To rescue the Afghan mission, honesty is the best policy

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The recent revelation that the federal government concealed a decision to halt the transfer of prisoners to the Afghan government amid suspicions of abuse reflects the lack of transparency that has characterized the Conservatives' handling of the Afghan mission. This disclosure followed close on the heels of John Manley's report, which criticized the Harper government's communications strategy on the mission and called for it to 'engage Canadians in a continuous, frank and constructive dialogue about conditions in Afghanistan and the extent to which Canadian objectives are being achieved.'

The government often cites 'operational security' to justify withholding information about some of the more controversial aspects of the Afghan mission. Another tactic used by the government to play down news of setbacks and to counter questions on the mission's daunting challenges is to list the successes that have been achieved. The same achievements have been touted for almost three years now: the return of six million children to school, the repatriation of more than five million refugees, successful presidential and parliamentary elections. These are monumental achievements, but should not be used to stifle debate or conceal the severity of the growing security crisis.

It is not uncommon for states at war to attempt to control the flow of information reaching the domestic population. Concealing the complexities of the Afghan war from the Canadian public is seen by some as a legitimate strategy to secure public support. But while controlling the message received by the public might have been possible during the First World War, when even letters written home were vetted by censors, this is much more difficult in this information age.

In fact, efforts to control the message can have the opposite effect, creating public suspicion of the mission. The disparity between the government's depiction of the situation in Afghanistan and the information Canadians find elsewhere, such as images of ramp ceremonies for fallen soldiers and battlefield accounts by embedded journalists, have undermined the compelling arguments in favour of our continued involvement.

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Ours is not the only government to attempt to gloss over the growing crisis in Afghanistan. Rather than admitting that the insurgency has built momentum, Washington and Kabul insist on citing every major new attack or shift in strategy as evidence of Taliban desperation.

I witnessed this spin firsthand in October, when I participated in a panel discussion at the British Parliament. I was shocked when one of my fellow panelists, an official from NATO headquarters in Brussels, stated that there was no definitive evidence that the Afghan security situation was deteriorating or that the Taliban were gaining strength. After the event, he privately admitted that the statement was wrong. Such wilful manipulation of the facts undercuts public confidence in the mission and impedes the sense of urgency that can lead to innovative solutions.

In truth, the seriousness of the Afghan situation is no longer in doubt. In the last week of January, a report from the Atlantic Council of the United States, led by retired Marine Corps general James Jones, warned that "urgent changes are required now to prevent Afghanistan from becoming a failing or failed state." The same week, an open letter by Oxford to British Prime Minister Gordon Brown warned of a "humanitarian catastrophe" unless Western countries undertake "a major change of direction." The International Crisis Group's latest report states that Afghanistan is not lost, "but the signs are not good."

While the government has been guilty of spinning the mission to the public, the positions of the opposition parties are similarly at odds with reality. Liberal Leader Stéphane Dion insists that Canada end the combat mission in February, 2009, and assume a humanitarian and reconstruction role that focuses on the training of Afghan security forces. This position ignores the fact that without a NATO partner to take Canada's place in Kandahar, the security situation will not be conducive to humanitarian work. The NDP's demand for an immediate withdrawal of all Canadian troops in favour of focusing on the provision of development assistance also ignores the fundamental tenet that you can't do development without security. The fact that much of the country's south is currently off-limits to aid agencies and Afghan government institutions reflects this.

To secure public support for the Afghan mission, this government must adopt a different approach. It must be frank with Canadians about Afghanistan. It must tell them that it is a long-term mission, that things may get worse before they get better, that it will cost significant amounts of money, that more soldiers may die. It must also tell them that the mission is in Canada's interest. It must convey the high stakes involved.

If the Afghan state collapses, it could destabilize the region and the entire world by providing a haven for terrorists and criminal organizations who export extremism and narcotics. It could undermine Canada's reputation and harm the integrity of NATO, a multilateral body of which we are a founding member, and which is vital to both our diplomatic clout and collective security.

Finally, it would cause a humanitarian crisis for a people already among the most impoverished and vulnerable in the world. As a rich nation, Canada has a responsibility to protect them.

As Mr. Manley has argued, the reality is that Canada cannot win the war alone — but it could lose it. If we withdraw now, it could trigger a domino effect of troop
withdrawals among other NATO contributors. That is how much Canada matters to the mission, to NATO and to Afghanistan. Only by levelling with Canadians can the government secure their support, guarantee that our voice continues to matter and ensure that Afghanistan will not once again descend into chaos.

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