

Do you realize we're at war?

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Mackenzie King gave Parliament nine days after Germany invaded Poland on Sept. 1, 1939, before asking it to declare war. Stephen Harper gave Parliament three days to decide on extending Canada's war-fighting mission in Afghanistan.

He should not have put a gun to Parliament's head in that way. There should have been hearings, and more debate and information, followed by a House of Commons vote before the summer.

A host of questions remains unanswered, including how, realistically, to define success, how the Afghan mission will affect Canada's ability to do anything else in the world, how much it will cost, how the military situation is really going, and how this “take it to the enemy” strategy, adapted from U.S. doctrine, will succeed, having thus far largely failed.

These are appropriate questions to be answered, and they were not. Pro-war ideologues, of course, don't care about the answers, since they view this mission as a test of Canada's resolve not to be wimpish in the fight against terror. Instinctive anti-Americans of the kind that dominate the NDP don't care, either.

A foreign policy based on realism instead of ideology and sloganeering of the kind that drove the United States into Iraq (with so many Canadian cheerleaders) would have required debate and answers. But the Harper government — and the pro-war Liberals of the (“empire lite”) Michael Ignatieff kind — didn't care about these questions and answers.

The Prime Minister wanted to divide the Liberals, which he did, and extend the mission quickly lest more casualties turn public opinion more sharply against the mission. Getting parliamentary approval now was also important because some of the next soldiers for Afghanistan will be coming from pacifist Quebec, where public opinion is predictably hostile to the mission.

Canada is at war in Afghanistan. It's a shooting war — 17 Canadians have already died there, most in combat. More will certainly die.

How Canada got into a shooting war in the most dangerous province of a barely functional, post-medieval state half-way around the world — and will now remain in that war for at least another 2½ years — testifies to opportunities missed (or taken, depending on your interpretation).

After 9/11, Canada signed on to remove the Taliban from power in Afghanistan. We didn't contribute much, but we contributed. It was the right decision, given the barbarity of the Taliban and the fact that they had harboured and encouraged Osama bin Laden and his ilk.

When the United States and NATO decided that stabilization forces (called Provincial Reconstruction Teams) were needed beyond Kabul, however, the Chrétien government began to dither. Jean Chrétien's instinct in things military was always to do the least possible short of complete embarrassment.

So, while Canada dithered, other countries signed up for PRT duty in less-troubled parts of Afghanistan than the southwest, especially Kandahar. Most of the “easy” parts were covered by the time a new chief of the defence staff, General Rick Hillier, persuaded the Martin government to go for Kandahar.

But going for Kandahar meant much more than a 300-person PRT team. It meant military engagement, in keeping with the general's feisty determination to beat the terrorists militarily and prove that the Canadian army could do more than just wear blue helmets. Military engagement was also necessary because Kandahar is so dangerous.

This more robust Canadian approach dovetailed perfectly with Washington's needs, which is perhaps the most important reason why Canada stayed in Afghanistan. Having skipped the Iraq invasion and, therefore, blotted the country's copybook with the Bush administration, the previous Liberal governments saw post-9/11 Afghanistan as a cheap surrogate for contributing in Iraq.

Things were going so badly for the Americans in Iraq that the Pentagon needed to withdraw troops from Afghanistan. The Americans implored NATO to take over missions there. Canada could score brownie points in Washington by taking on the dangerous Kandahar mission; to understand that point, take a look at the Canadian advertising at the Pentagon metro stop in Washington bragging about the Afghan contribution.

Paul Manson, retired head of the Canadian military, wrote this week that a successful exit from Afghanistan “could take five or even 10 years.” He said, correctly, that “the establishment of security and stability throughout Afghanistan won't happen quickly, even in the most optimistic view.”

The general then laid out intelligent, although excessively optimistic, criteria for defining success, few of which guided this week's parliamentary debate.

We're dealing with a country that isn't modern in any sense that Canadians would understand that term.

To Afghans in Kandahar, Canadians, Brits, Dutch and Americans all look the same. They come from far away, speak unintelligible languages, practise religions other than Islam, drive around in armoured vehicles and enjoy luxuries Afghans cannot imagine.

Canada is now at war for an extended period of time, courtesy of a hurried parliamentary debate, pushed for domestic political reasons, that left a myriad of questions unanswered and, therefore, a population unprepared for what lies ahead.

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