

Needed: a parliamentary debate on Afghanistan

It is distressing that the Conservatives seemingly cannot bring themselves to hold a parliamentary debate on Canada's troop deployments in Afghanistan. There are now 2,300 military members of Task Force Afghanistan, with the great majority in the perilous southern region of Kandahar. Last week alone, two soldiers died when their vehicle overturned and a third was seriously injured by an axe-wielding Taliban sympathizer.

But Prime Minister Stephen Harper and Foreign Minister Peter MacKay appear to think that talking about the mission in Parliament would undermine the troops in their hour of danger. "At this point, we do not want to in any way suggest that we are questioning Canadians' presence there, that we are doing anything except showing our forceful commitment to the mission and to the men and women who are wearing the uniform and wearing the Canadian flag in Afghanistan," Mr. MacKay declared yesterday.

That gets it backwards. Just about the most important decision a country can make is to send its soldiers into danger. If the government wants to make sure Canadians support the effort in Afghanistan, it needs to stand up and make the case for why we are there. What better place than Parliament? With casualties rising and further danger ahead, the government needs to explain, as simply and as powerfully as it can, why it believes it is in Canada's interest to have our troops engaged in this perilous, faraway war zone. Just as important, the opposition parties need the chance to question the government about the engagement -- its extent, its duration, its potential cost in lives and resources.

This is not the time for people to button their lips and salute the flag. Remember that the British Parliament held full, often raucous debates at the height of the Second World War. If Canadians have doubts about the mission, they need a chance to voice them through their elected representatives. Canada has never faced anything quite like this mission, with its suicide attacks and its terrorist enemies. The government needs to explain why it is necessary for Canada to stick with it.

As it happens, it has an excellent argument to make. There are good reasons why Canadian troops are in Kandahar, where extremists remain a serious threat to their own fragile nation and to global stability. The mission in Afghanistan has a dual aim: to help Afghans rebuild their country and to prevent international terrorism from flourishing there again.

Most Canadians, including most Canadian troops, would almost certainly say that discussion is healthy in a democracy. The Conservatives campaigned with the promise of full accountability, and they complained mightily in opposition about the lack of formal parliamentary debate on the current deployment. So what is their complaint now?

On the sole occasion that MPs even really talked about the Afghan deployment -- during a late-evening "take-note" discussion in mid-November, six months after the Liberal commitment -- excellent questions were raised. MPs asked about the length of the

deployment, the adequacy of the equipment, the fate of prisoners and the heightened risk, and about when the North Atlantic Treaty Organization would take over command of the southern region from the Americans. Those questions are even more relevant today.

Since that little-noticed debate, which ended without a vote, Canada has moved the bulk of its troops from the relative safety of Kabul to the high-risk south, assuming command of the multinational brigade headquartered there. And the full extent of the peril is becoming ever more apparent. It is clear that this is a mission unlike any action since the Korean War. Although Canada has long since ceased to perform benign peacekeeping missions -- it battled combatants in the Balkans in the 1990s -- this is a major escalation. Over the next 12 months, in six-month rotations, our battle groups will be actively seeking out insurgents.

Because the cabinet has the right to deploy troops under the National Defence Act, any parliamentary vote can be only on a non-binding motion. There is virtually no possibility of a defeat anyway. Both the Liberals and the Conservatives strongly support deployment, and the New Democrats and the Bloc Québécois have backed the forces' presence in principle.

A debate would ensure that politicians take full responsibility for their decision to put troops in a combat zone. As it stands, it has been left to the Chief of the Defence Staff, General Rick Hillier, to defend the integrity of the mission in cross-Canada interviews. Since he took office in early February, Defence Minister Gordon O'Connor has given only one speech -- and that included only a brief section on Afghanistan. At the time, he declared: "Our success in that country depends on the support of Canadians, and the Conservative government is determined to openly explain the nature of our commitment in Afghanistan in Parliament."

The time to do it is now. The real way to support the troops is to debate how the nation can best buttress and affirm their presence. It is parliamentary silence that does the disservice.