

Where Liberals stand

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STAFF REPORTER

The Canadian Forces' mission in Afghanistan has sparked the same controversy and differing views among Liberal leadership candidates as it has among members of the public.

Moreover, there's little doubt this arduous mission — 36 Canadian soldiers and one diplomat have been killed since 2002 — will dominate policy debate when Liberals gather in Montreal at the end of November to choose a new leader.

A recent poll by EKOS Research for the *Toronto Star* showed a "precipitous decline" in Canadians' support for the mission. EKOS president Frank Graves reported that for the first time there was a higher percentage in opposition (49 per cent) than support (38 per cent).

Liberals say that airing opposing views is a healthy part of any leadership debate and that caucus will unite behind a new leader after the Dec. 2 vote. Last spring, Prime Minister Stephen Harper's government announced an extension of the mission from early 2007 to 2009. In a vote in the Commons, two leadership candidates — Michael Ignatieff (Etobicoke-Lakeshore) and Scott Brison (Kings-Hants) — voted with the government. Other contenders from the opposition benches — Ken Dryden (York Centre), Joe Volpe (Eglinton-Lawrence), Stéphane Dion (Saint-Laurent-Cartierville) and Hedy Fry (Vancouver Centre) — voted against the motion.

No date has been set for the end of the mission. However, this week, Foreign Affairs Minister Peter MacKay set out several conditions for withdrawal, including securing the borders, rebuilding infrastructure, the return of refugees and the establishment of democratic institutions in Afghanistan.

"We want to leave Afghanistan when those things are achieved in a meaningful way," he said. "I believe, in spite of some casualties and some very high costs ... these are values and principles worth fighting for."

On the eve of tomorrow's speech in Parliament by Afghan President Hamid Karzai, the *Star* asked the nine Liberal leadership candidates: "If you were prime minister, when and under what circumstances would you bring Canadian troops home from Afghanistan?"

Not all candidates offered dates for a withdrawal. However, most called for a reassessment of the mission, a clear set of goals and an exit strategy.

Joe Volpe

The Toronto MP, 60, says he "led the caucus debate on the change in the mandate" to 2009, trying to get everyone to oppose the government. Michael Ignatieff, he says, argued against him.

"I almost carried the day in caucus."

Now that the government has announced Canadian troops will remain until 2009, the commitment must be



RICK MADONIK/TORONTO STAR

Canadian soldiers salute four more fallen comrades whose caskets were loaded on to an aircraft yesterday at Kandahar Airfield.

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honoured.

"Effectively, we declared war without identifying our military objectives, our political objectives, the manner in which we would accomplish them. There's no time frame and no exit strategy.

"Having said that, if I were prime minister today, what I would be obligated to do is see this mandate through to what the government of Canada has committed itself to — 2009."

Bob Rae

The former NDP premier of Ontario, 58, calls the mission the "most preoccupying issue of public policy today," stressing he supports the troops and grieves with Canadians at the death toll.

"But we are now at a point where Canada's Afghanistan policy needs to be assessed and evaluated. This does not mean Canada should abandon Afghanistan. That is the straw man that the Prime Minister talks about. It is not an option any serious people are proposing

"My view is that Canada, along with NATO partners, must engage in real, intense discussion about what we should be doing there and the chances for success. Minister O'Connor recently said that the conflict cannot be solved militarily. I would ask Mr. O'Connor just what he meant by that statement ... Canada's original engagement was one where we emphasized the importance of diplomacy and development assistance as well as defence. My concern is that the role is becoming primarily a military role.

"If we allow ourselves to get in the position where we are perceived as an army of occupation that immediately changes the political dynamic in the country and changes the chances of success ... In advance of a serious reassessment, I don't believe in arbitrary dates for staying in or pulling out of Afghanistan."

Hedy Fry

"I believe that Canada has a duty to become engaged in areas of conflict around the world, but only as part of a multinational force and only under certain clear principles of engagement," says Fry, 65, referring to such principles as protecting civilians and rebuilding infrastructure.

"Canada should not act as a counter-insurgency force, nor become an aggressive occupying force ...

"I would remain in Afghanistan until February, 2007. We gave our word to do so and should not leave our allies in the lurch. In the interim, we should return to our original mandate. However, it has become increasingly clear that we are in violation of these principles of engagement. Indeed, Mr. Harper recently called the Afghanistan mission a war (and) neither the people of Canada nor Parliament were consulted about sending our troops to war."

Martha Hall Findlay

"Canada made a commitment; the idea of pulling out now, unilaterally, is simply irresponsible," says the Toronto lawyer, 47.

