

PM finds military a useful symbol

**Draws on Forces to evoke theme of nationalism
Harper positions troops as a central priority for Tories**

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BRUCE CAMPION-SMITH
OTTAWA BUREAU

OTTAWA—You won't find national defence among the Conservatives' vaunted five priorities.

But from the frontlines in Kandahar to the floor of the House of Commons to yesterday's visit to an army base in Alberta, Prime Minister Stephen Harper has quickly cemented the military as a key theme, a central priority — and often photographic backdrop — for his Conservative government.

Harper was on the reviewing stand yesterday at CFB Wainwright, where he told soldiers graduating from basic infantry training that they were now "part of a true noble profession — the Canadian military."

"This is the greatest public service that someone can render to their country. ... It's very important therefore for the prime minister to support this type of Canadian," he told reporters later.

Harper has been in power for just three months but already these are the familiar words from a Conservative government that sees the military as a convenient means to evoke favoured themes of nationalism, sovereignty and waving the Canadian flag.

While Harper was rallying the troops in Alberta, Defence Minister Gordon O'Connor was delivering his own pep talk to troops at CFB Petawawa who will soon be deploying to Afghanistan.

Harper has put a Conservative stamp on that mission involving 2,200 Canadians soldiers — an operation launched by the Liberals.

In March, the Prime Minister made his first foreign trip to Afghanistan to signal his support for the mission and it's rare he gives a speech without mentioning the work of troops in the war-torn land.

"They are prepared to take on danger," he said yesterday.

"What they want to know from government is that if we are going to send them to a dangerous place that we are going to support them."

But the profile of the Afghan mission comes at a price. Both Harper and O'Connor admitted yesterday that Canada's long-term commitment to the country will impede the military's ability to respond to other hotspots around the world.

"We can maintain the commitment in Afghanistan into the future ... but we will be greatly challenged to take any substantial commitment anywhere else offshore," O'Connor told reporters.

"I don't think we can take on a major operation at this moment," he said.

But even then, O'Connor and Harper tout their promises of more troops and more money for the military, a message that enjoys a broad audience beyond just the party's core constituency, pollster Frank Graves says.

He said Harper is also capitalizing on Canadians' swelling support for the military, a dramatic turnaround from the "studied indifference and apathy" just five years ago.

"They weren't willing to spend any money on it. They viewed it as an institution in decline," said Graves, president of EKOS Research.

Now, in the wake of the Sept. 11, 2001 terror attacks and growing worries that the world is a dangerous place, support for the military has ballooned and people want to see it "restored and renewed," Graves said.

"There is a much greater political advantage to beating the drum than there would have been four or five years ago," he said.

Now the military is the "most visible face of the federal government" and Graves said it's hard for Harper to put a foot wrong when he talks about the Armed Forces.

And he talks about it whenever he can. Just last week, Harper presided over a Parliament Hill event — replete with distinguished veterans and uniformed troops — to launch new measures to help retired soldiers — even though the program was a Liberal initiative unveiled a year earlier. But the event made for good optics and allowed the Conservatives to claim it as their own.

But it's about more than just symbolism. The Tories made clear this week they have also bought into the military's vision of the future — and they've done so by using the same language as the top general.

Over the past year, Gen. Rick Hillier, chief of defence staff, has argued the Armed Forces need to get bigger bang for the buck on overseas operations.

"Not one little small operation being done by the army over here or one little small operation being done by the navy there ... none of which gets us leadership positions and none of which gets us profile," he told a Toronto audience on Tuesday.

Yesterday, Harper signalled his approval.

"What I would like to see done ... is rather than placing a handful of soldiers here and a handful of soldiers there, really concentrate our efforts in ways that we can show leadership ... and take a very visible role so we make a real notable contribution" in international missions, he said.

with files from Canadian Press



FRED CHARTRAND/CP

Defence Minister Gordon O'Connor, above, talks to reporters yesterday after giving a pep talk at CFB Petawawa to troops who will soon be deployed to Afghanistan. O'Connor and Harper are touting their promises of more troops and money for the Armed Forces, capitalizing on Canadians' swelling support for the military.

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