

January 25, 2008

The Hon. Stephen Harper, P.C., M.P.
Prime Minister
House of Commons
Parliament Buildings
Ottawa, Ontario
K1A 0A6



Dear Mr. Prime Minister,

I am writing to you in the aftermath of the death of yet another young Canadian soldier in Afghanistan. It is indeed a sad day for our country to lose another young person who undoubtedly had much to contribute. My heart goes out to his parents, family, friends and comrades.

The National Union of Public and General Employees is deeply concerned about the current deployment of Canadian troops in Afghanistan. At our most recent national convention a policy paper entitled "Peace and the global commons" was debated and adopted that looked at Canada's increasing move away from our historical role as peacekeepers. I have included a copy for your consideration.

The section of the paper that deals with Afghanistan is introduced by the following paragraphs:

"As so many young Canadian men and women risk life and limb in Afghanistan it can be difficult to discuss the nature of the mission in a fair and responsible manner. It is only right that all of us honour the women and men serving and that concern for their safety and wellbeing must be the starting point for our discussion.

It is equally true that it is our duty as citizens to question and debate our government when it makes the conscious decision to send our young people in uniform in harm's way.

To do otherwise would be to make light of their sacrifice.

To do otherwise would be to undermine the democracy that these soldiers are serving to defend.

To do otherwise is to diminish the suffering that many Afghans are experiencing."

It is from this perspective I wish to comment on the recent revelations of outgoing military ombudsman Yves Côté and the release of the report from the advisory committee led by the Honourable John Manley.

The National Union agrees with Messrs. Côté and Manley that our troops deserve the best in material and social support that our country can offer them. It is no small matter to choose to serve in our military and we must commit to seeing that they are treated well.

Unfortunately, as both Messrs. Côté and Manley have indicated, our government has not adequately provided necessary support to our troops or their families. Mr. Côté has reported that his office has dealt with far too many families who have faced too much opposition when dealing with either the death or injury of a loved one or when accessing necessary support services. Our country must do better.

Unfortunately, we have consistently seen where money is quickly and easily found for military hardware and for extending the mission in Afghanistan but support for the soldiers and their families is only provided when the government is embarrassed into acting.

Last year, in the wake of eight soldiers killed in Afghanistan, General Hillier called for the creation of a fund to receive charitable donations to help the families of soldiers serving overseas. The families of our soldiers deserve more than charity.

The National Union disagrees with the report from the Manley advisory panel on the necessity of Canadian troops staying in Afghanistan. We have felt, from the beginning, that the decision to deploy troops to Afghanistan was done without the full and democratic debate that such a decision merits.

Once in Afghanistan our mission was changed dramatically without, once again, a serious and open public discussion on the goals of the mission or the likelihood of success.

The advisory panel even indicates that there has been a notable absence of public dialogue on this issue. As was reported in the Globe and Mail (ibid):

"What we're finding in this conflict is that virtually all your information is coming from Defence. Neither Foreign Affairs nor CIDA [Canadian International Development Agency] nor other government departments that are involved are able to give on the record briefings."

There needs to be a full and open public debate on the mission in Afghanistan. It is simply not good enough to say that the troops are there and that all debate must end.

We are completely cognizant of the sacrifices that have already been made by our troops and their families. Canada has suffered the highest ratio of fatalities of any of the coalition forces in Afghanistan.

Indeed, we were dismayed that your government did not loudly demand an apology from U.S. Secretary of Defense Robert Gates when he made disparaging remarks in the Los Angeles Times about NATO forces – including the Canadian forces.

Despite repeated assurances that the situation is improving in Afghanistan, more and more reports indicate that this is not the case. Many analysts and research organizations are starting to suggest that the goals of the mission are unachievable without a change in approach. And finally, many of our NATO allies do not think that there is any chance of success for the current mission.

In our opinion Canada needs to re-evaluate our approach to Afghanistan. As our policy paper states:

The National Union joins the call for Canada to immediately withdraw its troops from Afghanistan and to commit to supporting humanitarian aid, progressive organizations in civil society, and women's organizations.

In addition, we need to embark on a full and public dialogue on an independent foreign policy for Canada.

Sincerely yours,

James Clancy
National President

cc: National Executive Board (NUPGE)

Encl.