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Mr. Pierre Lemieux

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● (1905)

[*English*]

The Chair (Mr. Pierre Lemieux (Glengarry—Prescott—Russell, CPC)): First of all, colleagues, let me welcome you and those Canadians watching this meeting on television to the fifth meeting of the Special Committee on the Canadian Mission in Afghanistan. Tonight we're honoured to have Dr. Graham Fuller with us.

Dr. Fuller is an independent writer, analyst, lecturer, and consultant on Muslim and world affairs. Dr. Fuller worked for 20 years as a CIA operations officer, 17 of them overseas, mostly in the Middle East, including time as a CIA station chief in Afghanistan from 1975 to 1978.

Once again, thank you very much for being with us, Dr. Fuller. I will now turn the microphone over to you for your opening statement.

Professor Graham E. Fuller (Simon Fraser University): Thank you very much, sir.

I noticed the unfailing courtesy of everyone insisting that I am Dr. Fuller. Actually, it's Mr. Fuller, but if you insist, I will accept in other senses.

It's an immense pleasure for me to be here to talk to this group on what is a matter very close to my heart. I know it is of immense importance to Canada at this point in the development of its foreign policy.

First of all, I would like to very strongly commend the courage, devotion, and self-sacrifice of Canadian men and women in Afghanistan who are working hard, spending treasure, and, of more importance, giving lives in Afghanistan for this cause to work.

There is no question in my mind that the goals in Afghanistan are extremely worthy: to weaken radicalism; to improve the position of women, human rights, education—again especially for women—and the rule of law; to root out corruption; and to establish democracy and justice. I think these are unexceptional goals that everyone could aspire to. The problem is, in my view, that these goals are not being implemented in Afghanistan in any significant way. In my view, the situation is actually worsening.

I defer to you and to others who perhaps have been there very recently in terms of the most recent statistics and figures you have. I know there are many figures quoted by many different sources in support of their particular position, and I don't want to be here in a game of my statistics trying to outweigh yours. I'm simply presenting what I consider to be my view of the overall situation.

I think the situation is worsening, in that the number of attacks in general is growing across the country each year. More foreign fighters are becoming involved. The IEDs, or improvised explosive devices, which were devices really quite unknown in Afghanistan some years ago, are now being widely used as a result of the experience that fighters have had in Iraq.

It's similar for suicide bombings. For all the years of fighting in Afghanistan against foreigners, suicide bombing was unknown until just a few years ago. In Afghanistan today it's commonplace.

Unfortunately, the area of conflict is spreading outside of the worst of the areas, namely the Pashtun-dominated south, and it is moving into areas that are not known for Pashtun control. Sadly, Kabul is not in control of the country itself. Karzai is—rather cruelly sometimes—referred to as the President of Kabul rather than of Afghanistan.

The issues relating to poppy growth are very serious. Afghanistan probably supplies the bulk of poppies that are consumed by the west in one form or another. When I was chief of station in Afghanistan in the seventies, I can remember being briefed by people who told me they had been fighting poppies starting thirty years before that point. I used to go out with my children and wife in the summertime, counting poppies just in the vicinity of Kabul, to see if there had been any change despite all the efforts of the American and other embassies in the area to try to diminish this problem. So I don't see that there is any major change in that. And worse today is the insistence of some policies to destroy the poppy fields. That is destroying the livelihood of Afghan farmers and turning them in the direction of the Taliban.

In short, I just do not believe that the goals that have been established by Washington, NATO, or the participants in those operations are being achieved, and they are not really going to be achieved in any medium timeframe. Perhaps over a generation one might possibly have some hope of fulfilling some of these goals.

When I speak in such negative terms, I have to point out that I'm not alone in this. Certainly most of my colleagues in the intelligence business, or indeed in the State Department but now no longer involved in this, broadly share these views, as have many external independent assessments of the situation.

Let me just offer a few quick thoughts about the nature of the problem. I know many of you know a lot of the facts, but I'd like to just put them in a framework.

The power of the Taliban overall seems to me to be growing, but what is vital to understand about the Taliban is that this is not essentially an ideological movement. Rather, it's a national or nationalist movement of the Pashtun population, which is the biggest single ethnic group in the country, perhaps making up half of the population. If you were a Pashtun, you'd see the Taliban as the major vehicle for the fulfillment of Pashtun power in Afghanistan. Pashtuns perceive that they have lost that since the fall of the Taliban government and going on to earlier periods. Even if most Pashtuns do not love the Taliban, or even if they do not fully sympathize with many of their extreme interpretations of Islam, they often offer them support in the name of restoration of Pashtun power in the country.

If any of you have read the fascinating history of the area, I don't need to remind you that invaders of the country over hundreds and hundreds of years have never done very well in this country. I do not see any reason why today's forces, which are perceived as occupation forces by many, should expect feelings to be broadly different.

Unfortunately, although I think Hamid Karzai is a very honourable man, a very decent and likeable individual, he has not been terribly competent. Worse, he is perceived as an instrument of the United States and something of an Uncle Tom by most Pashtuns. Even though Karzai himself is Pashtun, he is seen as an effort to placate Pashtun feelings, but not as fully representative of them. New coalitions are therefore rising in the country that are either pro-Taliban, ex-communists, warlords, or others who oppose Karzai's power.

Another quick reality about the country that it is imperative to understand is that if the Pashtuns are the biggest single ethnic group in Afghanistan, there are twice as many Pashtuns in Pakistan. The whole border with Afghanistan is populated by Pashtuns on the other side who are integrally linked linguistically, culturally, tribally, in clan terms, and in other perspectives; so to speak of a border there is highly artificial. It's a porous border. People come and go across it mostly outside of any legal framework. So the Pashtuns in Pakistan will be deeply involved in Pashtun politics in Afghanistan whether we like it or not.

This affects Pakistan's position viscerally. Pakistan is a very insecure country in many respects, living next door to this colossus of India. Therefore, Pakistan cannot afford to have another enemy or threat on its western borders. Therefore, I would argue that any Pakistani government and any security officials or military officials in Pakistan will be determined to maintain control and voice over Pashtun politics in Afghanistan, and indeed would like to have some major degree of control over what Kabul's policies are. I do not think this is going to change. It has nothing to do with Islam or ideology; it has to do with Pakistani geopolitical interests and fears in the region.

● (1910)

Let me jump on now, because my time is very limited and I look forward to an exchange with you all here.

I wish I could say Canada was appreciated in Afghanistan and the region as a totally independent power with a long and distinguished culture of peacekeeping and working within the context of the UN. Sadly, most Afghans see the Canadian participation as essentially part of an American project. I fear that this association with that American project is a very fatal one, because it is a source of anguish and anger to most Muslims, not just in Afghanistan or Pakistan but across most of the Middle East today. Unfortunately, although we might see it as an international umbrella for Canadian participation, NATO also is essentially seen as an instrument of western power.

Today, Muslims across the Middle East perceive the American war against terrorism and its allies as a war against Islam. Whatever the facts are, this is the perception. They perceive Muslims as being killed in the many tens of thousands across the area, especially by U. S. forces. They are fearful and distrustful of American—and indeed even NATO—goals there. I wish that were not the case, and I wish that Canada could be there in its own right and appreciated in its own right as an independent force with a distinguished history.

Let me just suggest a couple of things that I think are vital. I do not wish to argue on Pakistan with many experts within the Canadian government. I understand that your distinguished ambassador to Afghanistan is coming this evening, and I don't wish to cross swords with him in any respect. But I'd like to say that if the likelihood of failure by NATO and others in the next few years is likely, as I wish were not the case, then we need to think about exit strategies. That's Colin Powell's old maxim for American involvement: exit strategies.

I believe there will be no lasting solution until the Pashtuns are brought fully into the system, and that will have to mean forms and elements of the Taliban itself, however distasteful this may be. It is not realistic to think of transforming Afghanistan into a democratic, cohesive, united, peace-loving, clean country in any near term.

