

# COMMENT

**“**I will leave City Hall at the end of this term knowing that I am passing on to the next mayor a city that has turned the corner and regained its confidence.  
**MAYOR BOB BRATINA**

## Afghanistan: Mission not accomplished

The country’s old politics and history are about to resume



GWYNNEDYER

Britain’s Prime Minister David Cameron rambled a bit on his visit to Afghanistan last December, but ended up sounding just as deluded as U.S. President George W. Bush had been when he proclaimed “Mission accomplished” six weeks after the invasion of Iraq. British troops were sent to Afghanistan, Cameron said, “so it doesn’t become a haven for terror. That is the mission... and I think we will have accomplished that mission.”

Prime Minister Stephen Harper was equally upbeat when addressing Canadian troops just before they pulled out in 2011. Afghanistan no longer represents a “geostrategic risk to the world (and) is no longer a source of global terrorism,” he said. Both men are technically correct, since Afghanistan never was a “geostrategic risk to the world” or “a haven for terror,” but they must both know that the whole war was really a pointless waste of lives.

Obviously, neither man can afford to say that the soldiers who died in obedience to the orders of their government (448 British troops, 158 Canadians) died in vain, but U.S. President Barack Obama has found a better way to address the dilemma: He just doesn’t offer any assessment of the campaign’s success. “I never doubted Obama’s support for the troops, only his support for their mission,” wrote former U.S. Defence Secretary Robert Gates, and he was right.

Now there’s another “election” coming up in Afghanistan (on April 5), and at least three-quarters of the remaining foreign troops (perhaps all of them) will be gone from the country by the end of this year, and the whole thing is getting ready to fall apart. This will pose no threat to the rest of the world, but it’s going to be deeply embarrassing for the Western leaders who nailed their flags to this particular mast.

The election is to replace President Hamid Karzai, who has served two full terms and cannot run again. It will be at least as crooked as the last one in 2009: 20.7 million voter cards have already been distributed in a country where there are only 13.5 million people over the age of 18. Karzai is so confident of remaining the power behind the throne that he is building his “retirement” residence next to the presidential palace, but he’s probably wrong.

It’s not that the Taliban will sweep back to power all over Afghanistan once Western troops leave. They really only controlled the Pashtun-majority areas of the east and south and the area around the capital even when they were “in power” in 1996-2001, while the Tajiks, Uzbeks and Hazaras of the “Northern Alliance” ruled the rest.

That pattern is likely to reappear, with the Taliban and the northern warlords pushing politicians like Karzai aside — probably not at once, when most or all of the Western troops go home at the end of this year, but a while later, when the flow of aid (which accounts for 97 per cent of Afghan government spending) finally stops.

The U.S.-backed government of South Vietnam did not collapse when American troops went home in 1973, but two years later, when Congress cut the aid to Saigon. The Soviet-backed government of Afghanistan did not collapse when Soviet troops withdrew in 1989, but three years later, after the Soviet Union collapsed and Russia cut the aid. It will happen that way again.

The new part-Taliban Afghanistan that emerges will be no more a source of international terrorism than the old part-Taliban Afghanistan was. It was Osama bin Laden and his merry men, mostly Arabs and a few Pakistanis, who plotted and carried out the 9/11 attacks, not the Taliban.

True, bin Laden et al. were guests on Afghan soil at the time, but it is highly unlikely that they told the Taliban about the attacks in advance. After all, they were probably going to get their hosts’ country invaded by the United States; best not to bring it up. And there have been no international terrorist attacks coming out of Afghanistan in the past eight years, although the Taliban already control a fair chunk of the country.

The election will unfold as Karzai wishes, and his preferred candidate (exactly who is still not clear) will probably emerge as the new president, but this truly is a case of rearranging the deck-chairs on the Titanic. The second long foreign occupation of Afghanistan in half a century is drawing to a close, and Afghanistan’s own politics and history are about to resume.

Gwynne Dyer is an independent journalist whose articles are published in 45 countries.

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## My dog ate my homework, Version 2

All I had to do was read one book. But things got in the way ...



PAUL BENEDETTI

I can’t get anything read anymore.

I get two newspapers a day, and I can’t get through them.

Sure, I scan the news pages and, of course, check the obits, but then I bog down. I see articles I want to read, and I promise myself I will get to them later, so I cut them out and put them on the fridge with a magnet. Right now our refrigerator door has so many clippings on it, it looks like the bride at a Ukrainian wedding after the money dance.

