

# *Afghanistan: A Choice of Comrades*

Terry Glavin

## I. A Tale of Two Cities

KABUL – Among the many things that are likely to surprise a visitor to this city is the Dari version of Marilyn Manson’s *Personal Jesus* that’s playing on the radio these days. There is also the exuberant courtesy, solicitousness and friendliness of the place, and the fact that at least four million people live here now. That’s about ten times the population of 30 years ago. The city’s motor registry department adds 8,000 new vehicles to its rolls every month.

I have no excuse to be surprised. I’m well-travelled, I’ve made Afghanistan a bit of a personal study over the past few years, I’m a co-founder of the Canada-Afghanistan Solidarity Committee, and among my committee colleagues I count several Kabuli émigrés and activists who have spent a great deal of time here.

Still, nothing quite prepares a visitor for certain things, not least the spectacular contrast between the cosseted little universe inhabited by Kabul’s ‘international community’ over class and the gritty, raucous reality of everyday life among Kabul’s rambunctious masses. It’s as though there are two completely different Kabulis in the world. There’s the city that routinely shows up in English-language dailies – a miniature, Central Asian version of Stalingrad during the siege – and then there’s the one you never hear about, a bustling, heartbreakingly poor but hopeful and splendid city.

The Kabul known to the outside world is the city the *Sunday Telegraph* judged ‘as dangerous as Baghdad at its worst’ shortly after I arrived here. This is the Kabul you can see from the verandas of the city’s justifiably jittery foreign diplomats, aid-agency bureaucrats and journalists. It’s the one with helicopters always flying overhead, and rapid-fire text messages on everyone’s fancy cell phones containing intelligence bulletins about the latest assassination attempts and kidnappings.

Another city entirely is the Kabul I came to know during three weeks of interviews with human rights’ lawyers, polio victims, almond-sellers, seamstresses, football players, cab drivers, teachers and beggars. This the Kabul of the souks and bazaars, the bus stops and back alleys; and no matter what you read in the headlines, its

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citizens are among the most welcoming, happily boisterous and hospitable people on earth.

It is in this other Kabul that you will find a sprawling sub-metropolis where life unfolds in intrigues and excitements all its own among the hordes of kite-flying children on Kabul's flat rooftops. At least 70,000 of these Kabulis are more or less orphans who descend into the streets every day to hawk maps, magazines, and packages of chewing gum, sometimes resorting to begging, ragpicking and the refined art of the pickpocket.

In this vast rooftop district, the talk these days is not about why the international press depicts Kabul in such strange ways, or why there is such silence about Tehran's interferences in Afghan politics by its favours to factions within Hezb-e-Islami, one of Afghanistan's largest political parties. No, the talk is about President Hamid Karzai's early November decree outlawing begging. The decree instructs the Interior Ministry to clear the streets of panhandling ragamuffins by trundling them all off to orphanages and to the network of Dickensian 'care homes' run by the Afghan Red Crescent Society.

Kabulis like a good laugh. There are vast fleets of armour-plated Toyota SUVs ferrying nervous European bureaucrats around Kabul's rubble-strewn streets, but instead of being pelted with bricks, they are made the butt of Kabuli jokes. The black humour goes a long way to explain why all but a few of Kabul's streets remain unpaved after all these years. Here's just one joke: The UN tells Karzai the world has had quite enough of the corruption in his government, and he has to act, once and for all. Karzai responds: Of course! Then he whispers: How much will you pay me to fix it?

But for all his eccentricities and failings, Karzai still enjoys a surprising degree of support here, and it's at least partly because Afghans are wise to the pot-kettle-black context to the regular diplomatic uproars about his regime's payoffs and cash-skimming. The world has pledged roughly \$25 billion to Afghanistan for aid and reconstruction since 2001. The Agency Coordinating Body for Afghan Relief reckons that only \$15 billion has been delivered, and barely half that amount has trickled into the Afghan economy. The rest has been eaten up in ex-pat salaries, consultants' fees, and country-of-origin subcontracts. It is not for nothing that among Kabulis, the foreign administrative caste that sucks up so much of the

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world's commitment to this brutalised country is known as 'the cow that drinks its own milk.'

