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*by Eugene Lang*

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## THE GENERAL SIR WILLIAM OTTER PAPERS

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# MAKING AFGHANISTAN POLICY— GENERALS, BUREAUCRATS AND POLITICIANS

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*by Eugene Lang*

**T**hanks very much for inviting me to speak to you today. It is a great pleasure and an honour for me to be asked to speak to such a knowledgeable audience in such an impressive and historic institution.

I have been asked to talk to you today about the nexus among generals, civilian government officials and politicians in the making of Canada's Afghanistan policy. This is a central aspect of the book I have written with Janice Stein called *The Unexpected War: Canada in Kandahar*.

Writing a book can be a hazardous undertaking, particularly one that deals with a story that is still being written. There is often a tendency to look at authors as wide ranging experts, and all too often authors enthusiastically get seduced and take up the "expert mantle". I don't claim such expertise. I am not and have never claimed to be an expert on either Afghanistan or the military, although I know something about both subjects based on my experience in the defence department over a three--year period. My "expertise" lies in my knowledge of the defence and foreign policy decision-making process during the 2002-2006 period. Nevertheless, I often get asked what Canada should do next in Afghanistan or what I think about the current mission. Let me be blunt about this--I don't have a clue. And I genuinely believe that anyone who purports to have a clear, definitive answer to that question is not to be trusted. The situation there today is just too complex for certainty.

This leads directly to the questions of what my book is about, if not Canada's military mission in Afghanistan, then what? The book is largely a story about the six-year history of government decision-making on Canada's role in Afghanistan—and the interaction of generals, politicians and bureaucrats in the decision-making process. It's a story of a flawed process of decision-making. It is a story of generally well-intentioned, professional people trapped in an imperfect system that sometimes borders on dysfunctional. It's a story about the worldviews of decision-makers, generals and civilian advisors in the post Cold

War, post-911 period. It's a story about a country—not Afghanistan but Canada—trying to find its way and carve out its identity in the post-911 security environment, in the shadow of the Bush administration. It is a story that is still ongoing, and I want to emphasize that my knowledge lies largely in the story pre-2006.

Nevertheless, I believe the story we tell in the book is a very important one, because it sheds light on why Canada is in Kandahar today and how we got there. I do not believe you can have a sophisticated understanding of Canada's involvement today in Kandahar without understanding that pre-2006 story. This is why I wrote this book. This is the story that I want to share with you today.

In our book, Janice and I try to tell the story of government decision-making, the factors that inform decision-making, who makes the decisions, who advises on them, and the occasional irrationality that creeps into decision-making at the highest levels. It's a story about how Canada's government institutions operate and how its occupants think about the post Cold War, post 911 world and Canada's place in that world. Afghanistan is the central case study of that system.

We don't do in this country what journalists call "history on the run" while the main event is still underway. But that is what this book is an example of. They do it the US and they do it well. And they do it in the UK. We don't typically write these types of books here. I believe our policy--making suffers as a result. We need to hold up the mirror to see how and why we are doing things when we are doing them, not after the fact. To see our shortcomings, so we can adjust on the run rather than waiting 20 years for a "definitive history", when the documents are declassified, when memories of those involved have faded, or key players have passed on, when the event is over and can't be influenced anymore. This event—Canada's involvement in Afghanistan-- is too important to limit ourselves to a post facto analysis.

I watched the government extend the Kandahar mission in 2006 with virtually no debate in Parliament or in the country--and certainly no informed debate-- about what Canada is doing in Kandahar and the nature and depth of the challenge in that country. Our Parliamentarians in all parties were almost universally ignorant about Afghanistan and Canada's involvement there when the House of Commons voted to extend the mission in May 2006. I can count on one hand the number of Parliamentarians across all parties who showed any interest or had any knowledge of the file at that time. During late 2005, as we prepared for the Kandahar deployment, only two MPs out of 308 asked for or expressed interest in being briefed on our efforts in Afghanistan, a country the Canadian Forces had been deployed in for 4 years. At that time, the House of Commons Defence Committee was asked by Defence Minister Bill Graham to hold hearings on the upcoming mission, so Parliamentarians and the public could learn, through expert testimony, what Canada was getting into. The Committee rejected the request.

After the heavy casualties in the first few months of the Kandahar deployment, I realized that part of the reason there had been such little debate was that neither the media nor Parliamentarians had paid much attention to Canada's involvement in Afghanistan over the previous 4 years. To my mind that was a big problem. Canadians need to understand that lineage. Today's mission is part of a continuum of government decision-making stretching back nearly 7 years. It can't be understood in isolation from that political history.