Furthermore, apart from involving the Pashtuns heavily, which means Pashtun power, even if the most radical of the Taliban are excluded, there are regional powers that have immense interests in the area, and these are very important for future settlement. These powers are Iran, which has huge influence over western Afghanistan; Pakistan, which I've already talked about; but also Russia, which, as you know, is still licking its wounds from its involvement, with many sad parallels to the NATO participation today. Russia, China, and India—all of these countries have deep, permanent interests in ways that even the United States does not have them. The United States has not lived next door to Afghanistan, and once the fear of al-Qaeda is eliminated, most in the region feel the U.S. will lose interest and that NATO will lose interest.

● (1915)

There must be ways to engage these countries even if Washington does not want to talk to or deal with Iran and does not wish to bring China or Russia more closely into the picture. Indeed, I would have to say that although Americans on the ground are very realistic, the leadership in Washington still perceives Afghanistan as a future base for American power projection across Asia, to block China and to block Russia. Therefore, I feel this goal in itself, even though unspoken, is a reality and creates a reaction from China and Russia, whose assistance, without mentioning Iran, is vital.

Therefore, in conclusion, I would say that I think Canada will have a distinguished future role in the world as a peacekeeping force and as an independent country. However, to be associated with the seriously flawed and dangerously failed policies of the United States government under the present administration is to simply make nearly impossible the Canadian mission there. I wish that were not the case, but having long been associated with American foreign policy, it pains me to say that this is the reality.

So, hopefully, as the world grows more multi-polar now, even against Washington's wishes, I think Canada will find increasing room to work among emerging great powers of the world rather than having a simple, “Are you for America or against America?” I think the world is a bigger place than being pro-American or anti-American. There should be room for countries like Canada to work broadly amongst a great range of powers.

Thank you very much.

● (1920)

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Fuller.

Each of the parties will now have seven minutes to enter into dialogue, to ask questions, and for you to answer. I'll start with the Liberal Party, and the Honourable Bob Rae.

Hon. Bob Rae (Toronto Centre, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Fuller. It's great to have you with us. I'm sorry you're not going to cross swords with Mr. Lalani, because I think it would be helpful for us to hear such a discussion. I'm serious. I don't think we should be shy about having a healthy debate.

Mr. Fuller, we do have to develop an exit strategy, at least militarily as a country, because we've only committed our troops until 2011. Nothing that you've said shocks me, but if you had to restructure the mission leading up to 2011 and if you had to restructure the mission after 2011, how would you do it?

Prof. Graham E. Fuller: That, of course, is the $64,000 question, and I wish I could give you an easy response to that.

It's not just a tactical question, it's a question of gradually attempting to engage regional powers in this process, as I said earlier. One of the future scenarios for Afghanistan—just one of them—would be an Afghanistan dominated by Pakistan. I'm not proposing or supporting this, but I think it is one logical possibility for the future.

As the west grows tired of this nearly impossible task, Pakistan itself will seek to strengthen its voice there in ways that will empower the Taliban but which will lead to the crushing of al-Qaeda and international jihadi forces. To me, that's what this is all about in the end. If there's one critically vital task, it's eliminating these international jihadi forces, and especially al-Qaeda. I think Pakistan —and the Taliban themselves, by the way—is quite capable of doing this once the Pakistanis feel their local goals have been taken care of.

Hon. Bob Rae: Let me just take you up on that. Let's go back to the recent origin of the conflict. I'm not going back too far over time, but to the attack on the twin towers. The fact is that al-Qaeda was clearly sustained by the Taliban—not just tolerated by them, but sustained by them. What evidence would you have that suggests that the Taliban would now be ready to turn on al-Qaeda and turn on other jihadi forces that are now located in Afghanistan, as well as in northwestern Pakistan?

Prof. Graham E. Fuller: That's a very good question.

First of all, there is no Taliban as such. This is a very broad spectrum of people. Most Taliban are interested in Islam as it relates to Afghanistan, society in Afghanistan, and defence of traditional Afghan values, whatever we may think of them. I would argue that if they think that some minimal attention is being given to these goals and that western military forces are out of there, we would find large numbers of Taliban who are quite ready to simply operate within their own country rather than join some kind of international jihad.

Yes, it did happen—you're absolutely right—with al-Qaeda before, but I think this is an exception to the rule. Afghans have not been, by and large, joining al-Qaeda around the world or fighting elsewhere. So I think it is not entirely a dream to think that the Taliban can be split, as long as they feel that western armies and occupying forces, in their view, have left the country.

● (1925)

Hon. Bob Rae: I'm going to give my last question to Mr. Ignatieff, Mr. Chairman, because we're such good friends.

Mr. Michael Ignatieff (Etobicoke—Lakeshore, Lib.): We're such good friends—all true. It's a truly amazing spectacle.

Thank you, Mr. Fuller.

Let me get to the question, sir. If the Taliban are a nationalist movement—and those are your words—and not primarily terrorist, although they did harbour terrorists, and if they are serving Pashtun nationalism, which is transborder, is one implication of what you're saying that any attempt to create a national state out of Kabul with Pashtun support is destined to fail?

As I understand the Canadian strategy in Afghanistan, it is to create a national government in Kabul with the support of the Pashtuns. You appear to be saying this is a delusionary dream—that is, that Pashtun nationalism will always resist the creation of a central state—and that therefore Canada is supporting a political goal that can't be achieved.

Is that the sense of your testimony?

Prof. Graham E. Fuller: No, sir, absolutely it is not. I'm concerned, if I left that impression with anybody.

The Pashtun have dominated Afghanistan for some 300 years in a multi-ethnic society, and it has worked fairly well. At this point, the Pashtuns feel that with the overthrow of the Taliban, which was essentially a Pashtun government, they have lost everything in Afghanistan.

Therefore, no, I'm not saying they would resist a united country dominated by Kabul; the question is whether the Pashtuns will have the major voice within Kabul itself. No, I do not think they would in any way resist a united Afghanistan; they would prefer that. But they simply want to be part of that project.

Yes, it's nationalist, but it's also very religious, and to them there's virtually no difference. If you're Pashtun, you support this kind of religious, rather primitive, mountain type of religion—mountain Islam. If you're religious, that's what you support. It's very hard to distinguish between an ethnic movement and the kind of fundamentalist religious ideals that the Taliban have.

By the way, they're not alone in this. Other elements in Afghanistan also share some of those religious, social values.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

[*Translation*]

Now, it is Mrs. Barbot's turn, for the Bloc Québécois.

Mrs. Vivian Barbot (Papineau, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I am going to share my time with Mr. Bachand. I will ask my question and then Mr. Bachand will ask his.

Thank you for coming here, Mr. Fuller. You paint quite a dark picture of the situation in Afghanistan, particularly about Canada's contribution.

Accepting the fact that you are saying that, in general, things are not going well and that we are heading for failure, is Canada's work with NGOs bearing fruit? Are we working consistently enough to be reasonably well accepted by the Afghan people?

[*English*]

Prof. Graham E. Fuller: I think the views among the Pashtun and Muslims in general in Pakistan, Afghanistan, and the rest of the Muslim world are very similar. They feel threatened by the global war against terrorism as conducted by Washington. They see it as a war against Islam, against Islamic values. They see Muslims being killed by the tens of thousands or more in country after country, as a result of policies that I frankly would describe as very misguided by Washington: in Palestine relating to Israel, relating to Lebanon, relating to Somalia, relating to Iraq, Afghanistan, and Pakistan. Therefore, most Muslims don't think only in terms of the local situation, but think of this as a global defence against imperialism. I'm not calling Washington's policy imperialism, although there are some elements of a global hegemonic vision there, but it is perceived widely in the Muslim world in this respect, and that is what complicates the problems so much. Most Muslims everywhere sympathize with the struggle even if they don't fully approve of Osama bin Laden.

I hope that answers your question as I understood it.

● (1930)

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Let us wait for thirty seconds to get the interpretation working.

[*English*]

I want to make sure you hear the question in English.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Bachand, go ahead, please.

Mr. Claude Bachand (Saint-Jean, BQ): Mr. Fuller, I read your CV this afternoon and I was impressed by your credentials. But what most got my attention was that you worked for the CIA for a long time. So you are an intelligence and information man. That tells me that you surely still have your old contacts who gave you the reports that you used for your evidence to the committee.