Even so, Kabulis commonly regard aid bureaucrats with affection, especially the lower-tier workers and the non-governmental-organisation employees who actually spend time with ordinary Afghans. And though you might not know it from your newspapers, six years of polling data shows that most Afghans also consistently express support for the presence of foreign troops.

It was no great surprise, then, that the postures of the 'anti-war' movement based in the world's rich countries leave the Afghan activists I interviewed utterly mystified. Without exception, the proposition that the 39-nation International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) is merely a tool of western imperialism was greeted with derision. As for the notion that the way forward in Afghanistan involves the withdrawal of foreign troops and some kind of brokered pact with the Taliban, the response was invariably wide-eyed incredulity.

There was a range of opinion on these subjects, of course. At one end there was bemusement, and at the other was fury, with a great deal of worry and dread in between.

Perhaps most furious was Fatana Gilani, the head of the Afghanistan Women's Council. Gilani yearns for an Afghanistan that eventually stands on its own without foreign soldiers, and she's a leading voice for a traditional, nation-wide 'jirga' as a possible way forward to disarmament and reconciliation. But she was emphatic in her disgust with all the talk filling the pages of the foreign press about drawing the Taliban into some sort of negotiated power-sharing arrangement. 'Anybody who does this is not a friend of Afghanistan,' she said.

Gilani is a profoundly conservative Muslim, but her sentiments about diplomatic deal-cutting as a means to secure some kind of peace in her country appear to run across the spectrum of Afghan civil society, even to the Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan. RAWA opposes even the 'mini-jirga' process that is bringing Taliban-friendly tribal leaders from the Pakistan-Afghanistan borderlands together with officials from Kabul and Islamabad.

Mahboob Shah, a tireless Kabul anti-poverty activist, said the entrenchment of the rule of law in Afghanistan is critical to the alleviation of hunger, joblessness and

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disease here, and international troops are playing an irreplaceable role in providing necessary security. ‘People who say the foreign soldiers should go away, they do not know what they are saying,’ Shah said. ‘Yes, it should be Afghans who decide, but we have decided that the world should come to us, as a brother.’

Shamsia Sharifi, director of a formerly clandestine operation now called the Hope for Poor Women Organisation (HPWO), laughed out loud at the idea of Taliban peace talks. ‘Maybe your country should make a visa for me,’ she joked. ‘It is very hard, even now,’ she said, referring to the Islamist gangsters and Muslim Brotherhood alumni who still wield influence at the centre of power in this country. ‘But we are very scared of the Taliban coming back.’

Sharifi distributes micro-loans for women’s businesses from a ramshackle house with a half-collapsed roof down a dusty Kabul side street, where HPWO members produce textiles, teach gemstone-polishing, and run adult literacy classes for women in the basement. The struggle Sharifi waged during the Taliban years still goes on, but she can now count 4,000 women among HPWO’s graduates since the Taliban’s 2001 rout. ‘We need to have the troops in Afghanistan,’ she said. ‘If the Taliban come back, the target will be us again.’

And that is the way my conversations went, from Sharifa Ahmadzai, a 75-year-old dressmaker who teaches women how to read in an informal classroom in her home in Baghlan, to the perilous heart of Kandahar City, where 38-year-old Ehsan Ullah Ehsan runs a school for women, a library, a computer lab, an adult-education centre and a free internet cafe.

Ahmadzai lives only a few blocks from a mosque where Taliban thugs routinely deliver written pronouncements calling for her murder. In the days before I visited with Ehsan in Kandahar, the Taliban gunned down a friend of his for the mere crime of working for a government-owned electrical power company. Ehsan himself had just received yet another Taliban ‘night letter,’ warning him he would be killed unless he stopped doing his work. A few days later, a gang of men sprayed acid in the unveiled faces of a group of Kandahar girls on their way to classes. But the girls remained defiant. Nothing will stop us from going to school, they vowed.

