

PARLIAMENT AND THE DETAINEE ISSUE

Introduction



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Focus

On April 27, 2010, the Speaker of the House of Commons ruled on a long-standing dispute between the Conservative government and opposition parties in Parliament over the release of documents on the treatment of Afghan detainees. In this story, we look at the roots and development of that dispute as well as the meaning and potential impact of the Speaker's ruling.

Quote

"Is it possible for the two sides, working together in the best interest of the Canadians they serve, to devise a means where both their concerns are met? Surely that's not too much to hope for."
— House of Commons Speaker Peter Milliken (*The Globe and Mail*, April 28, 2010)

The House of Commons Special Committee on the Canadian Mission in Afghanistan has been investigating serious allegations about the treatment of Afghan detainees in the Afghanistan war zone. Several witnesses have testified that, between 2005 and 2007, the Canadian military turned over captured Afghan nationals to Afghan authorities, fully aware that these Afghan prisoners were likely to be tortured by the local authorities. This action is contrary to international law; individuals who turn over prisoners who are likely to be tortured can be tried for war crimes.

Other witnesses, including members of the military, diplomats, and members of government, deny these allegations. They insist that the military had no knowledge that torture was being used on the detainees they surrendered, and that once they received information that torture was perhaps being used, a new agreement was signed that provided for supervision of the detainees following their transfer.

To resolve the disparity in testimony, the Special Committee has tried to obtain hundreds of documents from the government dealing with what has come to be called the Afghan detainee question. The government has refused to provide much of what the committee wants. Any documents it has released have been heavily censored. That is, much of the information has been

blacked out. The government argues that much of the requested information cannot be released because it is a matter of national security and would jeopardize Canada's Afghan mission.

In December, the scene was set for a major confrontation when the Commons passed a motion demanding that the government release its documents uncensored and unedited to the House. Failure to comply would result in a motion of privilege—a request that Peter Milliken, the Speaker of the House, rule that the government had failed to respect the rights, powers, and privileges of Parliament. In other words, he would be asked to determine which institution is the supreme authority in Canada: the government or Parliament itself.

In March the opposition parties passed that motion, and on April 27 the Speaker ruled that the documents must be turned over. As the next day's headline in *The Globe and Mail* reported, "Parliament Has the Power." But the Speaker also insisted that protecting national security was an obligation for both parties, and a negotiated compromise solution was the only solution that would truly benefit the country.

As this *News in Review* story is being written, the four political parties are negotiating to find such a solution. A failure to do so could have devastating consequences, including a bitter election fight than no one really wants.

To Consider

One of the problems that must be resolved if a compromise is to be reached is how the Special Committee members can guarantee that national security will not be compromised if they view uncensored documents. According to many observers, parliamentary committees are notorious as sources of leaked information. What measures might the committee take to ensure that leaks of classified information do not occur?

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Video Review

Quote

“The people who are elected are the ones whose job it is to determine what’s the public’s interest.”
— NDP MP Jack Harris
(*Toronto Star*, March 14, 2010)

Quote

“Make no mistake, the methods of the NDS are well known. It’s electric shocks, it’s pulling out toenails, it’s beating people with chains, it’s hanging them for days.” — Paul Champ, lawyer for Amnesty International (CBC News, April 6, 2010)

Pre-viewing Activity

With a partner or in a small group discuss the following questions and write your responses in the spaces provided.

1. Should prisoners of war or those detained in a war zone have the same rights as other citizens?

2. If the military really believes that a prisoner knows information that might be able to save a Canadian soldier or help to put troops out of harm’s way is it acceptable to use torture to obtain that information?

3. If Canada allows human rights abuses during war time, does that threaten the very core values of our country?

4. If a government is aware that torture is occurring and they do nothing to stop it, is it guilty of a war crime?

Video Questions

As you watch the video respond to the questions in the spaces provided.

1. What is the issue at the heart of this parliamentary crisis?

2. What was the government’s initial response to the charges?

3. What did Richard Colvin say about the matter?

4. a) Why did Prime Minister Harper say that he was proroguing Parliament at the end of December?

b) What reasons did his critics give for prorogation?