I will not be telling you anything you did not know when I say that the Vietnam war was not lost in Vietnam, but in America when the American people took a stand and decided that it was over. At least, that is what I think.

Is it your impression that, since the Vietnam War—and this still applies today—military doctrine has changed when it comes to information and propaganda as tools? It is refreshing to listen to you today because we have been discussing our involvement in Afghanistan, probably for years, and each time that a general, or a senior government official, or public servants come here, they tell us that extraordinary things are happening in Afghanistan and that we are heading down the road to democracy at top speed.

I would also like you to tell us if you think that a committee like ours can be on the right track if we are not given real information and if we do not have access to classified documents. In other words, we listen to people and trust in their good faith. So the senior people who appear before us are involved in a campaign of propaganda and manipulation, in my view, and I would like your view on it too.

[*English*]

Prof. Graham E. Fuller: Thank you, sir. That's a very important question.

Any government attempts to put the best face on its policies and its accomplishments.

Secondly, if I were asked to be in charge of the Afghan effort today, I would have to think positively about what I can do today to change this thing. It is, perhaps, a luxury of being an intelligence officer or intelligence analyst to have the freedom to look down the road regardless of the political implications of the analysis. This is why there is very frequently tension between intelligence organizations and policy-makers.

Yes, I think there has been a great effort by Washington to put a positive spin not only on Afghanistan but also on Iraq and many other situations in the area. This is always true, but I think it has been especially true in the last eight years.

But, sir, you wondered how you can be informed of the situation without classified documents. I have worked for 25 years with classified documents, and let me say that I do not think that classified documents contain necessary secrets for your understanding or my understanding of this particular problem. The secret information may sometimes be important as to where bin Laden may be hiding or where some military force is standing today for a military attack, in tactical terms. But in terms of understanding the broad trends, there is no intelligence that gives an answer to this question. All we can give is informed judgment, informed opinion. And informed people can disagree even about the way to interpret the facts.

My understanding of what is going on in Afghanistan today, or in Iraq or elsewhere, is based not at all on classified information. I see no classified information. I haven't seen classified information for 15 years.

But if we learn to think intelligently and look at a variety of sources.... On the Internet today, by the way, there is a remarkable variety of sources and good information about alternative views of the situation. If you look at the views of other countries—the English press, the Indian press in English, or things such as the *Asia Times*, which is published in east Asia in English and has an Indian-Chinese perspective that is markedly different and very well informed—they will give you some alternative perspectives.

I don't think you need any classified information to appreciate the grander problems that are involved in understanding this situation.

● (1935)

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Fuller.

I now move over to Mr. MacKenzie.

Mr. Dave MacKenzie (Oxford, CPC): Thank you, Chair.

I may end up sharing some time with my colleague, sir.

Mr. Fuller, I listened closely to what you said, and I have some problems with your concept. You seemed to indicate that we should leave the country and that the Pashtun population and the Taliban would then fill the void. But isn't that the reason we're there?

We have heard from Afghanis about what went on in their country when the Taliban was in control. How do we square that circle—that we leave the country and allow that body of people to then take over, to burn the schools, to do all of the things they did for a good number of years? Does that make sense?

Prof. Graham E. Fuller: Sir, that is also a very important and difficult question. If there were an easy answer to it, I would not be here and you would not be here.

But let me say that I think there is a difference. I think the presence of western troops "in occupation"—and that is the term that is used by most Muslims—of their country creates a radicalizing element that encourages other radical forces. It encourages jihadis to come in from all over the world to fight, especially against the American presence there, which is being fought in country after country on a military basis.

I am arguing first that the Taliban, to the extent that we can generalize about them, because there are different trends among them—they're all Pashtun, they're all nationalists, they're all believers in Islam to one degree or another—have learned a few things in a generation as well, watching this terrible debacle. Even the old Taliban were uncomfortable with bin Laden, when he first arrived there, but found themselves gradually trapped in a situation in which they came to depend on him. I don't think the situation could be replicated in quite the same sense.

So I would argue that the Taliban have learned something, the Pashtun have learned something, and I think the Pakistanis themselves have learned about the dangers of losing control of even elements that they supported, as they did earlier.

If it is known that the west is leaving and mechanisms are put into place with regional power support—from Russia, Iran, China, India, others, the UN—to essentially try to re-establish a government in which Taliban may win an important voice, it is the kind of Taliban and the kinds of policies they will pursue that will matter most.

I don't think we would go back to school burnings, but a conservative country, a conservative social policy, a conservative policy towards women that I do not approve of? Yes, I think we would see some return, but I don't think it would be a return to the rather horrific and sometimes exaggerated examples of the worst of the Taliban and their methods now, which are seen as part of their anti-American struggle.

● (1940)

Mr. Dave MacKenzie: It seems to me you're suggesting we try an experiment: that we leave the country now and see what happens.

One of the countries you talk about is Russia. They've already had their conflicts with Russia. I just don't comprehend how we leave the country to the Taliban, to their past and perhaps their future, and then expect that Russia will be one of the countries that will keep them as an honest broker. It somehow defies common sense to me.

Prof. Graham E. Fuller: First of all....

I'm sorry, the thought has left me, but the other important thought is there and it will come back to me.

First of all, we're not talking about turning the country over to the Taliban, but opening up a new political and essentially non-military process, and a very quick one, whereby a new government can be established and a new balance of forces be established. I can't give you the perfect formula for how this is going to be conducted, but the alternative is equally important.

You say leave and give it up. I'm not persuaded that if we stay two, three, five, or even ten years we are going to achieve the goal we hope to achieve there. I think twenty years would be lucky, and there is no guarantee that you're not going to continue to inflame nationalist and religious and fundamentalist passions, in Afghanistan and in Pakistan and in the region, to come and fight against this present NATO project.

So it's not a crazy choice versus a sober choice. It's a sober choice at the present, which I argue is not working and is probably not going to work. And it's a new way of approaching the use of regional powers to stop the worst of the past elements. That is the participation of elements like al-Qaeda. Pakistan doesn't want it, Iran doesn't want it, Russia doesn't want it, and China doesn't want it. These countries have great power within those countries.

Another scenario is that Afghanistan will basically be divided into spheres of influence for some time to come, with those countries involved. It's quite thinkable, even though regrettable.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Ms. Black.

Ms. Dawn Black (New Westminster—Coquitlam, NDP): Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman.

Thank you very much, Mr. Fuller, for coming here from the west of Canada. I know it's a long trip, because I do it every week, as does my colleague Mr. Dosanjh. We appreciate it that you came. You've given us a different insight and some provocative things to think about.

I'm particularly interested in what you said about the area and the countries surrounding Afghanistan—Pakistan and Iran. I wonder if you believe it's possible to find a peaceful solution to the war in Afghanistan without the involvement in the buy-in by those neighbouring countries. I quite doubt it myself.

The other thing I wanted to ask you about it is the issue of the marines who have now come down to the south, an additional 3,000 troops, to do some kind of a surge similar to what they did in Iraq. I'm wondering what you think about that kind of a surge that is happening right now, and whether you think this kind of effort will work in the long term, because I think we do have to look at the long term there, as you said.

I'm also curious about whether you have any information to share with us about the ISAF mission and the Operation Enduring Freedom mission, which is going on at the same time. I understand there are 8,000 to 10,000 American troops in Afghanistan now that are not part of the ISAF mission. I'm wondering if you have anything you could share with us about how those two quite separate missions interact, whether you know of any problems and communications between the two, or any other information you could share with us.

● (1945)

Prof. Graham E. Fuller: I hope very much that the presence of a new marine contingent will assist in the pacification of the south. But as we all know, this is a guerrilla war and guerrillas generally do not choose to stand and fight and lose, as they inevitably will. They will vanish into the hillsides and attempt to wait out the United States.

This is a waiting game in many respects. Nobody expects Washington to have the stomach—much less other countries—to stay for two, three, four, five, six or more years in this kind of an effort. People are therefore waiting until the moment is more propitious for their own power.

Frankly, I don't think there's a military solution in that sense. It has to be essentially a political solution, and I think there is a contradiction somewhat between the two, frankly. Ideally, you weaken the military strength of your opponents so that they will then negotiate. I don't think they are going to negotiate. They will simply retreat and wait.