### **Three Points of Analysis**

When you look at the history of government decision-making on Afghanistan three things stand out, and these are the central analytical points in our book.

The first is that every major decision--certainly during the Chretien and Martin governments-- was driven primarily by perceptions, considerations, angst, inferiority complexes etc. about Canada's image in Washington, about Canada-US political and Canada-US military relations in the post 911 world. And I would argue, in many cases our calculations and understanding about the United States, its interests, its desires, what the US allegedly wanted from Canada, who we are even talking about when we say "Washington wants x, y or z from us" was often ill-informed, and in some cases naive or even wishful in think-

ing. In some cases it was just plain wrong. We consistently over-estimated our significance in Washington throughout the whole piece. The reality is Canada just doesn't matter that much at the highest political or military levels in Washington no matter what we do or don't do. Let me underscore that point. The United States is a global military superpower, perhaps the only one with strategic interests all over the world and the ability to project overwhelming military force anywhere and anytime. Canada's national and foreign policy interests, not to mention our military capabilities, just do not fit into that equation and never will. That reality should condition our policy-making more that it has in recent years.

The second analytical point that emerges from the story is that no government in Ottawa has never really had what I would call a coherent, long-term, sophisticated Afghanistan policy, befitting a country, region and conflict of this complexity. The Harper government is perhaps closer to it now than either the Chretien or Martin governments got, but they still have a long way to go.

Canada's involvement in Afghanistan since 911 has been a story of a series of ad hoc decisions, taken at particular points in time, under particular circumstances and political pressures, for short-term missions or deployments, with little recognition of the long-term challenge. The decisions were driven by factors that had little to do with the realities and challenges of Afghanistan. The notable drivers of Afghanistan policy in the crucial, formative period from 2003-05, when the decision to take on the current assignment in Kandahar was made, were Canada's decisions to stay out of the Iraq war in 2003 and to reject participation in the US Ballistic Missile Defence project in 2005. A significant Canadian Forces role in Afghanistan was viewed, to varying degrees, by politicians, generals, diplomats and civil servants in Ottawa as a partial solution to these alleged problems and stresses in Canada-US relations.

The third analytical point that emerges from this story is that our institutions in Ottawa are not well-configured to engage in the type of conflict we find ourselves in Kandahar--what retired British Lieutenant General Rupert Smith calls "wars amongst the people", or counterinsurgency. Our foreign and defence policy institutions are not designed, funded, or organized for counter-insurgency and, with few exceptions, our generals, politicians, diplomats, and civil servants have virtually no experience in wars

amongst the people. This should not come as a surprise when you consider that prior to the spring of 2006 these institutions and their inhabitants had never been called upon to work on a counterinsurgency. Counterinsurgency has never before been central to Canadian foreign and defence policy. It is at the heart of it today.

Our foreign policy institutions—The Department of Foreign Affairs, The Department of National Defence, CIDA, and the Privy Council Office-- now need to catch up with our policy decisions. That is a long tough road. Reforming institutions in Ottawa could take almost as much time as defeating an insurgency in Kandahar. The resistance from politicians, generals and civilian officials—from the system if you will---could be equally fierce. No one should understate the financial, cultural, operational and intellectual impediments to this in Ottawa. But we have to overcome the impediments. I don't believe for a minute the CF will be out of Afghanistan in 2011 regardless of the government in power in Ottawa. We're in for the long haul now whether we like it or not.

### **The Road to Kandahar**

I won't run through the full history of Canada's policy making on Afghanistan, which is covered in considerable detail in my book. Instead, I'm going to start the road to Kandahar in 2004-05.

In the Spring of 2004 Canada had a new Prime Minister, Paul Martin, elected to head the first minority government in Ottawa in a quarter century. Martin had grand—some of his critics would say naive or illusory--ambitions to change Canada's international image, make Canada a bigger player on the world stage, and re-build a Canadian military he played a key role in eroding—some would say dismantling-- when he was Finance Minister in the 1990s (he admits this himself today).

Martin began by appointing a new Defence Minister, Bill Graham, who had previously been Foreign Minister under both Martin and Prime Minister Chretien, and had also been the long-serving and distinguished Chair of the House Foreign Affairs Committee and before that a professor of international law down the road from here at the University of Toronto. Graham had a more sophisticated understanding of diplomacy, Canadian foreign policy, and international history than anyone in the Martin government or anyone in Parliament for that matter. He

knew the value of the military as a central instrument of foreign policy, especially in the post Cold War period. He was exceptionally well qualified for the job of Defence Minister.

