

# Troops must remain in Afghanistan

Afghanistan under the Taliban was a country under siege from within. Schools and religious institutions were destroyed, women and girls were denied even the most basic human rights such as schooling and terrorist organizations received safe harbour and training. These facts are not in dispute, but what has been questioned lately is why Canadian Forces personnel are in Afghanistan and what it is we are hoping to achieve.

Let me be clear, Canada is in Afghanistan at the invitation of the Afghan government to help Afghanistan rebuild, to fulfill our obligations to NATO and the UN and to protect our national interests.

Freedom, democracy, the respect for human rights and the rule of law are fundamental to the Canadian way of life. Canada has always stood by our allies when freedom was threatened. As a founding member of NATO, we take seriously our commitment to NATO that an attack on any member nation is an attack on all member nations.

While it can be argued that the war in Iraq shifted some of the focus off Afghanistan and this has allowed the Taliban to regain a presence in some regions, this does not detract from the simple fact that our current mission is entirely in line with Canadian tradition. From the beaches of Normandy to the Korean War, Cyprus to the Golan Heights, Canadians have willingly put themselves in harm's way. The dangers to our military personnel are very real and should never be underestimated. But now more than ever, it is critical that our troops and those of our NATO allies continue their mission—the future of Afghanistan depends on it.

If we are to achieve any measure of success in the region then we must continue to help the Afghan people rebuild their country so that it can stand on its own as a stable, prosperous and independent country. To this end, our government has committed \$1 billion over 10 years in development assistance. The benefits of our assistance are already beginning to show as proven by the 12 million people who registered to vote in the first series of democratic elections ever held in

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that country and by the nearly five million children who are now attending school. There is a real and palpable sense of hope in Afghanistan that did not exist even just five years ago.

Just as Rome wasn't built in a day, neither will Afghanistan be rebuilt on a prescribed timeline. Nation-building takes time and will require our sustained support. To withdraw prematurely would jeopardize the very future our young men and women have put their lives on the line to protect. It would most certainly cast doubt on any future international mission that we might engage in. That is not who we are as a nation.

With the events of September 11, 2001 seared in our collective memory, we know first-hand the terrible toll and devastation that acts of terrorism can bring. It is in our own interest that Afghanistan becomes a secure democratic state that never again serves as haven for terrorists. I recently read an e-mail from a young Canadian soldier serving on his second tour of duty and in it he wrote, "I want you to convey to anyone you can that I truly believe, I KNOW that what we are doing here is the right thing. We just cannot turn our backs on these people— not after what they have been through. It is frustrating to see so much more than the people in Canada and then have questions asked about what we are doing." His words cut straight to the heart of the matter.

You can contact me with questions or concerns at 1-866-878-5556 or chongm@parl.gc.ca  
—Michael Chong is the MP for Wellington-Halton Hills



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