Between ISAF and the U.S. military forces, I cannot give you any in-depth assessment because I'm not deeply engaged in these details. I would have to say there has been some contradiction in American policy from very early on, and that is between State Department nation-building and aid nation-building, if you will, or institution-building. On the other hand, there are the CIA and the military that are essentially looking to find al-Qaeda and kill them, and to kill Taliban forces in the area.

There has unfortunately been a high degree of civilian deaths. Let's not call them collateral damage; they're civilian deaths. This has been a major factor in alienating the population. Even President Karzai has been very bluntly critical of Washington in saying that these civilian casualties are intolerable, yet they are essentially a part of the process, and I don't see any serious diminution of that process. But while the CIA and the military are working with warlords, supporting them and giving them money, and supporting private militias to attempt to fight the Taliban to locate al-Qaeda and other foreign elements, they are supporting the very elements within the government that are weakening the civilian nation-building side.

So there has been a contradiction between these two elements. I don't think they're totally incompatible, but I think they're weakening. Each one complicates the other's mission.

Ms. Dawn Black: You mentioned in your comments to us that the Taliban were not ideological.

Prof. Graham E. Fuller: I said they're not primarily ideological.

Ms. Dawn Black: Yes. I'm wondering how you see al-Qaeda and the Taliban interacting. The Taliban appears to have goals that are limited to Afghanistan—and Pakistan, I suppose—but do they support the broader goals of al-Qaeda? Do you see that kind of link? Are the goals of the Taliban part of a wider crisis that you talked about in Islam?

Prof. Graham E. Fuller: Part of a wider crisis...?

Ms. Dawn Black: A wider crisis in Islamic nations.

Prof. Graham E. Fuller: Again, I stress the importance of understanding that when we talk about the Taliban, we're talking about more moderate and more radical, as in any movement. Moderate Taliban may not be entirely reassuring to us with a western education, with views on women that at best are primitive. Even mountain tribal views of women have, for hundreds and hundreds of years, been extremely primitive in this respect.

Nonetheless, there is a spectrum. I will argue that when you see military western occupational forces leaving, in their view, there is going to be a struggle for power amongst the Taliban. Some Taliban will want to seek western money and aid to help them rebuild the country as long as it is without troops and without Americans, essentially. They will even take American money if it's without American forces. Others will say never, because they want no westerners there. Some will say they should cooperate closely with Pakistan, while others will say they live in Afghanistan and do not want to be dominated by Pakistan.

There will also be disagreement about their ties with international jihadi forces. Are there forces and elements within the Taliban that cooperate with al-Qaeda? Yes, there are. Certainly Mullah Omar and the old crowd, the old elements, are very weakened, but they are still there and they probably have this old view now that will not change. But younger elements have a different game. They are Afghans. They are interested in power in Afghanistan. Most of them are not interested in revolutionizing the world, whatever some of their statements may be.

You asked me about American policy here. I think this has been part of a broader failure. It has a tendency to lump every single movement that uses terrorism into this huge basket of terrorism: they're all enemies, they all have to be fought, and they all have to be killed.

It's critically important to distinguish between, say, movements like Hezbollah in Lebanon—I'm not supporting them—and even Hamas. You can go to Lebanon—I have—go to Hezbollah offices, talk to them, get their literature, interview them, take their pictures, and print articles about them. They are part of the government and they are part of a movement in that country. This is not an international conspiracy or an international movement, whether we like them or not.

I would argue that the same will be more applicable to the Taliban as the situation begins to change. They will not be unified as much by this American presence, by this western military presence. They will divide along clan lines, perhaps along religious lines, along regional lines, among policy lines, and among whom they will cooperate with and whom they won't, as I mentioned earlier. I think we need to open and encourage this, but the entire military approach to terrorism undertaken by Washington has brought disaster and failure through country after country: in Lebanon, in Palestine, in Somalia, in Iraq, and elsewhere.

● (1950)

The Chair: I'm sorry, we've gone over time and we need to move on with the second round of questioning, which will last for five minutes.

Monsieur Patry.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Bernard Patry (Pierrefonds—Dollard, Lib.): Thank you very much.

[*English*]

I will share my time with Mr. Dosanjh.

Mr. Fuller, I will go to a question right away.

Even if this is a NATO mission, the perception in the Muslim world is that this war is led by the U.S. and is against Islam. My question is about the Taliban. You said in your remarks at the beginning that the Taliban will be ready to kick out a terrorist group like al-Qaeda if they reach their local goals. Can you tell me what these local goals are?

Prof. Graham E. Fuller: Do you mean the Taliban's goals?

Mr. Bernard Patry: My second question is whether you think the next United States administration will agree, through diplomacy, to discussions with regional powers such as China, Iran, Russia, Pakistan, and India, as you mentioned, towards a political solution.

Prof. Graham E. Fuller: I mentioned that I think the Taliban, first and foremost, have local goals, and I would summarize those goals, perhaps, as follows.

First of all, they want to restore a Pashtun dominance of the government in Kabul, but by dominance I don't mean something that necessarily has to be a frightening image. The Pashtuns have dominated Afghan politics for 300 years and will probably continue to as the single largest group. This does not mean and has not meant that other elements will not play a part in this, or be part of a future government.

There are other non-violent, even fundamentalist, religious groups within Afghanistan that would share many of these social goals. They want more sharia law. They want very traditional social functions. They would want at least separation of men and women in education. Probably many of them would accept female education, but not together, as is the case in Saudi Arabia where you have education of both but separately.

I think the agenda would be mainly a conservative social policy coupled with a strong Pashtun representation within that. There will be jockeying for power within it.

As for the next U.S. administration, it's hard to say. I don't think a republican candidate would be likely to strongly change the American approach. It might be smarter—probably will be smarter—but I think the similar instincts will govern it.

If it were a Democratic administration—and let's assume it would be someone like Barack Obama—it's possible there might be some rethinking of the American global project, but that project up until now, since the end of the Cold War has been essentially an American hegemony. Whether with a smiling face under Bill Clinton or a not smiling face under the Bush administration, it has been essentially a hegemonic vision and has explicitly been called that. These are not my words; these are the words of many of the neo-conservatives: the American century, the new American empire, recognized and supported by many.

I think that idea of abandoning a unipolar world will die hard. It will die slowly, but I think it will die, because it's already de facto dying, as we see in countries like China and Russia, and even in the solution recently of Hezbollah and Lebanon and in talking with Hamas; U.S. policies are simply not being observed by regional players any more.

I'm hopeful that we're going to find a more multilateral world at work, and in that context I think Washington may begin to abandon its aspirations for hegemonic control.

● (1955)

The Chair: Mr. Dosanjh, you have about a minute for question and answer.

Hon. Ujjal Dosanjh (Vancouver South, Lib.): I'll take less than 30 seconds to ask my question without any preface.

You said that the new Taliban would be different. The old Taliban harboured al-Qaeda. How would it be that the new Taliban might not be susceptible to the same?

I have a second question, which is mainly an observation, actually, and not even a question. You're essentially saying you see nothing but failure, particularly with the current approach. If the U.S. leaves and others remain, you see something, perhaps, better than what is currently happening.

Prof. Graham E. Fuller: I cannot guarantee that a new Taliban will be drastically different, but I've set forth some of the reasons why...if a provocative and polarizing American military force, or even a NATO force, is clearly on the way out, it opens the issue up to domestic politics in one way.

Secondly, I do not believe that regional forces—even Pakistan, which would welcome a strong Pashtun element in the government.... Pakistan cannot afford to have another reprise of the last al-Qaeda/Osama bin Laden game. This has cost Pakistan dearly. It's cost Afghanistan very dearly, and as long as there is no longer an excuse for radical Islamists or nationalists to fight an American occupation, I think other powers can make powerful conditions of aid to a new government, which would not be entirely Taliban.

A strong Pashtun presence in the government can make very clear demands. If you want aid or support from Canada, from Russia, from China, from Europe, from anywhere, even from America, you will have to meet certain criteria. I'm fairly confident that they will act somewhat rationally in this capacity, but they will not give you mixed education, male-female schools, tomorrow. No, sir, they will not. And they will not love the United States either. But I think if we can persuade them to stop supporting international movements and focus on issues at home and try to develop the nation in more positive directions, they will not turn their back on this.

