

# Why the Aighman mission should cross party lines

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The Manley report did not change the minds of many Canadians, but it has convinced enough traditional Liberal voters to extend the Canadian mission in Afghanistan – providing certain conditions are met – to put Liberal leader Stéphane Dion in deep trouble if the Tory government endorses the report.

The Innovative Research poll, taken right after the Manley report was released this week, shows that, for the most part, those who were already supportive of the mission in Afghanistan are now more likely to support its extension beyond February, 2009.

But the poll, published in today's paper, also shows fully 43 per cent of those who voted Liberal in the last election told pollsters they would support extension of the mission – with no end-date mentioned at all – "if conditions are met to provide the mission with a better chance of success."

The implication of this result is clear. Many Liberals are distinctly uneasy with the black-and-white choice their party leadership seems to have touted for the past year: No more military mission beyond February, 2009, full stop.

This also means a large number of Liberals will want the party to support extending the mission if Prime Minister Stephen Harper begins to meet the Manley report's conditions for doing so.

Mr. Dion must either decide to support the report's recommendations, thus effectively removing Afghanistan from the nation's political agenda – and from contention in the next federal election – or risk a serious split in his party.

Meanwhile, there are two immediate challenges for the PM. The first is to clearly and without equivocation accept as government policy the conditions laid out by the Manley report. The second is to actually begin to implement them before the NATO summit meeting scheduled for Bucharest in April.

Both challenges are doable, neither will be easy. One of the most important of the Manley recommendations is that the Prime Minister himself take on the Afghanistan file. It can most certainly be done.

Robert Borden was prime minister during the First World War and William Lyon Mackenzie King was PM during the Second World War. Both men were fully engaged, every day, in leading the nation through those greatest of conflicts. It may be said Afghanistan is a very little war compared to the two global struggles, and thus doesn't warrant the Mr. Harper's time to that extent. But in the minds of many Canadians, the vast majority of whom have no recollection whatever of any war, even Korea, Afghanistan is the only real war they have ever known. Thus it looms large – especially on those too frequent days when another Canadian soldier is killed there.

The PM may want to replicate in some way the cabinet war committee that Mackenzie King used religiously from the very start of the Second World War. Or he could appoint a special civilian adviser on the conduct of the war, perhaps Mr. Manley himself. But he must engage himself fully, now, no matter what the current state of the Canadian economy is or how imminent the next federal election may be.

That's the easy part. It will be less easy to implement the other conditions the Manley report lays out that fall within the purview of the Canadian government. There are many of them and they are well thought out: changes in how aid is delivered in Kandahar province; clear indices of success laid out to measure the Canadian military, aid, and diplomatic mission in Afghanistan; a virtual revolution in how we are kept apprised of what is going on there; an immediate injection of new and much-needed equipment for the Canadian Forces.

The government can do all this, but it will have to take a sledge hammer to the departmental and bureaucratic stoves-pipes that are impeding a concerted and co-operative Canadian endeavour in Afghanistan.

The other conditions the Manley report laid out are beyond the immediate reach of the Harper government. But though beyond reach, they are not beyond influence.

One of the most important is demonstrable proof the Karzai government is beginning to root out corruption, cronyism, warlordism and other major roadblocks to progress for individual Afghans. Just as important is proof that NATO is starting to take a co-ordinated approach to the struggle in Afghanistan and provide more combat troops.

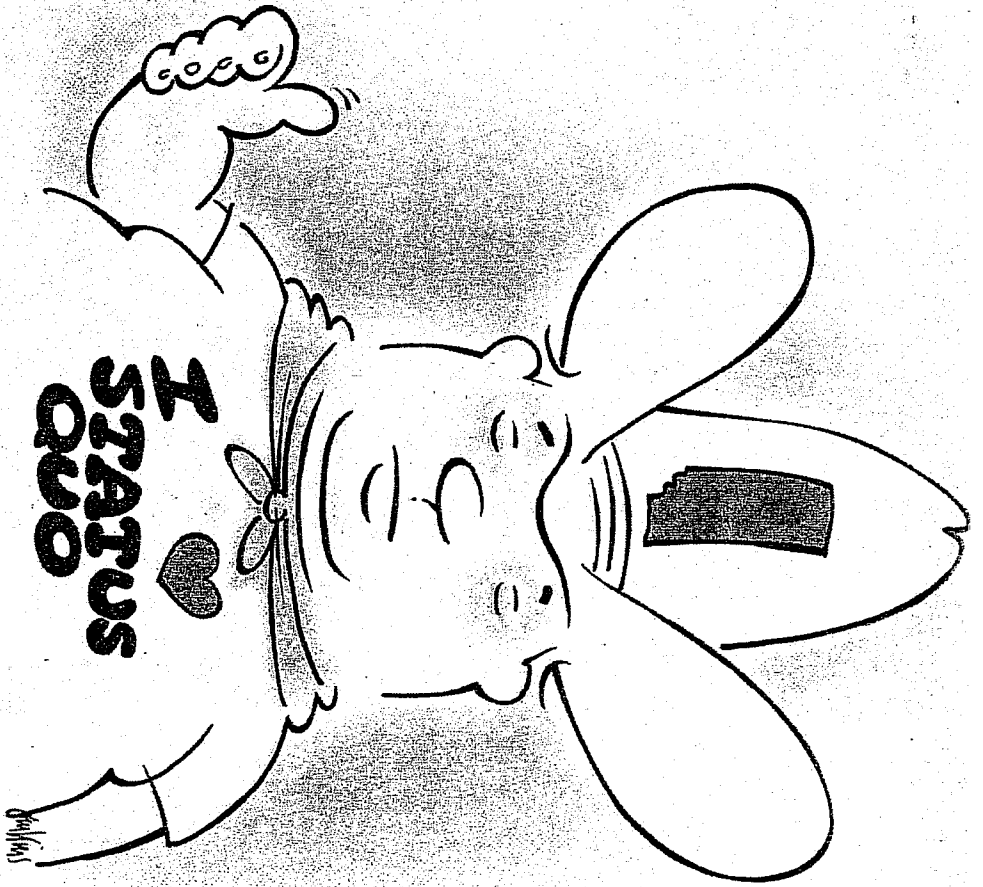
Although Mr. Harper doesn't control either the Karzai government or NATO, the Manley report strongly urges Canada to use the tremendous leverage it has already gained far more vigorously and with greater demonstrable effect to achieve Canadian objectives. And if it is not prepared to do so, then there is little point staying on beyond February, 2009.

