

AFGHANISTAN UNDER THE RADAR

- The Real Story on Detainees Might Still Be Told in Ottawa -

As a Member of Parliament who has been working here in Ottawa for more than a year now, I have come to realize some of the most important business gets done far from the public eye. The forty-five minutes of Question Period gives Canadians the impression that their elected representatives do little more than shout at each other, and that pressing issues are rarely resolved.

Over the last two weeks, I have wished that the proceedings of the Standing Committee on Access to Information, Privacy and Ethics, of which I am a member, were given the same amount of exposure. We have been hearing from witnesses to get some clarity about an issue that Canadians should know more about: the human rights reports on detainees in Afghanistan.

We have heard so many versions of what this government did or did not know, concerning the treatment of detainees. Repeated calls for the real story can sound as though one was trying to embarrass the military, or besmirch the good name of our men and women soldiers there. Unfortunately, the heroic work of those serving there is perhaps the only thing that should go unquestioned here. More questionable is this government's treatment of the facts, and their willingness to cloak themselves in those same heroic deeds to conceal their own ineptitude, an ineptitude that has quite clearly jeopardized human rights in a part of the world where we must be adamant, and vigilant, in affirming them.

For the sake of clarity, here are the salient facts, so far: when first questioned about the treatment of detainees, Defense Minister Gordon O'Connor told the House that the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) monitored the situation and reported to the Canadian government. If there were any human rights violations, he assured Canadians, he would know about it from them. A little digging from reporters and concerned citizens, however, revealed two inconsistencies:

1. The ICRC is under no obligation to inform us about the detainees. Indeed, they only inform the government of Afghanistan, and this government can choose whether or not to divulge this information.
2. The Canadian government does compile reports on human rights in merging democracies like Afghanistan. One in particular, from 2006, as first released for an Access to Information request, with significant portions blacked out. A version that was not blacked out, detailing just how woeful the treatment of detainees really is, was "leaked" to the media. So began the shifting narrative of who knew what when, who was responsible, and what actions we were taking. My committee decided to get to the bottom of this and to examine this report in question. The response from Conservative members of this committee was disturbing, to say the least. They filibustered for hours and hours of committee time in a concerted attempt to block the proceedings. Professor Amir Attaran and writer Jeff Esau, two gentlemen who finally got a chance to appear as witnesses, have shed some light on why. They both filed Access to Information requests with the Department of Foreign Affairs for these human rights reports, and the story they have told is one of inexplicable delays, blacked out documents and even, unbelievably, a denial that such reports existed, which was explained away by saying there was a misunderstanding of what was asked for – a Foreign Affairs official claimed that Mr. Esau asked for a "global" report when they only reported "on a country by country basis." I have been left shaking my head in disgust time and time again, with the cynical assumption of this government that Canadians either don't care or don't deserve to know about this situation.

Well, I believe my constituents do care about this issue and they fully understand its importance. Aside from our international obligations to affirm the human rights of detainees under the Geneva Convention, it is simply the right thing, the moral thing to do if we are to have any credibility in the struggle for democracies around the world. They might not be aware that concealing any such document like the human rights report in question is illegal under the Access to Information Act, but again, I know Canadians can smell a cover-up when it is served to them ... even if it is not televised every day.

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