● (2000)

The Chair: Thank you very much. Now we go over to Madame Boucher.

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Sylvie Boucher (Beauport—Limoilou, CPC): Thank you for being here, Mr. Fuller.

I could ask you a number of questions, but I will ask just one. You have talked about the United States mission. I am Canadian, and this is a meeting of the Special Committee on the Canadian Mission in Afghanistan. I am interested in knowing what we have done in Afghanistan and to what extent we have helped the Afghan people. We have talked about reconstruction and development a lot. As reconstruction in Afghanistan has progressed, have you seen changes in the Canadian mission, and I emphasize the word “Canadian”?

[*English*]

Prof. Graham E. Fuller: First of all, I apologize for the Americo-centric view that I've given—although I now live in Canada—but I think the American presence is the heart of the operation there and inevitably affects the relationship of all other countries there. Therefore, whatever mistakes the United States has made inevitably affect Canada powerfully and directly.

I'm only partially aware—and I apologize for this—of all the details of Canadian projects there, but I have heard positive things about efforts on schools, on education—female education, in particular—and on some reconstruction and infrastructure projects in these areas. I wish I could say that these projects are decisive in bringing a change to the strategic nature of this problem. I think those who know what a Canadian is, as opposed to an American, may appreciate the character of the Canadian approach to these efforts, which is perhaps lacking in some other countries. I'm sure Canada has contributed on the ground in specific areas in very useful ways, but I fear this is probably not strong enough, big enough, or influential enough to change the strategic direction of this problem, which involves huge international and local forces, tribal forces, economic forces, religious forces, and others that complicate this issue so much.

If Canada could operate, somehow, in the future as an independent nation, not tied to any other western project, I think it would be particularly welcomed in this capacity.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Keddy.

Mr. Gerald Keddy (South Shore—St. Margaret's, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and welcome to our witness. It has been a very interesting and illuminating discussion.

I can't help but remark on Mr. Bachand's comment about Vietnam, and I'm wondering if we're mixing up our issues here. We have a military mission that is under way, that we're very much engaged in; we also have a political mission, quite frankly, that's under way. In Vietnam, much of the lack of success is related to the fact that the political mission was never satisfied. Agrarian reform never happened. There were a whole number of issues where there was massive failure.

You talk about a gradual engagement of regional powers. I think we've attempted to do that in some form. You talk about the ability of Pakistan to exert a positive influence. To be polite, the political situation in Pakistan has some challenges, but certainly we have engaged them. The idea of western troops that are spread out in a vast area of Afghanistan, not all of them in combat roles....

I wonder, if we did make a massive effort to subsidize agriculture, to wean the Taliban or the Pashtun off the poppy crop—in order to do that they have to make more money growing something else—and to centralize our effort in the areas of Afghanistan where we are not playing a combat role, would that not help at the end of this long arduous road we're on to put the basis of some sort of nation state in place that would have a chance of success?

● (2005)

The Chair: We have about a minute left for this part of the meeting.

Prof. Graham E. Fuller: That's a very challenging question. The good news is that we are not trying to build a government where none has ever existed. There had been a government in Afghanistan for a long period, up to the Communist takeover in 1978, in which multi-ethnic forces within the country did cooperate. The Pashtuns were dominant, but it worked reasonably well. I think it's possible to go back to that.

But today we are in a super-heated, super-radicalized environment in which almost all the infrastructure has been destroyed, so it's going to be a very, very long task. If you can hand out money to farmers not to grow poppies, they will not grow poppies, but this essentially ties you to giving out money forever. As I told you, when I was in Afghanistan nearly 30 years ago, I was told about the 30-year effort up to then in trying to stop the poppy crop. So I'm not very sanguine about the possibility of change here.

You are right. Much of the country in Afghanistan is somewhat at peace, although terrorism is spreading in those areas as well, in efforts to radicalize and polarize the situation. I don't want to be universally black about it. I'm sure your ambassador will be able to point to many gratifying and successful missions that are taking place. It's just that from the strategic position of the long term, I think these are not going to bring enough change that we can then walk away from Afghanistan and say the mission is accomplished, the infrastructure has been established, and now it can work on its own in creating a government that the west would like to have.

I think we'll be lucky if we can get away with a government that is not incredibly brutal, that does not support terrorism, and that's run by Afghans, not by foreigners. I think that's doable.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Fuller. That brings the first part of our meeting to an end.

On behalf of all the committee members, I'd like to thank you once again for having travelled here to appear in front of our committee. We certainly appreciate it.

Colleagues, I will suspend the meeting for three minutes, and then we'll regroup for the second part of our meeting.

● _____ (Pause) _____ ●

● (2010)

The Chair: The meeting has resumed.

In the second part of our meeting we have the great honour of having Ambassador Lalani, the ambassador of Canada in Afghanistan. Ambassador Lalani, before serving in Afghanistan in 2007, last served as Canadian ambassador to the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan and to Iraq. In some of the work he's done here in Ottawa, he worked in the office of the senior advisor for the Middle East peace process.

I should also mention, Ambassador, that some of the members here on the committee—Mr. Laurie Hawn, my colleague Mr. Wilfert, and I—just returned from visiting Afghanistan. I would like to, through you, extend a thank you to your staff for having organized an excellent itinerary for us in Kabul. We had the opportunity to meet Afghan officials and ambassadors from other countries.

On that note, I will hand the microphone over to you, Ambassador.

Thank you.

His Excellency Arif Lalani (Ambassador of Canada to Afghanistan, Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade): Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman and members of the committee. I myself was going to note that some of you have in fact been to Afghanistan very recently, and some others, while I've been there. It's good to see some of the faces that know about the Afghanistan experience first-hand.

I would like to thank you, Mr. Chairman, for inviting me and giving me the opportunity to speak to you.

I have a prepared statement. I'll go through it, but I'm really looking forward to the discussion. You've just had, as one of your members put it, an interesting, and even a provocative, presentation. I'm looking forward to carrying on that discussion.

Let me also say that I have been watching the progress of this committee in the short time it has been in operation, and it is certainly very active. I think it is actually very helpful to our work in Afghanistan to have parliamentarians take such an interest in the work that Canada is trying to do in Afghanistan.

I have been in Kabul for a year now, but I've actually been following the Afghanistan file for about seven years. I was at our embassy in Washington on the night of 9/11, 2001. From that night on, my job there turned to looking at Afghanistan and the international response. Then I was working on it from here, and now from Afghanistan.

I say that simply to give you a sense of the perspective with which I come to it. I have seen the file at low points and at high points. I end my first year in Afghanistan with the sense that we are actually gaining momentum. We are getting traction on a lot of the issues that we have been pursuing.

I want to speak to you a little bit about that, to take stock, to talk to you about the whole-of-government approach that Canada has in Afghanistan, the Afghanistan Compact and how we're implementing it, the relationship between security and development—which I think is crucial, and I think really crucial to what this committee is looking at—and a little bit of the progress and challenges—just to start off our discussion.

One of my most important functions as ambassador is to oversee the work of more than 50 Canadian civilian officials in Afghanistan, both in Kabul and in Kandahar, and also to oversee the coherence and integration of the whole Canadian effort in the country.

In addition to officials from Foreign Affairs and International Trade, civilians from half a dozen departments and agencies are deployed in Afghanistan, including those from the Canadian International Development Agency, the RCMP, and Correctional Service Canada.

The Government of Canada's efforts in Afghanistan are in many ways an unprecedented undertaking. Never before have officials from across government been deployed in such an integrated and coordinated way toward the achievement of common objectives. Canada is, of course, in Afghanistan, as you well know, as part of a much larger international undertaking.

Canada, along with more than 60 nations and international organizations, is in Afghanistan as part of a UN-sanctioned mission to help build a stable, democratic, and self-sustaining society. Two years ago the Afghanistan Compact was jointly adopted by the United Nations, the Government of Afghanistan, and members of the international community, including Canada.

