

Harper Hid the Cost of Afghan War

Friday, 10 October 2008

As you may have seen from reports in yesterday and today's morning newspapers, the cost of the war in Afghanistan will reach \$18 billion by the end of 2011, according to a new report released by the Parliamentary Budget Office.

The report, by Parliamentary Budget Officer Kevin Page, does not even include the salaries of the 2500 soldiers in Afghanistan, and is still much higher than the \$8 billion estimated cost provided by the Conservative government, which even included salaries.

I attended the report's press conference yesterday in Ottawa, and during the announcement of the investigation, Page noted that this study is incomplete because he did not receive full co-operation from government departments, including the military. Even worse, those departments may not realize how much they are spending on the war because of sloppy accounting.

This the first public costing of the war completed by a government office or department. The study was produced at the request of NDP MP for Ottawa-Centre Paul Dewar.

Earlier this week, David Macdonald and I released our own costing of the war in Afghanistan called *The Cost of the War and the End of Peacekeeping: The Impact of Extending the Afghanistan Mission*.

Based on our calculations, the cost of the war to the government coffers, including the salaries of the troops, will be \$21 billion. Add to that the financial loss felt by families and communities from so many young men and women injured or killed, and the impact reaches \$28 billion.

I was astounded to see that the Budget Office's findings, when adjusted to use comparable methodologies, are actually much higher than our own results. Therefore the real cost is higher than anyone imagines.

Our report went a step further to look at our military's contribution to peacekeeping, and we learned that it has dropped by more than 80 per cent since the beginning of the Afghanistan war. This year the military will spend a paltry \$15 million for the entire year on UN peacekeeping, the equivalent of what we spend on the war in just

two or three days. We contribute only 63 soldiers for UN peacekeeping operations - they could all fit into a school bus!

Yesterday we were busy discussing the cost of the war to Canadians through the national news media, in both Quebec and the rest of Canada. Here you can watch interviews on CTV Newsnet, CBC Radio and CBC TV and GlobalTV, and Business News Network. We also received coverage in The Globe and Mail, the Toronto Star and elsewhere.

Our message was this:

- The \$18 billion estimate for the cost of the Afghanistan war provided by the Parliamentary Budget Office is very large – the largest anyone has seen. It is welcome information and should serve as a basis for further reporting.

- The number is likely too low, because the office did not receive full co-operation from the departments involved, including the military. The Prime Minister should have instructed departments to co-operate fully.

- It is appalling that Conservative and Liberal MPs voted to extend the war by three years, to December 2011, without even knowing that they were approving the expenditure of an additional \$7 billion over the \$11 billion already spent.

- With financial storm clouds gathering on the horizon and no large budget surpluses to rely upon, will the government cut social programs to fund the war and avoid tax increases or a deficit?

I would like to hear from you. Do you think the Afghanistan war has been worth the cost? Please leave your comments to this post.

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