Here in the ‘west,’ none of us on the liberal left would fail to recognise these brave women and men as our comrades and allies, and if we were to flatter ourselves we might even imagine them to be our Afghan counterparts. On the question of troop

withdrawal, their views were varied and nuanced, but their answer was ultimately the same: Stay. And yet this is not the position that the left has been fighting for, in the main, in Europe or North America. It changes by degree from country to country, of course, and the left's positions are varied and nuanced. But in Canada, the left's answer is pretty much unequivocal: Leave.

### II. A Cautionary Tale

For anyone whose primary concern about Afghanistan is how best to discharge the duty of solidarity the world owes the Afghan people, the Canadian experience might serve as something of a harbinger of the debates to come, or at the very least, a cautionary tale.

Because Canadian troops were kept on the benches during the Anglo-American showdown with Saddam Hussein's Ba'athists, Canada was more or less unencumbered by the ferocious political divisions set off by the bloody enterprise in Iraq. This didn't last long, however, because one of the most successful troops-out propaganda strategies in Canada has been the mischief of conflating the Iraqi conflict with the Afghan struggle as though the two were merely separate fronts in an American imperialist adventure.

Another success quickly chalked up by Canada's troops-out camp was its deliberate elision of the fundamental differences between the UN, ISAF and NATO approach to Afghanistan – to which Canada has been so deeply committed – and the U.S. approach, first laid down by the former U.S. Secretary of State, Donald Rumsfeld. That simple and simplistic policy was articulated in the most helpfully clear terms by President George W. Bush, when he said, succinctly: 'We are not into nation building.'

It didn't help that the Bush presidency plunged Canada into flights of hysterical anti-Americanism, aggravated by a Conservative prime minister with close political affinities to the Bush White House. Nor did it help that the leadership of the left in Canada had come of age during the Vietnam War, and cleaved to all the fuzzy and comforting counterculture ideas that have made it so difficult for truly progressive analyses to arise from the ashes of 9/11.

Into the vacuum left by the absence of any robust left-wing analysis on the Afghanistan question came Canada's 'anti-war' movement, which rapidly emerged

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as the primary organisational forum for collaboration between Third Worldists and far-right Islamists. This was a bizarre phenomenon, but Canada's news media, in its efforts to offer an uncomplicated and 'balanced' view of the Afghanistan story, conveniently overlooked it. Ignoring the appeals of Canada's progressive Muslims, Canada's left-wing press simply looked the other way.

The result was a troops-out campaign that was allowed to pose as 'anti-war' without being called to account for the deadly consequences of its fundamental demands. For one, a withdrawal of foreign forces from Afghanistan would plunge the country back into the bloodshed that had left hundreds of thousands dead and made refugees out of a quarter of Afghanistan's people during the 1990s. For another, a troop withdrawal would threaten to trigger countless more wars by emboldening the most bloodthirsty jihadists from the Pillars of Hercules to the Banda Sea.

But across the liberal-left, these implications remained unexamined. What mattered more was the protection of Canada's virtue as a refuge from the bad neoconservative vibes emanating from the Bush White House. In these ways, the Canadian debates about Afghanistan became thoroughly infantilised, and by 2006, during the Israel-Hezbollah war, public opinion was turning sharply against Canada's engagement in Afghanistan.

In Ottawa, an unpopular Conservative minority government was at best lukewarm about the engagement. The Liberal Party that first sent battle troops to Kandahar when it was in power had lost all interest in championing the Afghan cause. The only momentum on the Afghanistan question was for withdrawal, and it was gathering steam. Worse still, for those of us who considered ourselves socialists or social democrats, the troops-out momentum was being driven by the central institutions of Canada's mainstream left.

The nominally socialist New Democratic Party settled on an utterly absurd, two-phased approach – first, a full withdrawal of Canadian troops from the UN-sanctioned 39-member ISAF coalition, and then, a policy of meddling in Afghan affairs by directly negotiating with the Taliban. The president of the Canadian Labour Congress was content to refer to the Taliban as the Afghan 'resistance.' An NDP senior adviser and later one of its 'star' candidates went further, calling the Taliban mere 'dissidents' that Ottawa was unreasonably refusing to invite to peace talks. And always, it was just 'George Bush's War.'