5. Why were the opposition parties upset that Frank Iacobucci had been asked to review the Afghan detainee documents?

6. What did the opposition parties ask Speaker of the House Peter Milliken to do instead?

7. What was the government's response to the opposition request of the Speaker?

8. What lie was the government caught in about the release of detainees?

9. What claim did Malgarai Ahmadshah make about the Afghan detainee issue on April 14, 2010?

10. What did British documents about the treatment of Afghan detainees reveal?

11. a) What was Speaker Peter Milliken's ruling?

b) In what way did he give the government a bit of a reprieve?

Post-viewing Activities

1. Now that you've watched the video, revisit your responses to the Pre-viewing Activity questions. Have your opinions changed in any way? Explain.

2. Why is it important that people like Richard Colvin and Malgarai Ahmadshah be protected from persecution after coming forward with testimony critical of the government?

3. Does the information in the video affect your attitude about Canada's role in the war in Afghanistan? Explain.

4. What else do you need to know to answer the question "Has the Canadian government committed a war crime in relation to the treatment of Afghan detainees?"

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The Issue

Did you know . . .

The Military Police Complaints Commission was established as an independent civilian agency to examine complaints arising from either the conduct of military police members in the exercise of policing duties or functions or from interference in or obstruction of their police investigations.

Further Research

Information on the struggle to hold investigative proceedings is available on the MPCC Web site at www.mpcc-cppm.gc.ca/300/afghan/index-eng.aspx.

“The matter at the heart of the dispute should not be forgotten. The treatment of Afghan detainees relates to Canada at war, Canada’s relations with other countries, Canada’s respect for human rights. Parliament has a duty to hold the government to account for its conduct of the war.” (*The Globe and Mail*, Editorial, April 28, 2010)

The issue that threatens to bring an end to the 40th Parliament of Canada was first brought to Canadians’ attention by *The Globe and Mail*.

In April 2007 the newspaper obtained a 2006 report prepared by the Canadian embassy in Kabul, Afghanistan. It warned the Canadian government that Afghans captured by Canadian forces were being handed over to Afghan authorities who were quite likely torturing them. At first, the government denied this report existed. Later it released the report, but much of the evidence was redacted, or blacked out.

The Canadian Military Police Complaints Commission

Two months earlier, in February 2007, the Canadian Military Police Complaints Commission (MPCC) had begun a formal investigation of the transfer of Afghan detainees by Canadian military police to Afghan authorities. The investigation was a result of a complaint filed by Amnesty International and the B.C. Civil Liberties Association. It argued that the military police had on at least 18 occasions transferred detainees to Afghan authorities, even though they knew it was likely the transferred prisoners would be tortured. Such transfers are contrary to international law and could result in war crimes charges

against those who ordered the transfers.

From the beginning, the government tried to prevent the MPCC from having access to the information it required to carry out its work. As early as July 2007, the office of the Canadian Chief of Defence Staff, General Rick Hillier, refused all requests made under Canada’s Access to Information Act that related to Afghan detainees. The reason given was that public disclosure of any such information could endanger our forces in Afghanistan.

Over the next two years, the battle continued between the MPCC and the government. In March 2008, frustrated by his attempts to obtain the documents that the commission requested, Chairman Peter Tinsley decided to order public hearings on the detainee issue. The government’s response was to go to court and try to shut down the hearings indefinitely. In April 2009 a federal court ruled against the government, denying its request for an indefinite stay of the MPCC hearings. Finally, in May 2009, hearings began.

MPCC hearings continue, and the commission continues to struggle with the government to obtain both documents and witness testimony. In October 2009, the commission summoned diplomat Richard Colvin to testify. The Department of Justice responded by attempting to have the summons set aside.

The Special Committee on the Canadian Mission in Afghanistan

But Richard Colvin did have his say—and created a furor—when he appeared before the House of Commons Special Committee on the Canadian Mission in Afghanistan in November 2009.

Quote

“As I learned more about our detainee practices, I came to a conclusion they were contrary to Canada’s values, contrary to Canada’s interests, contrary to Canada’s official policies, and also contrary to international law. That is, they were un-Canadian, counterproductive, and probably illegal.”
— Richard Colvin, quoted on CBC News at www.cbc.ca/canada/story/2009/11/18/diplomat-afghan-detainees.html

Colvin testified that during his posting in Afghanistan it was routine to hand over prisoners detained by Canada to Afghan interrogators. No procedures were in place to follow up on their treatment. He noted that it might take days, weeks, or months for Canada to notify the Red Cross, the one group that might have monitored the detainees’ conditions.