The compact's purpose is to ensure greater coherence of efforts between the Afghan government and the international community. The compact guides Canada's engagement. It sets out detailed outcomes, benchmarks, timelines for delivery, and mutual obligations in three areas: security; governance, the rule of law and human rights; and economic and social development. Canada's approach is fully in line with the priorities that are laid out in the compact.

● (2015)

We recognize that these three pillars—security, governance, and development—are interdependent and mutually reinforcing. This means, of course, that meaningful development cannot occur without security. Experience has shown that security needs to take hold if development and reconstruction are to progress. Afghans need security to build, govern, and provide basic services such as better roads, greater access to health care and education, and more meaningful economic opportunities. Access to greater opportunities will give all Afghans a stake in stability and prosperity.

The interdependence also implies that there can be no long-term improvement in security unless there is stronger governance. This means better public services, a stronger judicial system, and more accountable government institutions in Afghanistan. Improvements in all three of these areas—security, development, and governance—are key to countering the insurgency. But I cannot emphasize enough the importance of establishing a secure environment for this progress to occur.

Simply put, Afghans need to have faith in their government's institutions. They need to know that they can safely send their children to school. They need to know that the future will bring greater prosperity and stability. As we work with them on those objectives, let's remember the starting point. Rebuilding the country after decades of war is a long-term undertaking that requires patience and commitment. Those of you who have travelled to Afghanistan are aware of the challenges I'm speaking of.

When the Taliban were ousted from power in 2001, the country was literally in ruins. Most of the basic infrastructure had been destroyed. There were no government services to speak of, and Afghans were traumatized by years of misrule and oppression. In short, the Taliban had simply said no to everything. They had said no to democracy, no to economic development, no to women's rights, and no to any kind of social development.

Seven years later, Afghans have actually said yes to building democracy, building an economy, rebuilding their institutions, and really taking back their country with the help of the international community. Despite the clear negatives and challenges, there is progress, and I think the evidence is quite clear.

Per capita income has more than doubled in Afghanistan. Over five million refugees have returned since 2002. Ninety percent of returning refugees find jobs within six months of their return. Over 80% of Afghans now have access to basic medical care, as opposed to 9% in 2004. Close to six million children are now enrolled in school, and one-third of them are girls; in 2001 there were only 700,000 children in school, and all of them were boys.

These figures are not simply statistics. They mean tangible improvement in the lives of millions of Afghan men, women, and children. Canada, as a leading donor in Afghanistan, is playing an important part in that recovery.

We also have specific progress in Kandahar, where Canada is most heavily invested. We have been playing a leading role since 2005. Tangible signs of success are also present there. Canada is providing critical support to the Afghan government, notably through the work of the Canadian Forces and our multidisciplinary provincial reconstruction team, or PRT. Canada's assistance is being felt in terms of infrastructure projects, police, army training, and support for the rule of law.

Of course, we have a long way to go. Afghanistan remains one of the world's poorest countries. There are no shortcuts and there are no quick fixes, but there is a sure answer, and that is to continue to help create and build security, focus on reconstruction and governance, and focus the Afghan government on improving its record on governance, development, and corruption.

One key milestone in that process is going to be the elections. Next year Afghans will vote in their second presidential election, and in their second parliamentary election the following year.

● (2020)

In 2004 and 2005, over 10 million Afghans registered to vote for the first elections. These are important landmarks that demonstrate that Afghanistan is on the right track.

Security and governance challenges remain, but they should not obscure the fact that the situation is improving, both in terms of government and institutional capacity as well as in the everyday lives of Afghans.

I just want to conclude, Mr. Chairman, by making a very personal observation from the ground. We hear a lot—and every time I'm here, I hear a lot—of debate over the statistics, over whether we're doing the right thing, over whether we are getting it right, are communicating it, etc. I would also like to say that there are many elements to this story.

Afghanistan, on some levels, is a human story, and it is a national story, and it is actually a long-term story. What I mean by that is it's a national story in that it's a national priority. When you're on the ground in Afghanistan, there are not just the Canadian government officials and the military. There are approximately 150 Canadians in Kabul itself who are working outside of government, in the UN, with NGOs, and even in the private sector, and I think we need to keep in mind that there are a lot of Canadians out there who are working on this file because they believe in this priority. But most of all it is a human story for Afghans. It is a story of workers in the fields demining the fields to literally take them back, of children being vaccinated against polio, of girls not just going to school but taking teacher training courses and becoming teachers whereas they never had the opportunity to do so before, of young boys joining the Afghan National Army and the police force. These are not necessarily pleasant tasks, but it's Afghans themselves risking their lives to fight for their country and defend their country. I think we shouldn't forget that the Canadian effort, despite what the debate may be, is responsible for that very positive human story in Afghanistan.

I just want to end by saying it's also a human story for the Canadians who are working there. The soldiers and civilians are some of the most committed, dedicated, effective, and impressive people I have ever worked with. I want to end simply by saying how proud I am, after a year, of the work that all of the Canadians are doing there, and frankly how honoured I am to be doing this job at a critical time in Afghanistan's history. I really also thank Canadians for their support of all of the Canadians who are working there.

Thank you.

● (2025)

The Chair: Thank you very much, Ambassador.

We'll now move to the first round of questioning for seven minutes. I'd ask Mr. Rae to start.

Hon. Bob Rae: Ambassador, thank you very much, and because of the seven minutes I'll just get right to the questions.

What does the 2011 date mean to you in terms of interpreting the House of Commons' resolution with respect to the military mission and the Afghanistan Compact itself? What should we be thinking about in terms of that date as we sit now in 2008?

Mr. Arif Lalani: To me, one is very clear. Parliament has decided that our military contribution in Kandahar will end in 2011. That means we need to start thinking about which areas we should focus on between now and 2011 to make sure, as best we can, that Afghans will have self-sustaining institutions by 2011, and be realistic about the goals we are trying to achieve.

We hear a lot of talk that it's a 20- or 30-year process to achieve the goals we have in mind. That is true for long-term development goals, and it is true to create the kind of economic prosperity and conditions that I think Afghans want. But between now and then we need to create a base to allow them to pursue those long-term goals.

That means focusing on the Afghan National Security Forces, the army, and the police; focusing on local governance so the Afghan government is providing services at the district level—the Canadian equivalent is the municipal level; and focusing on the regional issue. I think the international community should do more to address the Afghanistan-Pakistan border issue, and I can talk about what we're doing.

But it is reasonable to assume that in 2011 we will have an Afghan National Army that is trained and equipped, with Canadian and international support, to actually take the lead in its own security operations. It is even reasonable to assume, on policing, that we will have an Afghan national police force that will be better trained, better equipped, and better able to enforce basic law and order than it is now.

If we're able to do those things and include local level governance, in 2011 the question becomes much easier. If Afghans can hold that and build on it, we can be supportive, as opposed to being in the forefront on some of those issues. I think those objectives are achievable, as long as we're realistic about what we're trying to achieve there.

● (2030)

Hon. Bob Rae: I'm going to share my time with Mr. Ignatieff.

Mr. Michael Ignatieff: Ambassador, to get to the two issues that have bedeviled your time as ambassador, what specific measures has the Government of Canada undertaken through Corrections Canada, the RCMP, your office, and the civilian side to guarantee that detainees handed over by Canadian Forces are not subjected to abuse? Are you satisfied that we can now hand over detainees to Afghan authorities in Kandahar without risk of abuse or torture?

Two, what measures is Canada taking to reduce the incidence of corruption in the Karzai government?

Mr. Arif Lalani: On detainees, I actually think the Canadian effort and the international effort at this stage are quite well documented.

First of all, it is not only a Canadian issue. There are five or six other countries that have signed memorandums of understanding with the Afghan government on detainees. So it is a shared issue between the international community and the Afghan government. The first thing we've done is to sign agreements with the Afghan government that make clear Afghan responsibilities for the treatment of detainees, as well as their obligations under international law and under their own laws.

Second, we are also undertaking and implementing a very rigorous—many people have called it the most rigorous—monitoring regime of the detainees who are transferred to Afghan authority. There are a number of other countries also doing it, so we are into the facilities where we have detainees. We are working with Afghan authorities on the information sharing, but we have people physically going in and monitoring to ensure that we are actually satisfied with the treatment.