A few months after taking office Graham recommended Rick Hillier to be the next CDS. Martin agreed. Hillier is probably the most qualified CDS operationally speaking in a generation or more. And he is one of the most articulate, strategic and forceful personalities in Ottawa today.

Three personalities—Martin, Graham and Hillier—dominated Ottawa's foreign and defence policy apparatus during that time. No one should ever underestimate the role and influence of personalities in shaping events, in deciding the course a government takes—in making history. Personalities can be decisive and they were in this case.

This new minority government had a major policy decision on its plate. It was a hold over decision from the previous government, which, in its final days, had committed at a NATO meeting in Brussels in late 2003 that Canada would contribute a so-called Provincial Reconstruction Team to Afghanistan after our lead nation role in ISAF in Kabul ended in 2004.

There had been a discussion—or debate—among generals, diplomats and public servants in DND and Foreign Affairs for over a year on where and when this PRT would be deployed. There are some revisionist historians running around Ottawa today claiming Kandahar was the only option ever considered. This audience will of course know that the military never prepares just one option for consideration. There were in fact four on the table in this instance.

One option was to remain in Kabul with either a smaller force in ISAF—scaling back from the 2,000 troops Canada had there, which the generals said was not sustainable beyond one year-- or replacing that force with a PRT in Kabul. The NATO Sec Gen, Jaap de Hoop Scheffer, met Martin a few weeks after he became PM to urge him to re-commit to Kabul beyond the scheduled end date for Canada. Martin made no commitment because he didn't know what he wanted to do at that point, either in Afghanistan or elsewhere in the world. And Martin's Ministers, their officials and the generals had not reached

consensus on what to recommend to the Prime Minister on the Afghanistan file. The system ground on and the internal debate continued.

Another option was to partner in a PRT with the Italians in Herat, in western Afghanistan. Some officials in the Department of Foreign Affairs favoured this option, in part because they saw it as giving a new dimension to Canada's Iranian policy, given Herat's proximity to Iran. But there was no appetite among the generals for Herat—the timelines for standing up the Herat PRT didn't work for the CF and the military leadership at the time didn't have much confidence in the Italians as partners.

A third option was to partner with the Lithuanians in a place called Chagcharan, located roughly in between Kabul and Herat, in the north central part of Afghanistan. This was where the NATO Secretary General wanted Canada. I was in the room when de Hoop Scheffer called Graham and pressured him to commit to Chagcharan—months earlier de Hoop Scheffer told Martin he wanted Canada to remain in Kabul, but over time the Sec Gen and the NATO bureaucracy evidently changed its mind. They now wanted Canada in Chagcharan. CDS Ray Henault, Deputy CDS Admiral Greg Maddison, and Lieutenant General Rick Hillier, then Chief of the Land Staff, and others--were adamantly opposed to Chagcharan. They saw the location as too isolated, too risky, with little visibility or profile. Canada would get no credit for being there. Civilian officials in DND agreed. Graham accepted this view and rejected de Hoop Scheffer's entreaties. The system ground on and the debate among the generals, civilian officials and diplomats in Ottawa on Canada's next move in Afghanistan continued.

A fourth option was returning to Kandahar where a CF battle group had been deployed with the Americans in 2002. A Kandahar PRT would be working with the Americans again, but would eventually come under NATO-- ISAF "Stage 3" expansion. In fact part of the argument the generals and the DND civilian officials advanced for Kandahar was that Canada could help facilitate stage 3 expansion by being there with a PRT. For those who state that we are only in Kandahar because of Rick Hillier, I should mention that a PRT in Kandahar became the favoured option of his predecessor Ray Henault in late 2004, although he never formally recommended it to Graham.

But there was no consensus among officials, or formal recommendation to the government, on the Kandahar location. The system ground on, the debate among the generals, civilian officials and diplomats continued.

Then, in Feb 2005, something changed, causing ripples through the Ottawa system. Rick Hillier was appointed CDS. Within two weeks of that appointment he broke the logjam and formally recommended the Kandahar option to Graham. The civilian officials in both DND and DFA fell into line behind Hillier.