"But we urgently need a full and thorough and honest review, with our NATO partners, to determine where we are after five years; what we honestly hope to accomplish; and then whether those goals are realistic and achievable. Only then can we decide on next steps.

"I would bring our troops home if, after a full and comprehensive review with our NATO partners, in which Canada plays a strong part, we collectively decide to exit, and a realistic process is established for such an exit.

`` I would be prepared, at the same time, to consider staying, if through the same collective and honest review process we determine and agree that there are in fact realistic and appropriate goals that can be achieved.

"Canada has an opportunity right now to step up, and to get that thorough and honest review going with our NATO partners ... I would not have Canada act unilaterally, in any case.

`` We are part of the NATO collective; our NATO partners are also suffering casualties. We're not in this alone."

Ken Dryden

"Canadian troops should remain in Afghanistan to fulfill the objectives of the original mission for which they were deployed," says the former federal cabinet minister, 59.

"We will only extend or expand our mission after a full and rigorous public debate with any new information and circumstances shared with the Canadian people."

He said Canadians must be assured that the Afghan government and people continue to support the mission and that the conditions on the ground don't require substantial changes in the time frame or commitment of troops.

It is also important, says Dryden, "that the capacity of our armed forces to be deployed to future 'global hot spots' that may be of greater priority in fulfilling Canada's foreign policy objectives are not compromised."

The objectives of the mission would have to be periodically reviewed, in consultation with Canada's NATO allies, and a report given to the Canadian people.

Stéphane Dion

The former Liberal cabinet minister says there is no "magic science" to picking a withdrawal date, saying instead he would be assessing the situation daily.

Dion, 50, says he would "withdraw troops certainly if the government of Afghanistan requested our withdrawal. That's the easy part. But also if it became obvious that our military and civilian presence, in collaboration with our allies, was not bringing any effective progress for the security of the people of Afghanistan.

"But between the blind mission of Mr. Harper and the shameful withdrawal of Mr. Layton, I would look for a realistic and effective involvement. In the design of the mission, we need to weigh the risk to our soldiers and our civilians who are involved in rebuilding activities with the actual contribution to the security of the Afghans."

Scott Brison

"This may seem to be a simple question, but there are no simple answers to such a complex issue," says Brison, 39. "Since 2001, Canada has been part of a UN-led effort in Afghanistan, a mission commenced by (Prime Minister Jean) Chrétien and continued by (Prime Minister Paul) Martin, and, importantly, initially authorized by the United Nations Security Council. One measure of success of the mission is the number of Afghan girls now attending school and the number of women voting and getting elected.

"Clearly, it is a difficult mission. But that does not mean it is wrong for Canada, as a member of NATO, to be involved. Nor does it mean that as the level of difficulty increases that Canada should run. The mission, though, cannot be won if waged as a primarily military operation. It must be supplemented by an increased commitment to humanitarian support."

He argues the mission must be periodically reviewed — every six months at a minimum.

Michael Ignatieff

"I supported the extension of the Afghanistan mission to February 2009," says Ignatieff, 59, former director of the Carr Institute on Human Rights Policy at Harvard University.

"At the time of the vote in the House of Commons on this issue, I made it clear that my support of the extension was conditional on the Harper government maintaining the Liberal mission's balance between the reconstruction, humanitarian and human security components."

He doesn't support an open-ended mission.

"I believe that by February 2009 we can hand the torch over to our NATO partners and to the increasingly able Afghan security forces. We must plan for that transition. By 2009, Canada will have been in Afghanistan for over 7 years. We can return home with our heads held high, confident that we have fulfilled our moral promise to the Afghan people, as well as our commitment to the democratically elected Afghan government and to our international allies."

Gerard Kennedy

"I would withdraw Canadian troops under two circumstances. One is if we could not get NATO to change the current mission to one that has a real prospect of being successful. By that I mean a mission that deals with effectiveness with the poppy trade that has taken over the economy of Afghanistan and gives the Afghan people an alternate source of livelihood," says the former Ontario cabinet minister, 46, who, at the end of August, called publicly for complete troop withdrawal if the NATO mission could not be changed to include a balance of humanitarian, reconstruction and security goals.

He said he would also withdraw troops if the mission was over, having proven to have been successful in achieving a balanced approach and winning over the Afghan people.

"You asked specifically about troops as opposed to overall Canadian involvement, which I think can and should be long-term on the developmental side ... There is a value in short-term security being provided (but) I don't believe Canada should be part of a long-term occupation force ... We should be leading, not just following ... It makes no sense that Canada would not be exercising an independent voice within the NATO council and saying it is time for this change."

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