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So, when the Canada-Afghanistan Solidarity Committee (CASC) was formed in the autumn of 2007, we knew we were in for an uphill climb. But as we began to seek out prominent Canadians to identify themselves as founding members, we quickly found we had much broader support than we had imagined. Our founders came from across the political spectrum, and though we had our differences, we easily came to a straightforward basis for unity.

The Afghan cause was a liberation struggle, we argued. An international military presence was necessary to create and maintain sufficient democratic space for Afghans to work towards justice, peace and reconciliation. The United Nations wanted us there. The democratically elected government of Afghanistan wanted us there. Human rights are universal, women's rights are human rights, and we owed it to the Afghan people to hear what they had to say for themselves. And what they were saying was: Stay.

The Solidarity Committee set out not just to become another voice in the Canadian debates, but to try to change the conversation entirely. In small ways, we managed to do that, through speaking engagements, opinion pieces in the editorial pages of Canada's newspapers, and radio and television interviews. More recently, a campus group has launched a campaign to raise logistical and financial support for Kandahar University.

It is not as though we had to start from scratch. There were groups with solid Afghan solidarity track records, such as the Canadian Women for Women in Afghanistan and the Toronto-based Afghan Women's Organisation. We also drew from Canada's loosely-knit, marginalised, but young and hopeful Afghan émigré community.

We won our first victory without even having to really fight for it.

With his minority Conservative government on the brink of toppling, Prime Minister Harper threw up his hands and turned the Afghanistan imbroglio over to a panel headed up by John Manley, a former Liberal foreign minister. Earlier this year, the Manley panel delivered a long-overdue rebuke to the Harper government for its lumbering incompetence on Afghanistan, but it also savaged the troops-out isolationists, and proposed a range of policy reforms.

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Manley's recommendations were not all the Solidarity Committee had asked for in its submission to his panel, but his report was close enough. One of Manley's key recommendations was that Canada stick to its commitments in Kandahar through to 2011, which means we could live to fight another day. It helped that around the same time that Manley's report came out, UN secretary-general Ban Ki-Moon blasted the troops-out posture as being 'almost more dismaying' than the opportunism of the Taliban itself, and a 'misjudgement of historic proportions.'

It would be silly to overstate Canada's relevance to Afghanistan's prospects. But Canadian soldiers, along with the British, the Americans and the Dutch, are shouldering the lion's share of the military burden in Afghanistan's southern provinces. And Canada had come within a hair's breadth from withdrawal. If Canada pulled out of Kandahar, wrote commentator David Aaronovitch, the British would be left fatally exposed in Hellmand, and any British withdrawal would have forced the abandoned Americans to rely solely on a futile air war. Pakistan would revert to its duplicities, the Afghan government would collapse, and there would be a spring in the step of every jihadist from Palestine to Malaysia. 'That's before we calculate the cost to women and girls of no longer being educated or allowed medical treatment. And would there be less terror as a result?'

You could say we dodged a bullet. But now that the conflict in Iraq is rapidly winding down in ways that defy the grim forecasts of anti-war polemicists, the United States, particularly, is intent upon ramping up its efforts in Afghanistan. The war for 'hearts and minds' should be ramped up, too, but the main battles in that war aren't being fought in the mud-walled compounds of bleak Afghan deserts. They're unfolding in the rich countries of the world, where it is already fashionable in liberal-left circles to write off Afghanistan as an irredeemably misbegotten place, a folly, and a lost cause.

This is not a war any of us can afford to lose, and it is a disgrace that it has to be fought within the left, but that's what we're stuck with. The central struggle in Afghanistan is not the war with 'the Taliban.' It is a struggle against poverty, illiteracy, and slavery. It's a struggle against an Islamic variation of all the totalitarian, xenophobic, obscurantist and misogynist currents that it has been the historic mission of the left to fight and to defeat.

