

**AS OTTAWA  
DODGES  
DEBATE,  
JOE & JANE  
CANADIAN  
DODGE WAR**



**ColdType**

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**CANADIANS** are all part owners of what is already our country's longest-running war. In March, Parliament voted 198-77 to extend our military mission in Afghanistan where Canadian soldiers have been fighting a war of attrition without firm goals since 2002. Our troops will now stay until at least 2011. The minority Conservative government's move to extend the mission was supported by the Liberals, who demanded and got a caveat: other NATO countries must contribute 1,000 troops and our own must be given new transport helicopters and unmanned aerial vehicles. Currently there are about 2,500 Canadian military personnel in Afghanistan.

Living in Ontario it is difficult to believe we are at war. With the exception of those patriotic bumper stickers urging us to "Support Our Troops" there is little direct evidence of war. Gasoline is not rationed, nobody collects scrap metal for the war industries, and there are no campaigns to buy war bonds. Even the new Canadian Forces recruitment drive avoids direct references to Afghanistan.

But make no mistake, a war there is, and it is ours. Even if you are not a member of the armed forces every Canadian is paying for this war through taxes and higher

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inflation. (Never has a war been waged that did not drive up the cost of living, but government can delay inflation temporarily.) Billions of dollars that could have been spent on social programs and infrastructure will now go to support the war effort. The government has been cagy about how much the war is costing. In 2007, Brigadier General Tim Grant told the Standing Senate Committee on National Security and Defence that the number is \$30 million per month, exclusive of salaries. This figure does not include the costs of replacing worn-out gear or the estimated \$1.2 billion borrowing, buying and maintaining 120 used Leopard tanks or \$2.7 billion to buy and maintain 16 Chinook helicopters. Nor do estimates include the additional medical costs of caring for wounded veterans.

Over 80 Canadian soldiers have died in the war so far, and statistics on the number of wounded are hard to come by. In addition to the physical wounds the stress of war is taking its toll too. The 2006-2007 Departmental Performance Report of Veterans Affairs Canada (VAC) reveals that,

“Due to the increased operational tempo, psychological and psychiatric-related conditions are on the rise among Veterans, still-serving CF members, and RCMP. The increase is particularly noticeable among VAC clients suffering from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Over the past five years the number of clients with a PTSD-condition has more than tripled, increasing to 6,504. As of March 31, 2007, a total of 10,525 clients are in receipt of a pension for a psychiatric condition.”

These numbers represent only those who have left the armed forces, not those still in the military and who are being treated for PTSD.

Even given this level of sacrifice, the war is not going well. Last month the UN Secretary General reported, “In 2007 the level of insurgent and terrorist activity increased sharply from that of the previous year. An average of 566 incidents per month was recorded... compared to 425 per month in the previous year. Of the over 8,000 conflict-related fatalities in 2007, over 1,500 were civilians.... There were 160 actual suicide attacks in 2007, with a further 68 thwarted attempts, compared to 123 actual and 17 thwarted in 2006.” Beyond those grim statistics, the size of the Afghan opium crop is setting records, journalists are being sentenced to death for questioning religion, and the war has unofficially spread to neighbouring Pakistan, as evidenced by reports of clandestine NATO operations and U.S. airstrikes there.

The *Globe and Mail* revealed (“The ugly truth in Afghanistan,” March 1) that on

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most days fewer than 600 of our 2,500 troops are on patrol outside the confines of their base in Kandahar. The article advocates extending the tours of Canadian troops from six months to 15, even though some are already on their second tour, and if they remain in the military can expect to go back again.

One wonders what Prime Minister Stephen Harper meant when he introduced the motion to extend our war effort in Parliament with, “When the cause is just and the sacrifice necessary, Canada has always answered the call.” The armed forces are mid-way into a “strategic transformation” designed to increase numbers to 68,000 full-time (compared to fewer than 64,000 in March 2007) and 26,000 reserve personnel by 2011-2012. But with attrition at around 6%, the total size of the full-time military is increasing by fewer than 2,000 personnel per year. This modest increase does not make Canada look like a country determined to win the war.