Third, we also realize that the long-term solution is again to build Afghan capacity, in terms of their institutions and their training. So we are undertaking now our own mentoring and technical assistance and training of Afghan officials, as are other countries.

So there is actually a much more coordinated approach here than might be apparent as we focus on Kandahar, but there are a number of other countries doing exactly the same, and there is a positive cumulative effect. I am actually satisfied that we are actually doing everything possible, and the evidence on the Afghan side is that they take the agreement seriously. President Karzai has made the commitment publicly, and they have responded when issues have been raised.

Regarding corruption, one of the issues is that there is not a silver bullet. We can't simply legislate away corruption. The Afghans are very clear that they understand, and they accept, that corruption is a real issue.

I think there are two other things we can tackle that will help corruption, and I think it's very apparent. One is that in the civil service they have to get better training and better pay, and if we're able to do that, then that will address some of the corruption. The second thing is that I think it is quite right and quite legitimate for Canada and other countries to continue to urge—even to pressure—the Afghan government to take some of its own decisive steps to better vet the candidates they appoint to senior positions in the civil service, to take more action. I believe the Afghan ambassador himself, when he appeared before your committee, also talked about what he thought his own government needed to do on corruption, including looking at the judicial process and being able to prosecute people who clearly are found suspect of corrupt activity.

We are doing that through funding training programs in different ministries. We are doing that in some ways, as I mentioned, by helping to address the salary issues in the Afghan police force, for example. This year they are now better paid than they were last year. Their salaries are equivalent to the army's salaries, and we know that makes a difference. I don't think there is a short-term solution, but I do believe we should keep the pressure up.

● (2035)

The Chair: Thank you very much, Ambassador.

We now move to Madame Barbot.

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Vivian Barbot: Thank you.

Ambassador, there has been a lot of criticism that Canada's reputation has been weakened because of too close an association with Mr. Bush's policies. The guest who spoke just before you said exactly that. I would like to know what you, as Canada's representative in Afghanistan, think about that. It has been suggested that we are not doing enough in Afghanistan on the democratic front.

As Canada's representative, how do you protect Canada's reputation, and how do you personally do your work with the appropriate authorities?

Mr. Arif Lalani:

I do not think that this is just an American endeavour, a United States endeavour. As we said, 60 countries, organizations and institutions are in the country working with us. Coordination between us is good. There are a number of players. Policy in Afghanistan is not just American policy. There are policies on development, on good governance and on human rights. These are not just American values, they are Canadian ethical values as well. I feel that the mission is truly an international one.

As to Canada's role, our presence and our diplomacy,

[*English*]

we have certainly raised our game, as have other countries. The embassy there is now one of our most senior in terms of its civilian deployment. The Canadian embassy in Afghanistan is now among the top five embassies that Canada has in terms of our civilian personnel. We have tremendous influence because we are one of the largest donors. We ended last year as probably the fourth-largest donor to Afghanistan. That has meant that on any given issue, whether it's policing, or education, or governance, Canada is actually one of the leaders. The U.S. and the U.K.—which is usually one of the top ones—and others actually look to us to help solve the problem, and they also look to us to make sure we are in agreement on some of these issues.

We have a very good relationship with the Afghan government. I see President Karzai almost weekly, and I see him more than that in multilateral meetings with other key ambassadors.

We also have a certain amount of credibility that some other countries don't, because I think Afghans know we are not there because of any past history. They also know we are not there because we are really trying to carve out any permanent future role. I think they respect that we are really trying, in some ways, to build stability there that will benefit Afghans, but which will clearly also benefit security for Canadians.

Frankly, leadership is not a position Canadians are used to, but Afghanistan is a place where we are actually one of the leaders. One of the implications of that is that it's not easy, and as Canadians we need to come to terms with that too. Leadership means that sometimes we do things that are tough and difficult, and I think we're doing that in Afghanistan.

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Mr. Bachand.

Mr. Claude Bachand: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Lalani, you started by saying that you wanted to give a presentation that was as provocative as the one given before you. I do not think that you succeeded. Earlier, with Mr. Fuller, we were talking to a man who got off the beaten path. For several years, we have always heard the same speeches, to the point that I could have given parts of your speech before you did. As an example, when you mentioned six million children going back to school, I said to myself that you would then say “one third of them girls”, and that is exactly what you said.

I do not mean to be impolite to you, but we, as members of Parliament, have the impression that the military, the diplomats and the public service are controlled to the extent that key spokespeople like yourself follow in each others footsteps and use the same script.

Am I being too hard on you? Or would you be prepared to tell me that I am right and that you are required to follow the party line?

● (2040)

[*English*]

Mr. Arif Lalani: You're not being too hard on me. But with all due respect, let me suggest to you that the truth doesn't change, and it doesn't matter what my target audience is or to whom I'm speaking. The fact is that there are six million children in school—more children than have ever been in school in the entire history of Afghanistan. And they wouldn't be in school if we weren't there and the international community wasn't there. I will say the same thing tomorrow. I hope that a year from now I will say seven million. So I think some things are facts.

I will also tell you that you are right that there are a lot of challenges. This is a story of successes in some parts of the country—sometimes around the country—real challenges, and even issues where people need to admit failure. It is clear that we need to do more to have the Afghan government fight corruption. The international community has learned that we need to focus more on the national police force, which is what we have been doing over the past year.

So I am not restricted. If you want to talk to my colleagues in the Department of Foreign Affairs, and I think some members of Parliament with whom I've worked, they will tell you that I'm about as blunt a diplomat as you will find. Let me therefore also be blunt. I could have also finished most of Graham Fuller's sentences, because there is a perspective and a narrative that says nothing is working. The fact is that some things are working and some things are not.

It is also a fact that if we were to leave, it would be worse. There are some things that only we can do right now to help Afghans, and that is to help them build their institutions so they come to a point where they can address their own challenges. It doesn't mean that three or five years from now we should be thinking of a state that looks like Switzerland or even Bangladesh. But what we should be aiming for are Afghan institutions that can address the challenges.

I hope that was blunt enough for you.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Ms. Black.

Ms. Dawn Black: Thank you.

Thank you, Ambassador. I think you're aware that in Parliament we passed a resolution not too long ago about an Afghan journalist who's been sentenced to death. I have a letter from friends of his in Afghanistan who indicate that his appeal was delayed once again and his health is failing.

What specific steps have you or our embassy taken to ensure that he will be spared the death penalty? That hasn't happened yet. He's appealing and it's being delayed and delayed. Are you monitoring his condition in any way? The information I'm getting from Afghanistan indicates that he's deteriorating, and his brother is also under threat now.

More than that, what are we doing there as Canadians? What is our embassy doing there to ensure that people who are involved in human rights work in Afghanistan are not sentenced to death and are able to do the kind of work around human rights that we expect they would do, with the assistance they're getting from the international community?

● (2045)

Mr. Arif Lalani: Thank you, and thank you for asking.

Mr. Kambaksh is the journalist you're referring to, and it is a case that I've taken a personal interest in. It is a case that we have monitored very closely. We're aware of the recent court case and the delay that Mr. Kambaksh has asked for because of his health. I have raised the matter personally with President Karzai. Other countries have done the same thing. I've also raised it with the foreign minister, the national security advisor, and others.

There is no doubt, on the part of the Afghan government, about where Canada stands on this issue. It is an issue of freedom of expression and human rights. And the Afghan government certainly understands our position on the death penalty.

We are monitoring his personal situation. I want to respect his right to privacy and the work we are doing. I should probably stop by saying you can be assured this is a case we have followed and I have personally followed very closely. We will continue to follow it closely and work with the Afghan government.

There is a process, and so far the process is taking its course. None of us are happy with the charge and none of us are happy with the sentence, but the fact remains that it has not been implemented. He is going through the process, and we are watching and working very closely to make sure he is able to come out of that process with the right results.

Ms. Dawn Black: I'm pleased to hear that you're following this so carefully and that you are involved in it and speaking to the president about it.

Can you tell me if you feel some optimism about the case, and also about family members, who've been under threat as well, and whether you've raised that with the Afghan authorities?

