

Q&A: Elissa Golberg

Apr 7, 2009 by Paul Wells

Late last week I sat down with Elissa Golberg, who in January finished a year-long stint as the first civilian Representative Of Canada in Kandahar (the job comes with the coolest acronym in the Canadian civil service) and then went on a two-month “outreach tour” of NATO member countries, telling VIPs there what Canada is up to in Afghanistan. This week she started a new job running [this shop](#), which responds to sudden, unexpected disasters instead of the seven-year-old, seemingly intractable disaster she just left.

We talked about Afghanistan-Pakistan and why Canada doesn’t necessarily need one person in charge of activity in both countries; the imminent arrival of thousands more Americans in the Afghan South; and a lot more. Here is most of our conversation.

Q: Let’s go to what’s been happening this week. I’ve got a reader who emails me every once in a while with variations on, ‘Why are we putting all this effort into Afghanistan? Nothing ever gets better.’ And the last time I heard from her was about what’s come to be known as the rape law. Obviously our government disagrees with it. But seven years in, is this still the sort of thing we should have to put up with?

A: Well. ‘Put up with.’ We’re a partner with Afghanistan, but Afghanistan gets to decide its own laws and regulations, and it’s their parliament that passed it. So like a partner and a friend, you have a robust dialogue with them. Like we do in other countries when we’re concerned about laws that are being passed. And certainly our expectations are that the government of Afghanistan is going to live up to the commitments that it itself agreed to—that it will respect international human rights norms. Respect its own constitution which calls for equality before the law. And that’s what Canada has to continue to do. And the expectation on the other side [is] that there will be a dialogue. But it’s also part and parcel of what we continue to work on, right? It’s supporting democratic processes. It’s helping the parliament to strengthen its capacity over time.

Q: Do you expect President Karzai’s comportment to change because we’re in an election season? Do you expect that to affect both their internal politics and their relations with the coalition?

A: Certainly the election is going to have an impact. If anything it’ll be distracting from some of the initiatives that we’ve been hoping to continue to see progress on. ... There will be a certain amount of politicking that goes into the dynamics on a day-to-day basis. We’re going to have to come back and hold people accountable. And try our best to keep things on track, recognizing that some things will be delayed.

Q: How much of the Canadian model and approach is going to remain intact in a new year where the American presence is just going to swamp the Canadian presence?
A: I don’t think it’s going to swamp us—all at once. And I say that quite deliberately. I spent a week and a half with the Stryker Brigade, who are the U.S. Army friends who are going to be deployed to Southern Afghanistan. And I spent time with them at their request—out at Fort Irwin in California, out in the middle of the frickin’ desert. Which was cold and rainy and was a lot like Kandahar. Actually it’s really freaky because they’re so close to Hollywood they’ve got Hollywood set designers who help them build little cities. Anyway. Long story short. They asked for our presence because they recognize that we’ve invested a lot in Kandahar and in the South and that we have a very good understanding of how things have evolved over time: travel dynamics, investments on the governance and development side, the way that we’re working with our military. And they also recognize that, because they’re coming into the province and they’re going to be working alongside of us, and the PRT [joint military-civilian provincial reconstruction team] is, for the time being, going to remain a Canadian-led PRT, and it will be the governance and development platform for the province, that they need to be synching in with us. So I think from that perspective, we have a lot of strengths that the Americans understand. They’re not going to completely overwhelm us from that perspective. They’re still working out a lot of their strategies, so the more that we can demonstrate that we’ve thought through where we’re going—why these particular six priorities do reflect the interests of Kandaharis, they’re consistent with the National Development Plan—the more coordinated and effective we’re going to be. The other thing is that we play to different strengths. We’ve made really solid investments on irrigation and education and a couple of other core areas. The Americans, USAID, they’re really good at agriculture and the larger economic development work. So together it’s going to be quite complementary.

Q: People often talk about problems of coordination in Afghanistan. Ambassador Holbrooke [the U.S. special envoy for Afghanistan and Pakistan] often talks about it with a level of vituperative scorn that would be hard to imitate. What’s it like? Tell me why people get so worked up about problems of coordination when they’re trying to get stuff done there.

A: My experience in RC South [the southern Regional Command, which includes Kandahar province] was that there’s good cooperation. Certainly between myself, my British colleague, my Dutch colleague, conversations all the time. And there are things that are sui generis to every province, so you’re not working at cross purposes. There are other things that do cut across boundaries—water, energy, roads—where you do have to have a more synched-up approach. And RC South has been trying to put into place mechanisms to manage that more effectively. So they’ve created a civ-mil cell and working groups, and they’ll draw folks together on the civilian and military side from across the main provinces to work on those things. But then you’ll have other issues where there’s just lots of cooks who have a hand in things. Police, for instance. Part of it is a recognition that it’s an area that’s important and we need to do something so people go ahead and do stuff. So we’ve got CSTC-A, RSIC, you’ve got EUPOL, bilateral initiatives. We had a situation once where Army Corps of Engineers—we had spent weeks engaging with a community and with the Chief of Police about where we were going to locate a particular police station. Lots of conversations had gone into it because we were going to put the police station in a particular location so it would be in proximity to some schools we were going to build and it would enhance the confidence of the community more broadly. And we found out that the Army Corps of Engineers was planning to build something a kilometre down the road and hadn’t told us. That’s not good development and it’s not helpful vis a vis communities. So we’ve certainly got a grip on that in the last year. Now we chair a weekly meeting on police where every single person that has anything to do with police comes to the table. So we’re much more synched up. It’s the same reason we created a synch board at the PRT to ensure that nobody’s magically doing their own initiative somewhere in the province.

