

Liberal Times

The Official Newsletter of the Nepean-Carleton Federal Liberal Association

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Conservative Party Flip-Flops on Afghan Detainees

May 2007 – Special Update!

TORTURE OR NO TORTURE?

This Conservative government's changing stories and shifting positions on this most crucial international human rights issue have left Canadians frustrated, confused, and demanding answers from their leaders. With unclear messages emanating from the government and no answers or visibility from local MP Pierre Poilievre, the performance of these Tories has been a colossal disappointment.

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Wednesday, April 25 – Backed by confirmation of the plan by the PMO, Defense Minister Gordon O'Connor reveals that Canada had, "within the last few days," struck a new "arrangement" with local authorities in Kandahar province "so that we can enter the detention facilities any time we want." This is after that day's question period, when 23 questions about the prisoner issue had been asked, over the course of which the government gave no hint of a new agreement.

Flop

Thursday, April 26 – Prime Minister Stephen Harper admits that such an agreement to provide access to prisoners is still in the works; nothing is final as of yet. Public Safety Minister Stockwell Day later contradicts the PM in saying that Corrections Canada

officials have visited Afghan prisons as often as 15 times, and he is subsequently contradicted by the Afghan ambassador to Canada, who said that prior to this new agreement, Canadians did not have the right to visit detainees in Afghan jails. On Thursday, May 3, the elusive agreement is finally announced.

We hope the new arrangement will be better than what exists now, in which an understaffed Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission (one person with two assistants, and the responsibility of covering all prisons, military and otherwise, in the south) acts as this country's eyes and ears.

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The office of the Minister of National Defense issues a statement alleging that a new detainee arrangement exists and that Canadian military officials would perform the inspections to ensure Afghan detainees are not subjected to torture.

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After a rebuke by Chief of the Defense Staff, General Rick Hillier, who said that this was not a job for soldiers, the government changed its story to say that "Canadian government officials" will perform the inspections.

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A *Globe and Mail* investigation, based on 30 face-to-face interviews

with men recently captured in Kandahar province, uncovered a range of horrific stories and a clear pattern of abuse by Afghan authorities who work closely with Canadian troops. Names were published and the men were originally detained by Canadian forces. The *Globe* reported that Afghan prisoners, after being handed over to local authorities, are routinely beaten, whipped, starved, frozen, choked and interrogated by electric shock in Kandahar jails. Canadians are horrified that this government has allowed such evil atrocities to occur. The Prime Minister insists, on Monday, April 23, that the government is "taking this matter seriously."

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The government changes tune and denies that detainees face torture, despite a report by Canadian embassy officials in Kabul that says such abuse is rife in Afghan prisons and reports from Correctional Service Canada to Stockwell Day highlighting torture cases in Afghan jails. Afterward, on Sunday, April 29, Tory House Minister Peter Van Loan stubbornly maintains that the government has not seen any specific allegations of torture.

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For nearly a year, Conservative Defense Minister Gordon O'Connor repeatedly asserts that the International Committee of the Red Cross would report back to

Canada if transferred Afghan security forces abused detainees.

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The Red Cross exposes the Conservative lie: they deny that they have, or have ever had, any such role in monitoring detainees. The Minister of National Defense is forced to apologize to the House of Commons for providing false information and misleading the Canadian people.

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On March 22, the Conservative government denies the existence of a Foreign Affairs report on the treatment of detainees in Afghanistan, saying in writing, "No such report on human-rights performance in other countries exists."

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The Foreign Affairs report, written by officials of minister Peter MacKay and titled Afghanistan-2006; Good Governance, Democratic Development and Human Rights, is released to the public soon thereafter, albeit heavily censored by the Conservatives.

Oops! The *Globe and Mail* had already obtained an uncensored copy of the report! It makes repeated dark references to the reputation and performance of Afghanistan's National Directorate of Security (NDS), or intelligence police. Most prisoners captured by Canadian troops are now turned over to the widely feared NDS, which is considered tougher but perhaps less corrupt than the Afghan National Police.

"Allegations of torture and arbitrary detention by NDS officials have also been reported," the full text of the report says. According to the *Globe*, "[The report] seems to remove any last vestige of doubt that the senior officials and ministers knew that

torture and abuse were rife in Afghan jails."

Even worse, in March, when the U.S. State Department issued its annual report, it made clear that Afghan prisons, where Canada consigns detainees captured by its troops, were rife with torture, abuse and corruption.

Canada is a signatory to the Geneva Conventions, meaning the Conservatives must ensure prisoners that Canadian soldiers capture and transfer to the Afghan police are treated humanely, not abused or tortured. This government has absolutely failed in this role and proven itself to have absolutely no moral fibre.

WE SUPPORT THE TROOPS!

Our brave soldiers are innocent – they full respect the Geneva Conventions and, indeed, are in Afghanistan to uphold and defend human rights. In fact, detainees have commented on the humane treatment by Canadian troops; it's what happens after the prisoners are transferred to the Afghan authorities that is troublesome.

This Conservative government has broken Canada's commitment to the Geneva Conventions. Rather than answer for their incompetence, they instead accuse the opposition of attacking our noble troops, even though no one has accused our soldiers of crimes such as these. Tory foolishness and neglect of our military has left our troops open to criticism, and for this the government should be ashamed of itself.

Even General Hillier has said the soldiers are upset that this matter has siphoned attention away from the purpose of the mission: to rebuild Afghanistan's prosperity and peace. The Tory half-truths, flip-flops and blatant falsehoods are hindering this mission.

Evidently, Pierre Poilievre and the Conservative government would rather let our soldiers take the blame for Conservative complicity in the face of torture. Canadians will not fall for their theatrics – the Conservative government, not our soldiers, is to blame for Canada's violation of its own rules.

On Thursday, April 26, the *Globe and Mail* reported that "A quiet celebration was underway Thursday night in Kandahar among human rights officials, politicians, and relatives of prisoners who say they're hoping that an onslaught of Canadian scrutiny will force permanent changes to the way detainees are monitored." Thanks to the hard work of the Liberal Party of Canada, and Canada's commitment to human rights, the Conservative Party tolerance of torture has been exposed and Canadians have learned a dark secret about this extreme right-wing Republican-style government of Stephen Harper.

"Everybody is trying to understand the new story of the government," Liberal leader Stéphane Dion said.

It's beyond comprehension that Nepean-Carleton MP Pierre Poilievre could not find it in his heart to stand up for human rights and apologize to Nepean-Carleton residents for his government's role in allowing torture to occur. This is a matter of basic human decency – why is our MP missing in action yet again? What happened to "fighting for you"?

We call on our Member of Parliament to stand up for this riding. There's a first time for everything, Pierre!

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Questions/ Comments? Please feel free to contact Mark Johnson, Editor, at mark.brian.johnson@gmail.com. He welcomes all feedback!