This latest poll shows clearly that most Canadians are willing to give the Afghan mission one last solid push if the Manley report conditions are put in place. And by accepting the report's recommendations, the government will not only serve its own political interests, but the national interest as well.

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Reaching out: Seeking a blessing at a Kabul shrine. AP



## Time for a change? Not in Alberta

There are the trappings of democracy in the province, except only one party gets to rule



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What is it with Albertans? For 37 years, they've voted to put the same party in power. When an election is called in two weeks or so, they will do it again. Forty-one years it will then be, and counting. ...

Has anybody every heard of democracy in Alberta? Sure, the press is free. There's the full protection of the law. There are opposition parties and all the other institutions and trappings of democracy. Except one democratic ingredient is missing: Only one party gets to rule.

This doesn't happen elsewhere in Canada, the United States, Australia, New Zealand or Europe. In Canada, the Conservatives ran Ontario for four decades, but that hegemony shattered. Since then, three parties have governed Ontario. Only Japan resembles Alberta. There, the Liberal Democratic Party has governed since the Americans introduced democracy after the war. But even the LDP in Japan has lost control of the upper house.

On Feb. 4, Premier Ed Stelmach will present his government's Speech from the Throne. Shortly thereafter, an election will be called for early March. Barring a political earthquake, the Conservatives will win again.

A Strategic Counsel poll for The Globe and Mail earlier this week gave the Conservatives a 58- to 19-per-cent advantage

over the Liberals. Polls can be off from time to time. They have a margin of error. But a 39-point lead cannot be explained by margins of error or polling methodology.

What's bizarre about this finding is that Albertans apparently aren't bowled over by the government's performance. They seem to like Premier Stelmach – 61 per cent believe he's done a good job – but they don't ascribe any positive vibes to what he's done.

Fifty-five per cent think the government has done a "poor job" dealing with climate change. Fifty-seven per cent believe the government is "only concerned with economic growth and not the overall quality of life." Fifty per cent think the government is spending too much and saving too little for the future. They are split almost evenly on whether the government has done a good job managing fast growth.

Now comes the kicker: Fifty-four per cent of them think the almost four decades of Conservative rule is "too long for any one party to be in power." But that 54 per cent, or at least a big slice of it, never walks that talk. What's really amazing, demographically speaking, is that 43 per cent think almost four decades isn't too long. What would be "too long" for this 43 per cent? Fifty years of one-party rule? Seventy? A hundred? Forever?

It's one thing to be wedded to one party; it's another not even to think that maybe, some time, somehow there might or should be a change.

In Australia recently, former prime minister John Howard presided over almost 12 years of uninterrupted economic growth. His positive ratings exceeded his negative ones. But

the democratic instinct for change kicked in and Mr. Howard was out, replaced by the Labor Party.

It just happened next door in Saskatchewan. The province is doing well economically. The NDP was governing competently. But the voters said: Enough is enough, and put the Saskatchewan Party in office.

The most potent argument for any opposition party is the oldest one on record: Time For A Change. Sometimes the argument fails, sometimes it works. In Alberta, however, it always fails.

It used to be argued that Albertans voted herd-like for one party to defend their interests against rapacious Ottawa. But Conservative Prime Minister Stephen Harper from Alberta is running the show. The Conservatives hold all the seats federally in the province. Mr. Harper is certainly not coming after Alberta. Nor were Liberal prime ministers Paul Martin and Jean Chrétien.

Prosperity is hard to run against, but not impossible. Good economic times didn't save Paul Martin or George H.W. Bush or Lorne Calvert or John Howard.

Maybe it's just the word Liberal that frightens, upsets, bothers, bugs, infuriates Albertans into not thinking of changing governments. Maybe the provincial Liberal Party should change its name to the Progressive Party.

Maybe that wouldn't make the slightest difference. Maybe the Progressive Conservatives of Alberta really are the greatest and best political formation anywhere in the democratic world, and so deserve reelection, decade after decade after decade ...