### III. Yes, They Can

One of the more touching scenes I witnessed in Afghanistan involved no Afghans at all. It was in one of those unlikely places a visitor is surprised to discover in this city, the movie room of the Hare and Hounds bar, in the basement of the Gandamak Lodge, a converted 1930s-era British villa named after the 1842 Gandamak massacre, Britain's most humiliating military defeat in Afghanistan. I believe this is supposed to be ironic.

The place was filled with Americans. They came in several colours, but they were almost all young. They were watching Barack Obama's acceptance speech, live, on the movie room's wide-screen TV. They had just witnessed the largest Democratic Party landslide since the 1964 triumph of Lyndon Johnson, the year of the bloody voter-registration drive in Mississippi. As these bright young Americans, with such beautiful smiles and tears in their eyes, watched Obama speak with his characteristically big-hearted eloquence, it occurred to me that thousands of Afghan voter-registration workers were at that very moment fanning out across the provinces of Kunduz, Faryab, Balkh and Baghlan, in just one more small movement forward for Afghanistan's embryonic democracy.

Spend any amount of time in Afghanistan and it is easy to become cynical. We forget that only weeks before September 11, 2001, Pakistan's spy bosses were directing convoys of arms shipments through the Khyber Pass to Taliban bases, and most of the country was on the verge of starvation. Almost a third of the people were subsisting on emergency gruel packages from the World Health Organisation, and al-Qaeda was churning out tens of thousands of Algerians, Chechens, Filipinos, Saudis and Kashmiris from its training camps. Under the Taliban, it was illegal to sing. Women were livestock.

Now, millions of girls are attending school, three out of every four children have been immunised against childhood diseases, eight in ten Afghans now have access to basic medical services, and there are ten universities, dozens of newspapers, and seven national television stations.

It is so easy these days to add to the growing pile of critiques heaped upon the very idea of humanitarian intervention. But I didn't hear much of that kind of thing at the Hare and Hounds. After Obama had waved his goodbyes to the cameras, the room was alive with all the incoherence one commonly hears from the most

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fervent and idealistic of Obama's supporters. There was a lot of talk about hope, and about leadership.

Obama has been clear enough about one thing. He can be counted on to surge several thousand more American soldiers to Afghanistan. Those soldiers are badly needed, but a mere troop surge is insufficient to meet the challenges facing Afghanistan and the region: Good governance and security, neutralizing Pakistan's 'safe havens,' and the engagement of all of Afghanistan's neighbours in a common strategy. There is also the long-neglected matter of proper coordination between reconstruction, development, and military efforts, a disentanglement of aid-money bottlenecks, and a resolution to the conflicting agendas among NATO allies.

Each of these challenges is complex, but each has also been outlined clearly enough by the likes of Ahmed Rashid, Barnett Rubin, Steve Coll, David Kilcullen and all the other smart people whose ideas Obama has been taking into account. Rubin and Rashid even make a convincing case that in the matter of insurgent holdouts who can be convinced to put the gun down, something like 'negotiations' might even be possible in ways that won't require putting knives in the backs of Afghanistan's brave young democrats and secularists.

Most of the Taliban's foot soldiers are just wizened village chieftains who have ended up on the wrong end of a dispute with a local governor who happens to come from an opposing tribe, or they hail from the legions of desperate, unemployable men who roam the remote corners of the country, or they're refugee-camp survivors. As often as not, their outback conception of 'jihad' is indistinguishable from the more recognisable motives of brigandage and banditry. Their loyalties are as fluid as you might expect. But even if some rapprochement with sections of the 'insurgency' leadership were possible, and some kind of truce resulted, Rubin and Rashid are clear that foreign troops will be required in Afghanistan for a long time to come.

Run down that list of challenges again and what you notice is that each requires leadership, and change, and hope – the vague words that tend to dominate the lexicon of Obama's most loyal supporters. But it could well be that Obama's victory is just as Slavoj Žižek describes it: A 'sign of hope in our otherwise dark times.' And it could be that this is precisely what Afghanistan most needs, 'a sign that the last word does not belong to realistic cynics, from the left or the right.'

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It's all just words, of course. But words can go a long way, and in Afghanistan, the words the people need to hear are these: We will not leave you. We will not betray you. We will not abandon you.

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