasks set out by the Manley Panel have been accomplished. The troops have received new airborne equipment and more support in Kandahar, co-ordination at the NATO and UN levels has increased, and the government makes quarterly reports to Parliament.

The task force has also outlined six priority areas for Canadian effort in Afghanistan and three "signature" projects: building schools, eradicating polio and refurbishing the Dahla Dam.

"A lot of the heavy lifting was done," said one source close to the file. "It's taken about a year, but the hull of the ship has certainly been turned."

Now, some 18 months after the Manley report's release, Mr. Mulroney and his inner circle are hanging on as the Midas touch of the task force propels them onwards and upwards.

Mr. Mulroney himself is to be Canada's next ambassador to China, while current Ambassador to Afghanistan Ron Hoffman is off to be Canada's envoy to Thailand. Mr. Hallihan will be high commissioner to Jamaica, while Mr. Lalani will take over the influential post of director general for policy planning at Fort Pearson. Ms. Golberg, meanwhile, is now director general of DFAIT's Stabilization and Reconstruction Task Force (START), and Mr. Chowdhury is a director general of DFAIT's summits management office, planning the upcoming G8 Summit in Huntsville, Ont.

While sources acknowledge exhaustion and new opportunities as some reasons for departures, they also note that the shift in personalities telegraphs a new chapter in the mission, the homestretch where Canada will try to achieve some fairly ambitious diplomatic and development feats, all the while struggling to keep from drowning in the wave of U.S. manpower crashing down on Kandahar.

During a press conference earlier this month, a senior task force official denied that the mass departures would have an impact on Canada's mission, saying that a phase-in period has been underway for quite some time.

### New Team, New Tasks

In the PCO Afghanistan Task Force, a fresh coterie is moving in, in what amounts to a near complete changeover in the top levels of this key co-ordinating office.

Replacing Mr. Mulroney as deputy minister is Greta Bossenmaier, previously a DFAIT associate deputy minister and Mulroney understudy, who is assembling a trio of new directors and an ADM to work under her at PCO. Longtime diplomat and former consular chief Bill Crosbie, meanwhile, has become Canada's new ambassador to Afghanistan, and new staff will soon take up the important posts of Representative of Canada in Kandahar and Provincial Reconstruction Team director.

Sources familiar with the Afghanistan file agree that this rollover of personalities coincides with a significant shift in the challenges the PCO Task Force will grapple with in the coming two years.

"The Mulroney group needed to figure out what it is we wanted to work on and prioritize," said one source. The new crop of officials will have to implement the plan, while being mindful of the looming 2011 deadline, Pakistan's increasing importance in the equation and, of course, how to cope with a greater American presence.

"They have the 2011 discussion to do, they have the new Pakistan piece to do, and they have the American piece to do," the source said.

A key role Mr. Mulroney is handing off to his successor is the role of Canada's special envoy for Afghanistan and Pakistan. Whereas the United States has appointed a high-profile personality in Richard Holbrooke, and the United Kingdom in Sir Sherard Cowper-Coles, Canada has not taken such a move. Instead, Mr. Mulroney spoke for Canada at the "AF/PAK meetings" that have been held in various locations and are said to have about eight participating envoys. Observers will be watching to see how Ms. Bossenmaier, as well as new Ambassador to Afghanistan Crosbie, will perform.

Sources also agree that the election of Barack Obama has been a "massive game changer" and that the arrival of the American surge in Afghanistan has the potential to "reset" the whole mission. Looking to protect Canadian works in Kandahar province, where so much has been invested, the task force has been very proactive in helping the Americans ramp up their efforts, sources say.

Ms. Golberg, the former RoCK, for example, has spent time in the United States training American cadres destined for Afghanistan, while Canadians in Kandahar province have been drawing closer to American elements already in place.

Top American officials from the National Security Council, State Department, USAID and the American military also attended RoCK Talk III, a major planning conference for Canadian staff heading to Afghanistan, held at CFB Petawawa in April.

Sources indicate that the Americans are taking particular interest in Canada's system of metrics for measuring the effectiveness of aid and reconstruction efforts, particularly as the Americans prepare for a massive "civilian surge" of their own.

"The Americans have actually seen a lot of what we have done as a pretty decent model," said one source. "The extent to which the Americans have been eager to hear what we have to say...[and] the fact that we have established this kind of relationship is one of the unsung successes of our mission."

Maintaining an effective relationship with incoming American forces is key, sources say, particularly as Canadian elements race to achieve their development benchmarks by 2011.

"If we have somebody else in there chasing bad guys and taking them out, if we don't have to worry so much about protecting the approaches of the Dahla dam, we can spend that effort in building...and not worry about sheer protection, then this stuff is going to get built faster."

A quickened pace of development and reconstruction may well be an essential for the politics of the homefront. With the clock ticking down to the Canadian Forces' zero hour in Afghanistan, political discussions about the post-2011 end date will surely come to a head.

But that will be just another headache for the new staff of one of the government's most hectic offices.

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