I also have books piled up beside my bed. I’ve been meaning to read them — since 2010. This problem would not be a big deal if you could keep it private. You know, when people ask what you’re reading, you can say, “Well, War and Peace, among other things.” When they ask what you think of it, you just say, “You know those Russians, so dark — and all that vodka.” Then quickly head to the canape table.

But recently my problem became public. I was so far behind for the last book-club book that I tried reading the whole novel in the final two days. The night before the meeting, I found myself in the living room after dinner reading so vigorously, I was sweating. Then I realized something. I was a grown man (OK, a semi-grown man) and I was actually CRAMMING for a book club meeting!

What would be next — sneaking in crib notes? Outsourcing the reading to India? (Hey, that’s not a bad idea. Note to self: Call Mumbai.)

Still, it was humiliating going to the meeting and admitting that you haven’t even gotten past the first two chapters. And it’s especially tough in our club where guys will breeze in and say, “I really liked the book. Read it today, while standing in the grocery line.”

So, you’re embarrassed that you have nothing to

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say about the book. And why? You didn’t have enough time in the last two months to read a couple hundred pages? What were you doing — working on the Higgs Boson? (Actually, I think one guy in our group IS working on the Higgs particle.)

No, you have to admit you’ve been doing other very important things — like reading trashy magazines. GQ had Katie Perry on the cover last month. That issue alone occupied several hours.

You’d like to take a page from the government’s playbook and tell people you’ve been tied up with “matters of national security,” but really you’ve been frittering away hours watching comedy sketches on YouTube and trolling Twitter to see if anyone is saying anything important. (They’re not.)

And, though you can’t admit this to the guys, you’ve been binge watching Downton Abbey instead of reading. At least you’re not watching it while eating chocolate with a nice moisturizer on your face. (OK, you’re not eating chocolate.) In fact, you’ve been doing pretty much anything instead of reading the book. In other words, it’s university all over again, this time without the beer pong and toga parties. (Hey, it was the ’70s. Everyone was wearing togas. Even the profs.)

That’s all true, but the real reason for not getting the book finished is even more embarrassing.

Each night, you promise yourself you’re going to read before bed, so you stack up the pillows, open the book — and instantly fall asleep. Often you read as much as one entire page before going unconscious. If the book is difficult, this goes down a bit — to say, three sentences.

Then, on the rare night when you can keep your eyes open past 10 p.m., you find it impossible to read because your wife has her iPad in bed and is playing some strange online game that makes a loud PING-ING noise every three seconds.

“What is that?” you say.

“It’s Spider Solitaire.”

“Does it have to ping like that?”

“No, but I like it. It tells me I’m successful. I find it calming.”

“Well, it’s driving me insane.”

“Don’t fret, honey. One of us will be asleep in a few seconds, anyway.”

She’s right, of course.

Hey, does anyone have Coles Notes for The Orenda?

Paul Benedetti lives in Hamilton. He teaches journalism at Western University.

## Uganda: Gay Ground Zero



THOMAS FROESE

KAMPALA, UGANDA Fear is a strange thing, which is why it’s so hard to look into the eyes of another human being that you’re about to gas or bomb or, in the case of Uganda’s gays, throw to the lions.

This is also why President Yoweri Museveni recently refused to meet with Uganda’s gay community — there were repeated requests — before signing Uganda’s infamous anti-gay law.

The new law means even touching with the intent of a homosexual act — try to prove or disprove this one — will get you seven years.

Short of jail — a life sentence for a single homosexual act — there’s obviously also a new chill on the street here. In this country of almost 40 million, gays likely number several hundred thousand. And because African cultures are very community-driven, mob justice can easily rule.

So, as recently happened at a Kampala taxi park, women wearing skirts too short can be stripped and beaten. How much more a target is the gay person trying to survive a kick to the head, or brick through the window, or the so-called “treatment,” reparative rape?

Fear.

But you’re the president, for 28 years actually, and there’s another election soon, and when even outside polls show 96 per cent of your citizens oppose homosexuality, how can you meet for tea and biscuits with any gay man?

Now there’s also this golden opportunity to stand up to the west, the colonialist west, to say no to its cultural imperialism and immorality, and no you don’t need its dirty aid money either.

That’s the view from Uganda, Gay Ground Zero.

