

## **Conservatives shut down key Afghan cabinet committee**

MIKE BLANCHFIELD (featuring JACK GRANATSTEIN)

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The Harper government has quietly shut down the powerful cabinet committee that steered the mission in Afghanistan.

The decision to dismantle the committee came Tuesday, after Prime Minister Stephen Harper's minor cabinet shuffle, The Canadian Press has learned.

The committee had been chaired by Foreign Affairs Minister Lawrence Cannon and included Defence Minister Peter MacKay, Veterans Affairs Minister Jean-Pierre Blackburn, Public Safety Minister Vic Toews and International Co-operation Minister Bev Oda.

It was responsible for sending quarterly mission progress reports to Parliament.

A government official confirmed the decision was taken because Canada's combat operations in Kandahar will end this summer.

"Yes, the cabinet committee on Afghanistan has wrapped up, having fulfilled its purpose," said Harper spokeswoman Sara MacIntyre.

The move comes as the combat mission in Afghanistan winds down and Canada switches to a training role, she said.

"The cabinet committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence will continue to consider matters relating to Canada's role in Afghanistan."

Ms. MacIntyre said the committee's termination was effective immediately.

It was not clear whether the quarterly reports to Parliament would continue.

The updates attempted to measure benchmarks for success in Kandahar such as the training of Afghan army and police, the construction of new schools, attempts to eradicate polio and create economic opportunities in the impoverished southern province.

The wind up of the Canadian combat mission is expected to begin in earnest in the spring, with a July deadline.

The 3,000-strong contingent will be replaced by a much smaller group of military trainers – up to 950 – which the government says will be centred in and around the capital of Kabul.

Mr. Harper bowed to international pressure from major allies and decided to extend Canada's military presence in Afghanistan after July 2011, albeit in a non-combat role.

The cabinet committee and its quarterly reports were among the recommendations of an independent panel led by former Liberal deputy prime minister John Manley. The panel criticized the government for not communicating effectively to Canadians about the mission.

Military historian Jack Granatstein questioned whether the committee accomplished anything.

"I guess the question is: what has it been doing up till now?" he said. "There are a number of people who think it hadn't been doing anything."

Mr. Granatstein said Mr. Harper, and Mr. Harper alone, guided Canada's involvement in Afghanistan and that his sense of direction lately has to be questioned.

When Mr. Harper came to power in 2006, he pledged that Canada would never "cut and run" while he was prime minister.

After Parliament approved a two-year extension to July 2011, Mr. Harper was adamant that the mission would end as scheduled, but he eventually agreed to have non-combat military trainers stay on for three more years.

Douglas Bland, chair of the Defence Management Studies Program at Queen's University in Kingston, lamented the disbanding of the committee because it focused bureaucrats from several departments on important national security issues and forced them to work together.

"A lot of bureaucrats have come to understand the broad meaning of national security and they need leadership from the cabinet to keep that up, otherwise they'll wander off and do other things that bureaucrats do in the stovepipe democracy," Mr. Bland said.

"The lesson has been (that) war-like operations — and that's what this was — require the attention of ministers and especially the prime minister."

Mr. Bland said it is simply not good enough to leave the Afghanistan mission as an agenda item for cabinet's Foreign Affairs and Defence committee.

The concept of a war cabinet was created in Second World War Britain by Winston Churchill. Canada adopted the practice in the 1950s with its involvement in the Korean conflict and its first forays into Middle East peacekeeping, he said.

But as the malaise of the Cold War set in, the war cabinets simply faded into the bureaucracy.

The Harper government's control over the Afghan mission has evolved over time from a series of ad-hoc committees that tried to bridge various departments, to running it out of Foreign Affairs. It then morphed into the cabinet configuration backed by a secretariat in the Privy Council Office, the bureaucratic arm of the prime minister's office, Mr. Bland said.

The Prime Minister's desire for continued involvement in Afghanistan was diminished by the rising death rate of Canadian military personnel, which now stands at 154, as well as mounting concerns about corruption in the government of President Hamid Karzai in Kabul.

Harper's cabinet committee "was certainly secretive," Mr. Granatstein said.

"But was our policy clear? When you have the chief of the defence staff saying there will be nobody left, and then suddenly we're going to have 900 people there, it does make you wonder what this committee has been doing," he added.

"It's indicative; the committee hasn't had a hand on the tiller, or if it did, it wasn't a very steady hand."

Mr. Granatstein said he supported Canadian troops staying in Afghanistan past 2011, but he objected to the way Harper finally agreed to do that.

“It seems pretty clear that we have been driven by pressure from our friends. We were getting out, now we're still there. The reason seems to be clear. It's because the Americans and NATO pressured the hell out of us into doing so.”