Q: OK, I just won’t sleep tonight until I know what happened to those two police stations.

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Q: Now we're a week past the unveiling of the Obama strategy, or list of druthers, or whatever it was for Afghanistan and Pakistan. What's your short version of what's going to change in the American approach in that region?

A: Positive news for us, certainly, in terms of a presence on the military side. Hopefully joined up with an increased Afghan presence. Because we've always said it's not ultimately, in the end, about international forces, it's about reinforcing Afghan capacities. So that means ISAF should always be mentoring Afghan National Security forces. I think the positive thing we saw is that there's going to be mentors and trainers that they're going to be sending. A significant increase. Also an increase on their civilian side, their civilian capabilities. Which is good news, and reflects the direction that we've taken as well over the course of the year. And that's key.

Q: One question about plumbing that's become kind of politically freighted: If the Americans keep talking about Pakistan and Afghanistan, if Holbrooke is an envoy for the region, he's going to have a contact group for the region, should Canada have one person who is the contact person for the region?

A: It's not really my call! I think right now we have an effective approach. We have an ambassador in Kabul and an ambassador in Islamabad who talk to each other all the time. I mean, Canada's just been investing in the Dubai Process [a Pakistan-Afghanistan border-control mechanism] for the last few years, which is actually bearing fruit quietly — just the kind of quiet Canadian diplomatic getting-it-done. And that is exactly the kind of thing you want to see in terms of building up positive relations between the Pakistan government and the Afghanistan government, and we managed to do that by having, not one envoy, but a strong ambassador in Kabul and a strong ambassador in Islamabad. I think every country has their own approach and this is working for us.

Q: I came back from my last trip to Afghanistan and wrote a piece that essentially said, there is serious progress on a lot of these files and the security environment is just getting worse. That's untenable over the long term. You build all the schools you want, if people are dying and feeling like they're likely to die, it doesn't help. Does that not have to change? Does the security environment not have to get better soon? And do you have any confidence that it will?

A: There's a couple of things related to security. One is more macro, and the influx of additional international forces will make a difference. And Canada's been arguing that for a long time: that there were insufficient numbers of troops on the ground in the South to do what needed to be done in terms of clearing and holding. But again, you can't just have more international forces without also having more Kandaks [Afghanistan army units] and more police. Which is, to me, the second, perhaps more important, component of this, which is police. If we're really going to enhance people's perceptions of security, we're going to have to continue to focus on increasing police capacities. It's a cop at the end of the street that people recognize as the first face of government. And if they have greater confidence in that, if the cops start to be able to anticipate incidents, not just be able to respond effectively after they've occurred, that will go a long way towards enhancing the perceptions of security of the population. There's also a difference between rural and urban — Kandahar City and Spin Boldak City, versus some of the outlying districts. And what is understood to be the new normal in those contexts. I saw it over time. After the Saraposa prison break, I went out every single day that week, out and about into the city to see how things were going. The first three days it was a ghost town. And you went through Kandahar City, you know that it is a bustling place. It was by the Thursday and Friday that people started to come back into their normal routines. Fast forward to July-August when we had the bombing of the provincial police headquarters. Things dipped in the city for maybe 24 to 36 hours and then they started to go back to normal. Fast forward to November and the bombing of the Provincial Council building. No perceptible shift in the pattern of life in the city. So in some ways it's almost like people are starting to accept these acts of violence as part of the day-to-day, but it has a psychological impact on the population over time. And we see that in the polling, in terms of their overall confidence, their willingness, for instance, to put themselves at risk, to participate in the civic enterprise. And that, we need to be concerned about. And that's why we need to continue to reinforce ANP... why the ISAF forces containing the insurgency, keeping the insurgents busy in the top crescent is going to be so important. So I expect that violence will increase over the next 8-9 months, just because we'll have more dragons butting up against each other, as Denis (Thompson, former Canadian military commander in Afghanistan) would say. But the hope is that, at the same time, you're creating a space to continue to improve the ANSF so that continues to increase the confidence of the Afghans.

Q: What does 'winning' mean in this context for what has been a bloody expensive, very painful Canadian investment?

A: If by winning, we mean an Afghan government that is viable, that is accountable and representative of the whole of the country, that can provide basic services and basic security and protect its own border, that's what we're aiming to achieve. And I do think that's viable. But it's going to take time. It takes strategic patience. People forget that it's only been seven years that this country has emerged from 30 years of devastation.

Q: Does Canada have a strategic interest in that outcome?

A: Absolutely.

Q: How so?

A: The same reasons we went into it in the first place. Those interests are still alive. But I think we've also changed the way that we've approached things. It's more mature. I think we have a much more mature understanding of the ground, both at the national level and the provincial level. I think it's true for the international community as well, you know. At first we were focussing at the national level and reinforcing national institutions. That was incredibly important. And we didn't appreciate enough the regional differences. And a country like Canada understands regional differences.