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Canada's Role in Afghanistan: What Would Iggy Do on Afghanistan? What would the Liberals do?

by Thomas Walkom

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The opposition Liberals want Prime Minister Stephen Harper to clarify what he plans for Afghanistan. But he is clear. He says he's bringing Canada's troops home.

The real puzzle is: What would the Liberals do?

This is not an academic question. By the time Canada's scheduled troop withdrawal begins next July, we may well have had another election. Should Michael Ignatieff's Liberals win, it will be up to them to decide how to proceed.

Yet, what exactly do the Liberals have planned for Afghanistan after 2011? We don't know.

We do know, however, what Harper says he'll do.

"Canada's military mission in Afghanistan will end in 2011," he told the Commons Tuesday. "We will continue ... with a mission on governance, on development and on humanitarian assistance."

Or, as Foreign Affairs Minister Lawrence Cannon put it: “After 2011, we’re out.”

Note that the Prime Minister has gone well beyond the resolution passed by the Commons in 2008. That specified only that Canadian troops would be removed from Afghanistan’s Kandahar province by the end of 2011 — which left open the possibility that they might be deployed elsewhere in the country.

The Prime Minister now says the entire Afghan military mission will be terminated.

If he’s sincere, that means Canadian troops won’t be staying on as trainers or advisors — which, to a large extent, is what they are doing now. Nor will they provide security for reconstruction.

It is possible that Harper isn’t sincere. Politicians can be economical with the truth.

Still, the Prime Minister — once an ardent cheerleader for the war — has been remarkably consistent over the past year.

He has said he believes the war is unwinnable. He has said that after 10 years of fighting, Canada will have done its bit. He has said he is firmly committed to the 2011 timetable.

He has said all of this at home and on American television. Earlier this week, he reportedly said it straight to U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, after she publicly pressed Ottawa to change its mind.

As Defence Minister Peter MacKay has signalled, the Conservative government has not ruled out helping America fight its wars somewhere else in the world.

Indeed, it remains committed to building a strong Canadian military that can do just that.

But — unless Harper is lying — he’s finished militarily with Afghanistan. He has read the polls and knows that most Canadians want the troops to come home.

He’ll send aid workers and governance experts to Afghanistan. But another country will have to provide the soldiers that protect them.

The Liberals on the other hand, remain vague. It was their government that initiated the troop commitment to Afghanistan. But since Canadian casualties began to mount in 2006, they’ve been deeply divided over the war.

In an embarrassing Commons vote that year, the Liberal caucus itself split on whether to support Harper’s move to extend the Afghan mission. The Conservative motion passed only because it was supported by Ignatieff and 23 other Liberal MPs

Another Commons motion two years later managed to paper over the divisions within the Liberal party.

In that vote, and over the objections of the New Democrats and Bloc Quebecois, Liberals and Conservatives joined forces to extend the mission yet again — with the proviso that all Canadian troops be pulled from Kandahar by the end of 2011.

So what do the Liberals think now?

Like Harper, Ignatieff is by instinct a hawk. As an academic, he approved of America's 2001 invasion of Afghanistan, calling it a form of justified imperialism.

As a candidate for the Liberal leadership in 2006, he supported Canadian involvement in the war, noting that: "We should be willing to do things that are tough and difficult once in a while."

A vigorous supporter of the idea that Canada needs to regain its place in the world, he has argued — like Harper — that this country must be willing to take part in not just peacekeeping but full-scale foreign wars.

"Canadians want a foreign policy that involves projection of moral influence," he told the National Post in 2002. "But without combat-capable, lethal-power projection, we are just beating our gums."

In this Ignatieff represents a strain of liberal hawkishness that says the country must be willing to wage war if it hopes to be taken seriously by big powers like the U.S.

It's a point of view found particularly among foreign policy elites who know they'll never have to do the fighting.

And it crosses party lines. This week, Conservative Senator Hugh Segal, another liberal hawk, called the decision to withdraw troops from Afghanistan an "avoidance of international responsibility." Expect more such talk from those unnerved by Washington's decision to signal its displeasure.

Liberal foreign affairs critic Bob Rae argues that Clinton's undiplomatic remarks are evidence that Harper has not been clear enough about his post-2011 plans in Afghanistan.

The reality is quite the reverse. We know what the Conservatives say they'd do. We have virtually no idea what the Liberals intend.