Mr. Arif Lalani: I don't want to comment on it, only because I don't want to prejudice the process that the Afghans are undertaking. I think we need to let that process work. For me to comment now will be seen as perhaps prejudicing that process.

Ms. Dawn Black: Okay, fair enough.

There's been a lot of concern in Afghan, and I think internationally, around the number of civilian casualties. It's an issue that obviously needs to be dealt with. Our previous witness talked about how it feeds the insurgency when civilians die or they are injured.

In your discussions with the Afghan officials, can you tell me whether our allies are committed to ensuring that Afghan civilians are not losing their lives in aerial attacks and in other ways? Where is that now?

Mr. Arif Lalani: This is an issue that I think NATO and the alliance and the commander of the ISAF force, COMISAF, have taken very seriously. NATO forces have rules of engagement. They have reviewed them over the course of the year that I have been there, specifically in response I think to President Karzai and others who have raised this. It's a difficult issue. Every civilian casualty, anywhere, is a terrible thing. But there actually has been a different approach from the forces over the year that I have been there.

I can give you an anecdote. I don't want to underplay it, but I think the person that is most involved in this is the commander of ISAF forces. He may hate me for stealing his story, but he tells a story of an incident that happened this year, where there were civilian casualties as a result, I think, of some aerial activity. He went to the site himself and met with the village elders and tribal leaders for several hours, and for several hours he heard their concerns and their angst about the situation. At the end of it, he said, “Well, I've heard you. I've given you my piece of it. I've told you what we do and the precautions we take, and that's about as far as we can go.” He was getting ready to leave, and, as he tells it, they all stopped him and said, “No, we want one more thing from you.” They said, “We want more of your troops. If you have more of your troops there, we actually don't think some of this is going to happen.”

I'm not saying that to make an argument for more or less troops. I'm simply saying that I think even Afghans understand it's complex. Military operations are not easy, but even the Afghans themselves in that situation suggested to him—

● (2050)

Ms. Dawn Black: I want to also ask you about the situation with the global food crisis—

The Chair: Ms. Black, I'm sorry, we're out of time. It's over to the Conservative side.

Mr. Deepak Obhrai (Calgary East, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

After I'm done, my colleague Laurie will ask a question, as he has just returned from Afghanistan.

Before I start, Mr. Lalani, I want to respond to Mr. Bachand.

Mr. Bachand, as I have been the parliamentary secretary for foreign affairs for two years, I know Mr. Lalani very well. I've worked with him, and I can tell you he is one of those professionals. The diplomacy that we have in Canada is very professional diplomacy, and he is one of our best diplomats in telling us how it is, as a professional.

Mr. Lalani, I'm not just pumping you up. I know because I've worked with you. Mr. Lalani, it's good to have you back here and to hear your assessment, as our ambassador to Afghanistan.

In the last ten days I've been travelling with the former Minister of Foreign Affairs to Croatia and to Italy. Today I met with the Germans. All the NATO countries have a very keen interest in having a successful Afghanistan mission. From what I heard from all of them, they're committed to making Afghanistan a success, so there is international goodwill out there.

In my talks to them, I stated that Afghanistan could become a model, if it's successful, for bringing peace to other regions of the world, like Somalia and everything. So there is a lot more vested interest in our coordination effort in making Afghanistan a success story.

Interestingly, the Saudi foreign minister said to me that one of the reasons Pakistan is surviving as a state is because of its professional armed forces, the building of this institution. I asked why that cannot be applied to Afghanistan's building of its institutions so that then Afghanistan can carry on with it.

I think you are the number one ambassador, and today as you talk to the committee and to all Canadians via television, I think Canadians want to know, since we have been there for a while and will be there for a while, what the Afghani people are feeling. They've sacrificed, and they ask whether they are confident about the future. What do they want, on the ground?

We have people who are making all kinds of statements. The one before you said that.... I think Canadians still want to feel what is going on in Afghanistan. Travelling to Afghanistan is very tough. My colleague and I just came back from there.

As our ambassador, tell Canadians what Afghanis feel. Do they feel confident about their future or not?

Mr. Arif Lalani: Thank you, and thank you for your kind comments.

What is surprising to me is that Afghans actually say they have hope for the future. There have been polls conducted in which Afghans have said they are still very concerned about security, and yet in the same poll they have said they have confidence in the future and in their government. When we dig deeper and ask what it is about security that concerns them, interestingly, often they talk about law and order, tribal politics, and governance issues—and not necessarily about al-Qaeda and the Taliban. This tells us again that that's what we need to focus on and what Afghans themselves need to focus on.

In terms of daily life, we should also remember that life for Afghans is different from life for us as an international force. I have a certain security regime. I won't go into the measures that we take for me, but I take certain precautions. But in the year I have been there, I have seen that life in Kabul has actually moved on and intensified. There is more traffic on the streets. If you get up at nine and you're on the street, you see boys and girls going to school. There is a guy I drive by every day who plants a little corner of his field, and he's gone through three or four harvests of whatever it is he is planting. I say that just to say there are aspects of Afghan life that are normal.

What Afghans want to do is no different from what Canadians want to do. They want to have some kind of house and shelter. They want employment. They want their kids in school. They want health care, and they want to be able to go down to the corner with some confidence that the local police officer or legal authority is somebody they can trust.

● (2055)

Mr. Deepak Obhrai: Are we having success then?

Mr. Arif Lalani: I think we are getting there, because if you look at those factors.... We are employing Afghans.

Canada is one of the largest contributors to the micro-finance program, which gives small loans to Afghans. A majority of them are women. They're starting their own businesses; they're becoming independent. They're taking care of themselves and their families. We have more kids in school than ever before. This year we're going to train more teachers. We're going to have new textbooks and a new curriculum. Housing is being worked on in terms of construction. We are digging wells; we are building bridges; we are paving 4,000 kilometres of roads. So we've got those aspects.

The part that I think we really need to work on is that personal security part, of being able to go to the government and the police force and have confidence in it. I think that's really our focus.

We see so many images of the challenges we're fighting, and it's natural because that's what you're seeing. I have travelled throughout most of the country now—to the north, to the east, to the west, to the south. There is normal life for Afghans. We should not think that because we take certain precautions, their movement is as restricted as ours. They're walking on the street; they're driving on the street; they're playing sports; they're watching television. There are new programs starting and local television stations. I think there is normal life, and that is why they have hope.

The final point I would make is that Afghans are used to a level of insecurity and they're used to a level of challenge, because, unfortunately, that has been their history, in everyone's recent memory.

I have just one last point. If you look at where they were in 2001 under the Taliban and at where they are now, there's a light year's difference. Under the Taliban, nobody was in the streets, nobody was in school, there was no economic activity, nothing. Now all of that has returned. It's not where they want it to be, but it has returned.

The Chair: Mr. Hawn, there's just time for a very short comment.

Mr. Laurie Hawn (Edmonton Centre, CPC): It will be a short comment, and I think the answer will be very short.

We just got back, and we consistently heard a frank discussion of the challenges. We also heard consistently about the measurable progress that's been made. We heard it from the Canadian embassy folks; we heard it from five other ambassadors; we heard it from the United Nations in the person of Chris Alexander; we heard it from President Karzai; we heard it from the Speaker of the House, who is effectively the leader of the opposition; we heard it from the Kandahar provincial council; we heard it from the PRT; we heard it from the Joint Task Force Afghanistan leadership; we heard it from the soldiers. All of these people have lives on the line, their own lives or the lives of their countrymen. Is this just a massive plot to mislead the world on progress in Afghanistan, or is the story simply the truth?

Mr. Arif Lalani: The facts speak for themselves. As you pointed out, it's not me telling you; it's all these other people who told you. There is progress. It's just a long road, and we've got to stay on that road and learn as we go. But we've got to stay on that road because there is progress.

● (2100)

The Chair: Thank you very much, Ambassador.

It's 9 o'clock and we're at the end of our committee meeting. I'm very pleased that we were able to coordinate your schedule with a meeting of the Special Committee on the Canadian Mission in Afghanistan. I thank you very much for having taken time out to meet with us and for your testimony and your frank discussion tonight. Thank you very much.

The meeting is adjourned.

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