*Who will do our fighting for us?*

Our Afghanistan commitment reveals gross inequalities in society. The fact that nearly 30% of the dead are from just three provinces in Atlantic Canada (NB, NL, and NS) when those provinces comprise less than 7% of the total population reveals that economic class still dictates who fights wars: in a volunteer army most soldiers come from those areas where decent jobs are hardest to find. Likewise, even though 80% of Canadians live in major cities nearly half the dead come from small towns and rural areas.

Also, the Canadian military has been ordered to reflect the cultural diversity of the nation, a job it is ill-equipped to do. An army is a machine of destruction. It may be used as a tool of foreign policy or internal security but it is not designed as a tool for social policy, and generals should not be expected to become sociologists. At a time when our armed forces are engaged in their biggest commitment since the Korean War, the government is demanding they sign up more minorities. The result is recruiting officers dispatched to convince Asian, Black, Hispanic and other non-white teenagers to enlist for a war many do not see as any of their business.

An ugly feature of our system of relying on volunteers is that many of its supporters are people who have no intention of volunteering themselves. It is reminiscent of the anti-war slogan that, “A patriot is someone willing to lay your life down for his country.” Others state simply that, “If somebody else wants to fight this war, that’s okay by me. It’s none of my business.”

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Canada is struggling to sustain operations in Afghanistan. Should public sentiment push Ottawa to become involved somewhere else (Darfur, for example, but one could name a dozen worthwhile causes) the Canadian military could not do it. There are too few fully trained troops and not enough equipment to mount another mission. Conservatives like to blame previous Liberal governments for having “run down” and “neglected” the armed forces but every government since 1945 is guilty of contributing to this state of affairs.

### **Time for conscription**

Until now our political leaders have not had to take into account the popular will regarding the war in Afghanistan. They get away with this, in part, because most Canadians can comfortably ignore the sacrifices and the suffering. Our small army of volunteers can be ordered into battle and be kept there for a decade and most citizens won't have any direct stake in its conduct. Perhaps the time has come to debate conscription (a.k.a. the draft). With conscription the consequences of the war would be felt by every citizen, and there is no more democratic means of making us consider Afghanistan as seriously as those now fighting there.

By avoiding conscription, Canada increases its reliance on mercenaries. In Iraq and Afghanistan, the U.S. employs tens of thousands of people who work for so-called Private Military Firms (PMFs). They do a wide range of jobs – from repairing vehicles and cooking food to guarding vital installations and VIPs – previously done by military personnel. Canada, too, is using PMFs in Afghanistan under the Canadian Forces Contractor Augmentation Program. The danger of PMFs to Canada and other democracies is these contractors have no interest in seeing wars end. Mercenaries and shareholders of the companies who employ them benefit as wars expand and last as long as possible. Additionally, the use of PMFs is more expensive than using military personnel, as the U.S. experience is demonstrating.

Our choices in designing a Canadian military are limited: maintain a large all-purpose force capable of meeting every conceivable contingency and risk bankrupting the national economy (what the U.S. is doing) or create a small flexible force which can be expanded rapidly in times of greater need. Ever since the Second World War Canada has chosen an awkward compromise: we have an army with a few squadrons of tanks that can not wage armoured warfare on its own, a navy with four

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submarines that can't keep enough at sea to patrol Canada's vast maritime borders, and an air force with most types of aircraft but not enough transports to support overseas operations. Generals are proud of the fact they have maintained these "core capabilities" but no one ever asked them how they expected to develop these in a time of crisis into a full-fledged fighting force. Most Canadians ignored the problem in its entirety. Being allied to the American superpower meant Canada would never have to fight on its own, or so the reasoning went. So, here we are today bogged down in Afghanistan, begging our reluctant NATO allies to contribute another 1,000 troops that we can't or won't come up with ourselves.

To the average foreigner – many of whom see this war as a direct consequence of American imperial arrogance – Canadians must seem like a bunch of spoiled whiners. Why can't a country with 33 million people and the seventh largest economy on Earth, a country with no internal conflicts or threatening neighbours on its borders come up with another thousand troops? If our claim is that Afghanistan is a "good" war which must be won for the sake of democratic beliefs why aren't we prepared to wage it unless our allies ante up too?