“During these crucial first days, what happened to our detainees? According to a number of reliable sources, they were tortured. The most common forms of torture were beatings, whipping with power cables, and the use of electricity. Also common was sleep deprivation, use of temperature extremes, use of knives and open flames, and sexual abuse, that is, rape. Torture might be limited to the first days or it could go on for months.

“According to our information, the likelihood is that all the Afghans we handed over were tortured. For interrogators in Kandahar, it was standard operating procedure.” (Colvin’s full testimony before the Special Committee is available on the *Fair* Web site at <http://fairwhistleblower.ca/content/richard-colvins-testimony>.)

The government was quick to dispute Colvin’s testimony. General Hillier (now retired), Defence Minister Peter MacKay, and Prime Minister Harper all accused Colvin of providing false information and believing Taliban propaganda. Those who accepted the validity of Colvin’s testimony were accused of undermining the work of Canada’s forces in Afghanistan.

The government had dug in its heels. Despite growing evidence—including testimony by members of the armed forces—that rumours of torture of detainees were widespread, the government did its best to slow down and interfere with the work of both the MPCC and the Special Committee.

Many documents were withheld; those that were provided were heavily edited and censored.

Frustrated, the opposition parties joined to pass a motion on December 10 ordering the government to release to the special committee confidential records on the transfer of detainees. Failure to provide these could lead to the Commons holding the ministers who withheld them to be found in contempt. The government continued to argue that it could not release the documents because of concerns about national security.

Prorogation and Beyond

In what most observers felt was an attempt to defuse the controversy—but what the government described as a recalibrating of its legislative program—Prime Minister Harper prorogued Parliament before Christmas. Rather than meet again in January, the House of Commons recessed until March.

The opposition, however, was not prepared to let the issue slide. Liberal MP Derek Lee, an expert on Parliamentary power, prepared to move that the government’s refusal to provide the documents place it in contempt of Parliament. He planned to raise a point of privilege with the Speaker of the House, Peter Milliken.

But the government had another idea, which postponed Lee’s motion. It appointed retired Supreme Court Justice Frank Iacobucci to look at the requested documents and determine if the changes proposed by the government before their release were necessary to protect national security.

However, by March 18, the opposition had had enough. On that date they asked the Speaker to rule whether or not their parliamentary privileges had been breached. If the Speaker ruled in their favour, and the government continue to resist releasing the documents,

opposition members said they would be prepared to propose motions censuring the government.

In a surprise tactic, the government suddenly released 2 600 pages of documents and quickly followed this

up with another 6 200 pages. But these were heavily edited and hardly what the Special Committee had requested.

On April 27 the Speaker ruled in favour of the release of all documents.

For Review

1. What alleged actions by the military precipitated the enquiry into the Afghan detainee question?
2. What organizations are actively involved in the Afghan detainee investigation?
3. How has the government responded to requests for assistance with the investigation? Why have they responded this way? Make sure you include what the government's answer would be and what the critics would say.

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IV *Considering the Evidence*

At the crux of the dispute between Parliament and the government is the question of whether a parliamentary committee has the right to review uncensored documents dealing with national security. Members of the House of Commons, government ministers, constitutional experts, and media commentators have all waded into the discussion. Here is a collage of some of their opinions leading up to the Speaker's ruling on April 27. This collage helps to demonstrate the complexity of the issue.

Did the military fail to follow up on detainee transfers?