Ground Zero because much of this ignited when a few American activists, so-called Christians, came to warn locals — MPs, clerics, lawyers, thousands of students — of the so-called global gay agenda. One, Scott Lively, wrote supporters how hopeful he was when told his 2009 visit was like a nuclear bomb exploding.

Indeed, shortly later, Uganda’s parliament introduced its initial Kill the Gays bill, since softened to jail. A gay activist group has also since sued Lively in a Massachusetts court for the resulting arrests and beatings and murders of some gays here in Kampala.

This is what happens with nuclear bombs.

**Fear and politics and misguided religiosity have made this a very dangerous place to be homosexual**

They’re not so precise. They leave collateral damage. Radiation lingers. Because of the misguided religiosity of radical activists, what, for example, is the counter-attitude toward conservative Christians in places like, say, Hamilton?

But Ugandans have taken ownership of this issue. It’s their country and, like any, it has its ways. Even pro-gay Ugandans now wish the west would butt out because the more it riles itself up and pushes for aid penalties, the harder it is for Uganda’s gays.

There are, in fact, gay sex crimes here, predators paying for sex in schools. They abuse and confuse and destroy youth who find it hard to refuse money otherwise never imagined. It’s a forced prostitution that needs to be punished as any sexual perversion, gay or heterosexual.

Then again, why not create and demonize a larger enemy? Charge it with destroying families. You hear this on your side of the ocean too. Really, though, it doesn’t take much to see that families everywhere are destroying themselves quite fine on their own.

Fear.

Finally, Museveni told the world on cable news that he signed Uganda’s new law only after Ugandan scientists confirmed homosexuality is simply learned behaviour. There’s no genetic cause. None.

Thank you Ugandan scientists. We’re all relieved to finally have the final word, such conclusive knowledge, about the mysteries and nuances of human sexuality. No?

No, the truth is that there’s a political whiff in the air.

And that fear.

It’s a powerful force, like in the ancient world, everyone in the coliseum watching. Then your thumbs go down. Then the thunderous and terrible roar of the crowd.

Uganda is hardly alone in all this. Homosexuality is illegal in 67 countries. In 10 others, it officially carries the death penalty. This, if you’re not beaten dead first.

Westerners call this state-sanctioned homophobia. Here it’s called cultural sovereignty. Whatever, it amounts to the same dark sport.

This is our world. There will be a day of reckoning someday. But that’s in another time and place.

Author and journalist Thomas Froese is a Hamiltonian in East Africa most of the year. Read him at [www.dailydad.net](http://www.dailydad.net) and [www.thomasfroese.com](http://www.thomasfroese.com)



## BRIEFLY

Short and excerpted comments sent to [letters@thespec.com](mailto:letters@thespec.com)

**Tory attack ads waste donations**

Once again, while watching local TV, we are being treated to the usual federal Conservative attack ads against a Liberal leader — and months ahead of the next election. One question comes to my mind: What do people who donate to the Tory party think when they see how their hard-earned money is being used for such a juvenile practice? Here’s hoping the opposition parties will continue to take the high road and not descend to these schoolyard bully tactics.

I believe the Canadian electorate is not so shallow and unthinking as to be swayed by these ads. Perhaps this time around, the odious practice will backfire.

**LORNE SORGE, DUNNVILLE**

**Quebec nation? I'd drive around it**

I read in The Spectator that Canadian tourists will be welcome in Quebec if it separates from Canada. Someone should tell this Pauline Marois, the premier, that Quebec is and always will be part of Canada. Quebec Liberal leader Philippe Couillard says Quebec independence would destroy the rest of Canada. Really? I am a proud Canadian and I love all provinces. If this independent Quebec ever did happen, they should not get any money for this “new country” from our government and let them use their own dollar money.

I for one would travel through the U.S. to go around them to get to the rest of Canada.

**DOROTHY MADELINE, HAMILTON**

**Pols should try Ontario Works**

With regard to the plan to freeze MPPs’ pay, both MPPs and MPs should be happy with the salaries they get. Try living on the Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP) or Ontario Works for a month or two.

**ROBERT WOODS, HAMILTON**

**I loved Thursday's front-page display**

Thank you for the lovely, humorous front page of Thursday’s Spectator! Someone there has a wonderful sense of humour. I loved it!

**PATRICIA MARGETTS, DUNDAS**