

## Afghan mission tough PR sell

**Insider, critics, Manley all say tight-lipped style is failing Canadians**

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OTTAWA—Several times a week, senior federal officials gather by phone to plot strategy for pitching the controversial Afghan mission to Canadians.



CHRIS WATTIE/REUTERS FILE PHOTO

Sandra Buckler, Prime Minister Stephen Harper's communications director, sometimes takes part in the Afghan mission strategy conference call.

They dial in from defence headquarters, foreign affairs, the RCMP and the Canadian International Development Agency. Sandra Buckler, the prime minister's director of communications, is an occasional participant.

Moderated by David Mulroney, the foreign affairs official who leads the Afghanistan task force, the phone calls are a key part of Ottawa's public relations campaign for handling the issues and problems that surround the mission.

But as communications campaigns go, this group hasn't been doing a very good job, according to the independent panel that assessed Canada's future in Afghanistan.

The panel, led by former Liberal cabinet minister John Manley, urged "frank and more frequent" reporting by government and greater emphasis on diplomatic and reconstruction efforts.

"This information deficit needs to be redressed immediately in a comprehensive and more balanced communication of open and continuous engagement with Canadians," the panel's report said.

A government insider goes further, calling the communications strategy an "abject failure."

While the high-level teleconferences are ostensibly held to improve communications, it often becomes an exercise in keeping a lid on information, said the official, who is familiar with the phone calls.

"It's not about communications. It's about keeping the press gallery at bay," he said. "Government is no longer in the communications business."

He's among many in the bureaucracy who complain that while soldiers are allowed to speak out, officials from CIDA and foreign affairs are barred from talking about their work in Kandahar.

"There's a good story to be told. But these people in the field aren't allowed to speak," the official said. "Their sacrifices and hard work deserve to be heard."

Indeed, the communications effort has been marred by opposition criticisms of cover-ups on sensitive files, such as detainees, and accusations that the Prime Minister's Office takes an active hand in muzzling bureaucrats and cabinet ministers.

All issues related to the Afghan mission are vetted through the Privy Council Office, the bureaucratic wing of the Prime Minister's Office. That often means delays that can stretch to days when reacting to fast-developing stories, like the detainee issue.

"I think the Prime Minister's Office has probably made things worse unnecessarily throughout this whole piece," said Peter Donolo, who served as communications director for former prime minister Jean Chrétien.

"They're paying a price for their top-down, tightly-scripted approach to communications," he said.

He noted the Conservatives' attempt to bar the media from being on hand at CFB Trenton when the bodies of slain soldiers were returned from Afghanistan.

"It left a lingering aftertaste that they are very much into media manipulation," Donolo said.

Indeed, the government is preparing to hold a media briefing on its Afghan efforts this week in a bid to tout its openness after the criticisms of the Manley report. But the rules that have forbidden reporters to identify the bureaucrats who spoke at previous briefings are unlikely to change.

That kind of muzzling is a mistake, said Donolo. He encouraged the government to let foreign affairs staff – experts on the Afghan file – speak publicly about their work.

"A senior foreign official has a lot more credibility and expertise than a junior in the Prime Minister's Office," he said.

To turn around the flagging communications efforts, experts urge the government to be honest and forthright, and let diplomats and development workers tell their stories.

"Raise the volume on the developmental side," said EKOS Research president Frank Graves, urging the government to tap into public interest to hear more about reconstruction efforts in Kandahar.

"Ninety per cent of Canadians support the developmental objectives, more aid, more reconstruction and all those kinds of things."

Still, Graves gives the government's communications effort a passing grade, noting that despite casualties – 78 soldiers and diplomat Glyn Berry have been killed since 2002 – public support for the mission hasn't plummeted. Graves said Canadians remain divided on the mission, with about 30 per cent strongly committed and 20 per cent strongly opposed.

"The rest are churning back and forth from soft support to soft opposition. They're agnostic, haven't made up their mind," Graves said.

He said his firm's polling has found little public support to withdraw Canadian troops immediately, a position advocated by the federal New Democrats.

That's why he would add a new message to the government's Afghan sales pitch: "Early exit guarantees failure. At least if we stay in the game, we can pull a success out of this. But there's no question that if we leave now, it's all basically been for naught."

Prime Minister Stephen Harper said he accepted the panel's critique of his government's communications work and pledged to do better. He also offered a blunt assessment of the challenge facing the Conservatives.

"Let's be truthful ... a robust military mission where there are casualties is never going to be easy to communicate and it's never going to be all that popular to communicate," Harper said last week.