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An Independent Special Panel Was Established by Prime Minister Harper on Friday to Review Canada's Mission and Future in Afghanistan

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An independent special panel was established by Prime Minister Harper on Friday to review Canada's mission and future in Afghanistan. The discussion group will report directly to the Prime Minister by the end of January 2008. Some important questions should be asked about the panel's mandate and purpose. First, we are entering a federal election period—the writ may come down early next week. The panel's establishment could be interpreted as a crass political attempt to deflect media and public criticism during an election campaign. When the Minister of National Defence, Peter Mackay inevitably faces a barrage of tough criticisms from the public and the media about the government's record in Afghanistan, will he be able to simply shrug his shoulders and say the government has set up a review panel. In other words, is this panel a crass political attempt to deflect criticism?

Second, what is the panel's mandate? If its budget is small, then the inquiry is presumably meant to be kept 'on a short leash'. Apart from a visit to Afghanistan, the panel's budget should give us a good idea about it is planned to hold hearings across the country. The panel should travel across Canada to listen to the views of ordinary Canadians of every political stripe, not merely consult among its five members. One member, former U.S. Ambassador Derek Burney, has been a longtime defender of Canada's commitments to NATO and pro-American on all types of issues ranging from NAFTA to NORAD. He traditionally favours the status quo so the question is whether he will be open to alternative views? Will the panel travel across Canada and hear from peace groups, NDPers, and Green party representatives? The panel should consult with a broad umbrella of interest groups in order to gauge Canadian opinions on the country's involvement in Afghanistan. After all, 71 soldiers and 1 diplomat have already died and more deaths and injuries are to be expected.

Questions should also be asked about whether an appointed five-person panel is the appropriate instrument of foreign policy. Different Canadian governments have traditionally used a wide range of policy-making instruments to forge foreign policy. The government could have established a parliamentary commission, which obviously would have been very expensive and time-consuming, taking months if not years to report back (remember the Somalia commission!). A joint committee of the House of Parliament and the Senate might have been preferable because politicians from all parties and every constituency in Canada could have been involved. There are many experienced M.P.s and some non-partisan senators—with free time on their hands—who might contribute to a broader parliamentary discussion about Canada's future role in Afghanistan.

Finally, there is simply insufficient time to properly answer the Prime Minister's very substantive questions. Harper is asking the panel to consider four options in their 4-month study. First, whether the Canadian Forces should continue training the Afghan army and police with the goal of creating a self-sufficient security force is one question that bears long scrutiny. As the co-author of a proposal to establish a peacekeeping training centre at the former Canadian Forces Base Cornwallis in Nova Scotia—now the Lester B. Pearson Peacekeeping Training Centre—I think Harper's first question would take experienced military and policy months in the field to answer properly. The other three questions—such as whether the government should withdraw Canadian forces altogether

after February 2009--are also difficult issues that need long discussion and input from a wide range of officials to consider properly. When I was at NATO headquarters in April interviewing high-level policy-makers, the corridors were buzzing with hundreds of diplomats and officers dealing with Afghanistan. Afghanistan is now NATO's primary mission, almost its *raison d'être*. It seems impossible to believe that a five-member panel could adequately answer Harper's difficult questions by the end of January, which will no doubt lead pundits to ask whether the panel's establishment is for domestic purposes leading up to an election period only.

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