Over the last 200 years very few wars have been won by a country or alliance that did not use conscription. A direct link exists between a nation mobilizing all its resources and its willingness to see the struggle through to a successful conclusion. There is an old joke – likely apocryphal – that during the 1990-91 Gulf War a group of Coalition officers stood at a bar somewhere in the Middle East. They were arguing about the relative prowess of their militaries and at one point a U.S. Marine turned to two Canadians and demanded to know what Canada had accomplished during the Vietnam War. One of the Canadians replied matter of factly, "The Vietnamese didn't need our help."

### *The past is not prelude*

Conscription has always been a sensitive topic in Canada. In both World Wars the issue strained relations between English and French Canadians. But it is a misconception to assume conscription would have the same effect today.

A majority of Quebeckers believed the First World War was the result of British imperialism and declined to enlist in the military. Many also resented being treated

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as second-class citizens. The government in Ontario, for example, was extremely anti-French at the time and severely restricted Francophone language rights. On the other side of the argument, Anglophone Canadians deplored what they saw as Quebeckers shirking their responsibility to fight the war. Unfortunately, Ottawa did little to bridge the gap. Sam Hughes, the Minister of Militia, was an Orangeman and narrow-minded Protestant who had little regard for Roman Catholics or Quebec. He promoted very few Francophone officers to senior positions, and except for the Royal 22e Régiment (known as the Van Doos) did not send any large, identifiably Francophone, units to fight in France. By 1917 the war was going badly and carnage in the trenches made it difficult to keep units up to fighting strength. In December of that year a federal election was run on the issue of conscription and Prime Minister Robert Borden won a landslide victory everywhere in the country but in Quebec. As soon as conscription was made law massive riots erupted in Quebec City and Montreal.

In 1939, with the Second World War looming, Prime Minister Mackenzie King promised the country there would be no conscription. But after the fall of France in 1940 the German juggernaut looked unbeatable and King introduced the National Resources Mobilization Act, authorizing conscription for the defence of Canada but not for overseas service. As in the First World War, Ottawa failed to make enlistment appealing to Francophones. English was the only language offered for officer training and most technical instruction. Again almost all the senior officers were Anglophone. To many Quebeckers this war was another European problem, and they had a point: the U.S. remained neutral until Japan attacked Pearl Harbor in December 1941.

Quebeckers also questioned how this could be a war for democracy when Britain's biggest ally was the tyrannical Soviet Union. In 1942, King announced a referendum to release him from his earlier promise. Most of Canada voted overwhelmingly in support of conscription for overseas service, but in Quebec only 27% did so, in part because the government did not campaign strongly there.

The Allied invasions of Italy in 1943 and France in 1944 inflicted unexpectedly high casualty rates on Canadian troops and Minister of National Defence J.L. Ralston proposed to send conscripts as reinforcements. King balked and fired Ralston. Senior officers complained the volunteer system wasn't providing enough replacements and insisted conscripts were needed in Europe.

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General Pearkes\*, commander of Canada's Pacific region, urged his unit commanders to voice their concerns to the press. Another general threatened to resign over the issue. King perceived these acts as insubordination which threatened civilian control of the armed forces. Finally, in November 1944 he announced that conscripts would be sent to Europe. One cabinet minister resigned and there were riots in Quebec but none as serious as those of 1917.

The point in recounting all this history is to illustrate how much the subject of conscription was tied to the language issue in Canada. Today, Francophones are well represented in the senior ranks of the armed forces and language is no longer a barrier to any technical trade. And although there are still anti-French sentiments outside Quebec they are no longer dominant in either government or the general population.

What Canadians are left with, however, is a moral issue. If the country is justified in fighting the war in Afghanistan and is serious about winning, will it rely upon the economically disadvantaged and mercenaries to do so? Or will Canadians as a people accept conscription as the fairest way to share in the war's burdens or at least its risks.

*\*Ironically, National Defence Headquarters in Ottawa is today housed in the Major General George R. Pearkes Building.*



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