But Hillier envisaged much more than a PRT in Kandahar, as Henault had favoured. Hillier recommended a five element package that consisted of a battle group, PRT, command of the multinational Headquarters, special forces and a Strategic Advisory Team that would work inside Afghan government ministries in Kabul—about 2,500 personnel in total. It was an integrated package that seemed even to the non-military eye to have logic and coherence. The generals described the mission as challenging, dangerous, complex—a so-called Three Bloc war scenario-- involving combat, reconstruction, humanitarian assistance, not to mention intelligence and command responsibilities. It was to be one year in duration at a cost of about \$1 billion. And it would constitute the most significant Canadian military operation in decades, putting Canada on the map with NATO, the US and other allies. It would be a transformational mission for the military and it would transform Canada's role in the world. Generals, politicians and civil servants thought it could be sold to Prime Minister Martin on that basis.

Graham agreed with Hillier's proposal. Foreign Affairs officials also agreed with it, as did the Foreign Minister. Having crossed these hurdles Graham and the Foreign Minister recommended it formally to Martin in writing. But it wasn't long before it became clear that the PM had little interest in Afghanistan. He saw the CF role there as a legacy of his predecessor, and he wanted to set himself apart from his predecessor as much as possible. His civilian advisors agreed with him—Afghanistan was not to be the focus of this government's foreign and defence policy. The Prime Minister and his staff, including senior officials in the PCO, wanted a different international focus for this government, although they were not entirely sure what it would be. Afghanistan was not a priority. So this big Kandahar idea would prove to be a tough sell to the PM, especially given the huge financial cost to the government.

Graham, Pettigrew, Hillier and the PM's senior bureaucratic and political advisors eventually met to discuss the Kandahar proposal in the early spring of 2005. The meeting was positive yet inconclusive, with the PM doing most of the probing and asking both the tough and in some cases very basic questions. Martin, the Afghanistan skeptic, wanted iron clad guarantees that agreeing to this mission would not constrain him from deploying the CF to Sudan, Haiti or the Middle East in a year's time—his foreign policy priorities. He asked Hillier, the Foreign Minister and his officials to develop a strategy for Canada to take a lead diplomatic, and if necessary military, role to help resolve the Darfur crisis. Hillier left that meeting with immediate plans to go to Haiti and Sudan, assess the situation on the ground, and develop realistic options for the PM's consideration—and go to both places he did in short order.

It took about two more months of internal deliberation in the Prime Minister's Office, and consultations between the PMO and the Finance Minister, before Martin finally agreed to the Kandahar mission, conditional on having sufficient troop capacity to deploy to Sudan or Haiti, or perhaps even the Middle East, by early 2007. He got that assurance from Hillier. And he also, within a few weeks, got a Darfur strategy from the CDS.

The Ottawa system—bureaucrats, politicians, diplomats, political advisors—offered little resistance or “challenge function” to the Kandahar option, which in hindsight is surprising given the significance of this move. The lack of resistance resulted from the fact that the Kandahar recommendation was made at almost precisely the same time as the Government rejected, after a wrenching, lengthy, internal debate, participation in the US missile defence project—BMD. Many senior civilian officials and generals, and some politicians, thought this rejection of BMD would be catastrophic for Canada US relations, especially given that it was just two years after Canada had unceremoniously rejected participation in the Iraq war. How could another Canadian PM, who promised to rebuild the Ottawa-Washington relationship in the wake of the Iraq decision, possibly say no to Bush twice on one the US's most fundamental national security priorities? This was regarded among bureaucrats, generals and politicians as unsustainable, beyond the pale. Something had to be done. The Kandahar proposal was seen in this context. It was viewed in part as a way to compensate for rejecting the Americans on Iraq and BMD, because it was

thought this military contribution would be highly valued by Washington, and not just the Pentagon. I suspect in the final analysis Martin would have approved some form of Kandahar deployment—probably a more scaled back one—even if Canada agreed to participate in BMD. The real legacy of the BMD decision is that it prematurely cut off debate, challenge and criticism of the Kandahar proposal inside government, a debate that might have yielded important information, slowed down the decision-making process, and shaped the ultimate policy.

## Conclusion

To conclude I want to leave you with a few key messages.

First, we still have not had in this country or I suspect even within the government itself the fundamental debate that will hopefully achieve a degree of consensus about what Canada's realistic objectives are in Afghanistan, and how we seek to achieve those objectives with the CF and other instruments of our foreign policy.

The Harper government has embraced this mission as a defining feature or image of their government. They have risked the defeat of their government in Parliament twice over extensions to this mission. That shows a degree of commitment to this cause that I can't imagine the Martin government having. However, the Harper government's objectives in Afghanistan, as articulated in public, are no clearer than their predecessors. Polls show Canadians are confused about this mission, why we are there, and what we are doing there. They are justified in being confused.