- As late as March 26, the government was arguing that the committee really had nothing to investigate. "Every time the Canadian Forces have received a credible allegation of detainee mistreatment they have acted."— Jay Paxton, spokesman for the defence ministry (*The Globe and Mail*, March 26, 2010)
- While there may have been problems in the early days of the Canadian action in Afghanistan, these problems, according to the military, have been fully resolved. "The 2007 Supplementary Arrangement confirms that the government of Canada has full and unrestricted access to detention facilities where detainees transferred by Canadian Forces are held. It also requires that the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC) has the same unrestricted access, as the AIHRC has an important monitoring and investigative role. Since the Supplementary Arrangement was signed in May 2007, there have been more than 200 visits by Canadian officials to Afghan detention facilities in Kandahar and Kabul."— Vice-Admiral Denis Rouleau, Vice Chief of the Defence Staff (*Toronto Star*, February 28, 2010)
- The leaders of Canada's military had been warned of their responsibility to protect detainees. "Military commanders who know, or are criminally negligent in failing to know, that a transferred detainee would be subjected to such abuse have the obligation to take all necessary and reasonable measures within their power to prevent or repress the commission of such abuse. They may also be subject to criminal liability for failing to submit the matter to competent authorities for investigation and prosecution." — Brigadier General Ken Watkin, the military's top lawyer (*Toronto Star*, February 25, 2010)
- Denials of widespread torture in Afghan prisons by the government seemed especially hollow in the light of the U.S. State Department's Annual Report on Human Rights for 2009, which states: "Human rights organizations report local authorities tortured and abused detainees. Torture and abuse methods included . . . beating by stick, scorching bar or iron bar, flogging by cable, battering by rod, electric shock, deprivation of sleep, water and food, abusive language, sexual humiliation and rape." — *Toronto Star*, March 12, 2010
- Many commentators have pointed out that, no matter what Canada's current policy and methods may be, for at least two years detainee transfers were problematic. "It was this country's aversion to Guantanamo Bay methods

that spiked the preferred military option of handing Canada's Afghan prisoners directly to Americans. Instead, the military drafted, and General Rick Hillier signed, a 2005 agreement . . . considered weak, and Afghanistan warned would lead to trouble in their primitive, overburdened, notoriously brutal prisons." — James Travers (*Toronto Star*, March 13, 2010)

Does national security trump the power of Parliament?

- The Special Committee of Parliament is especially keen on determining what was happening between 2005, when Canada first began handing detainees over to Afghan authorities, and 2007, when the supplementary arrangement was confirmed. So is the Canadian Military Police Complaints Commission. But getting at the truth has not been easy. "Ever since human rights groups and the media first drew attention to detainee abuse, the Conservative government has been downplaying its significance, refusing to call a clearly needed public inquiry. "The government thwarted an investigation by the Military Police Complaints Commission by refusing to hand over documents on 'national security' grounds—even though the commission has full national security clearance. When chair Peter Tinsley, a 28-year military veteran, kept pressuring for the documents, the government refused to renew his term, effectively shutting down his probe." — Linda McQuaig (*Toronto Star*, January 12, 2010)
- The government has insisted that national security also takes precedence over Parliament's "need to know." Justice Minister Rob Nicholson has repeatedly argued that MPs do not have an unlimited right to see materials considered secret for national security

reasons: "Our parliamentary privileges are not indefinite and not unlimited. The exact scope of those privileges have been a matter of debate since Confederation." — *The Globe and Mail*, April 1, 2010

- Some commentators believe that Nicholson's argument has merit. "The government has a point on the need for some confidentiality. For example, releasing everything might identify, and compromise the safety of, Afghan informants who told the International Committee of the Red Cross about the abuse of prisoners. It might also release confidential information passed to Canada by other governments. The opposition says committee members can review all the documents privately and decide what to release. But there are no agreed rules for how to do this. Nor have there been any negotiations among the parties about how to approach the task. Some in Ottawa question whether members of the committee from the separatist Bloc Quebecois can be counted on, even if sworn to secrecy." — *The Economist*, April 3, 2010
- But for the opposition, the issue comes down to one question: "Is Parliament the sovereign or isn't it? That's a question that every Canadian can understand. The Prime Minister is not sovereign. That's what the issue is." — Liberal leader Michael Ignatieff (*The Globe and Mail*, March 2, 2010)

Should an outsider review the documents?

- Rather than bow to the will of Parliament, the government decided to appoint a former Supreme Court justice, Frank Iacobucci, to examine the documents the Special Committee was seeking and to determine which ones could be released without compromising national security.

“The government acknowledges that it is appropriate that decisions on the disclosure of information in these circumstances be reviewed independently from government. We have enlisted the help of Mr. Justice Iacobucci. The man is beyond reproach. He is held in eminent esteem by Canadians. He will give advice with respect to those documents.” — Justice Minister Rob Nicholson (*Toronto Star*, March 6, 2010)