Second, this story I have told you today, this story about the interaction of generals, civilian officials and politicians in making Afghanistan policy—is a story of Canada digging itself incrementally, almost imperceptibly, deeper and deeper into an extraordinarily socially, culturally and historically complex, conflict ridden, tribal, poverty stricken, economically decimated country—one that we knew almost nothing about a few years ago, and that I suspect our government and even our military still knows far too little about today.

How do we measure success in a country like this, where Afghans measure time by generations, and we measure time by six month troop rotations and one or two

year deployment commitments? As the old saying goes, we may have the watches but the Afghans have the time.

Our notions of democracy, freedom, the rule of law, a free press, a professional, non-corrupt government, and a decent and fair judicial and penal system, will likely never be understood or accepted in a highly decentralized, tribal society like Afghanistan. Recently the head of the Afghan Parliament's election committee stated "If they (the international community) want to hold all these elections then all Afghans will ever do is vote." Afghanistan is not and can never be the United States, a country in a perpetual state of elections. In Afghanistan elections can be a source of instability. We need to keep in mind we are talking about a country where anyone under 45 years old knows nothing but war and an opium economy.

Third, the actions of our political leaders—in three separate governments—and the officials who advise them have a limited understanding of the principles of war. And in particular almost no understanding of the age old but still relevant Clausewitzian dictum that war is a continuation of politics by other means. That is the fundamental essence of the relationship among generals, politicians and civilian officials. And for those who would think this is an outdated idea, I want to quote Rupert Smith again from his recent, brilliant and acclaimed book *The Utility of Force*:

"In international affairs we tend to place the highest priority on what we do rather than on what will achieve our ultimate object. This is because we sometimes have not defined our object in sufficient detail, and sometimes because in taking action we forget there are higher priorities. . . I must emphasize the importance of understanding the desired outcome before deciding whether or not military force has a part to play in achieving it. Only by knowing what you want can you frame the questions to ask of the analysts and intelligence services; and only in knowing what you want in terms of the political outcome can you decide what it is you want the military to achieve."

I would add to this we must be rigorously realistic about our ultimate objective, about what we want to achieve, and here I am talking about our political objectives, not our military objectives. I'm not sure we are or ever have been in our thinking about Afghanistan.

Fourth, the fundamental question that wasn't asked when I was in government by any of us—politicians, bureaucrats, diplomats, generals, political advisors--and that no one is asking today, much less answering, is how important is Afghanistan to Canada's long-term foreign and national security policy interests, and how much blood and treasure are Canadians and their governments prepared to commit to this unfortunate country? Should Afghanistan be Canada's central foreign policy priority for years to come, to the exclusion of other priorities, as it is today? Because make no mistake this is a long-term assignment that will dominate our foreign policy and absorb most of our military and foreign aid resources, if we want to have any real effect in that country. That is the big unanswered question that leaps out of the pages of the Manley report, which calls for an open ended commitment to Kandahar, implying that Afghanistan should be Canada's central foreign policy preoccupation for a decade or more.

No government in Ottawa has been clear on that basic point—how important is Afghanistan to our interests and our values. Those questions were not asked or answered when successive government's decided to take on various missions in that country because everything was viewed as short-term commitments. After seven years of CF engagement in Afghanistan, 82 deaths, hundreds of Canadian casualties, billions and billions of taxpayers dollars spent, and no realistic end anywhere in sight, it is a question that needs answering or at least demands an honest debate.

Thank you. 🍁

***The views expressed are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Institute or its members.***

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#### ***Author Biography***

*Eugene Lang served twelve years in the Government of Canada in various capacities including Chief of Staff to two Ministers of National Defence, John McCallum and Bill Graham. In 2006-07, he was a Visiting Fellow at the Munk Centre for International Studies, University of Toronto.*

*Lang is co-author of two books including most recently *The Unexpected War: Canada in Kandahar* (with Janice Gross Stein), Penguin Canada, 2007, which won the Writer's Trust Shaughnessy Cohen Prize for political writing and was named one of the *Globe and Mail's* top 100 books of 2007. The book has also been made into a documentary film for Global-TV called *The**

*Path to War.*

*A frequent contributor to The Toronto Star and The Globe and Mail, Lang's writings have also appeared in MacLean's, The National Post, Policy Options, e-Merge and Walrus, and foreign publications such as the International Herald Tribune. He has*

*appeared widely in print and electronic media as a commentator on Canada's involvement in Afghanistan, including on CBC Radio, CBC TV, Radio Canada, Radio Canada International and CTV. Lang was invited to testify before the Independent Panel on Canada's Future Role in Afghanistan (The Manley Commission).*