- It was not a response well-received by opposition critics. “What we’re seeing here is contempt and a denial of the truth to Canadians about torture. And that’s fundamentally wrong, especially when the House of Commons has requested formally that the documents be released. Mr. Iacobucci is a fine individual, but appointing a fine individual to then go off and do what Parliament should be doing is wrong.” — NDP Leader Jack Layton (*Toronto Star*, March 6, 2010)
- Some of the media were suspicious of the government’s motives. “Harper could have bowed to Parliament’s demand for the files, and thus blunted increasingly loud demands for a full public inquiry. MPs could have studied the files behind closed doors, if need be, to protect our troops and ties with allies. Instead, Harper stonewalled,

tried to discredit critics, and obstructed any meaningful inquiry. Now he is looking to a judge to extricate him from a crisis he created.” — Editorial, *Toronto Star*, March 9, 2010

- Constitutional experts were also concerned. “Iacobucci has accepted a task which neither he nor any other person of however high repute and qualifications has any business doing. Not the Prime Minister, nor the justice minister, nor a Supreme Court judge, can be the appropriate arbiter of what papers Parliament can order, and enforce release, from the executive.” — Reg Whitaker, Distinguished Research Professor Emeritus, York University (*Toronto Star*, March 19, 2010)
- Andrew Coyne of *Maclean’s* summed up the opinion of many observers. “There is only one way to resolve this question, and that is for the appropriate authority to have a look at the documents. The appropriate authority in this case is Parliament, ‘the grand inquest of the nation.’ MPs needn’t speculate about the contents of the documents; they have the power to demand them, if only they will use it. If they are serious, they will do so, with whatever special arrangements are needed to allay national security concerns.” — Andrew Coyne, *Maclean’s*, March 22, 2010

For Discussion

Consider the following quotation from columnist Jeffrey Simpson: “Those who dissent or put spokes in the government’s wheels—from diplomat Richard Colvin over Afghan detainees to the parliamentary budget officer to the Military Police Complaints Commission to the former head of the nuclear safety agency to opposition party leaders and so on—are blunted, get ignored, or become subject to attack ads on television. It is the politics of constant warfare, as political scientist Tom Flanagan, a former Conservative campaign adviser and Harper confidant, wrote so perceptively in these pages earlier this week” (*The Globe and Mail*, January 9, 2010).

Do you believe this is a fair description of the government’s regular approach to thorny political questions? Why or why not? Are there significant advantages and disadvantages to treating politics as “constant warfare”? What are they?

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IV A Constitutional Crisis?

A Question of Privilege

“If a member feels that his or her rights have been infringed upon or that a contempt against the House has been committed, he or she will rise on a question of privilege to voice a complaint and propose some action to correct the problem. In presenting a case the member is claiming that the breach he or she is complaining of is of such importance that it demands priority over all other House business. The member must convince the Speaker that his or her concern is *prima facie* (on the first impression or at first glance), a matter that should take priority over all others” (www.parl.gc.ca/information/about/people/house/speaker/rulings/ruling_3_1_e.html).

In December 2009, the House of Commons passed a motion ordering the government to release unredacted (unedited) documents to the Special Committee on the Canadian Mission in Afghanistan, which was looking into the transfer of detainees to Afghan authorities by Canadian forces. When the government refused to release the documents, the opposition parties joined together to ask the Speaker to rule that the government had violated collective parliamentary privilege. The Speaker is limited to ruling that a breach of privilege has occurred. Any punishment, or the bringing of contempt charges against those ministers withholding the information, is to be determined by the entire House.

Columnist Chantal Hebert summed up the choices facing Speaker Peter Milliken: “If he rules that the government is within its rights to ignore a House order to hand over the documents until they have been

vetted by an outside party of its choice, Milliken will have clipped the wings of Parliament in a way that stands to accelerate its current decline into irrelevancy.

“The executive powers of the government will have been reinforced for all time at the expense of Parliament.

“But if he rules in favour of the opposition and orders the government to find a process that allows parliamentarians to be the judges of the balance between national security and accountability, the Speaker could set the ground for a spring election” (*Toronto Star*, March 24, 2010).

The Speaker’s Ruling

The Speaker’s ruling was clear. Parliament does have the authority to require the government to produce any and all information it requires to do its business.

“It is the view of the chair that accepting an unconditional authority of the executive to censor the information provided to Parliament would in fact jeopardize the very separation of powers that is purported to lie at the heart of our parliamentary system and the independence of the constituent parts.

“Furthermore, it risks diminishing the inherent privileges of the House and its members, which have been earned and must be safeguarded.

“The House and the government have, essentially, an unbroken record of some 140 years of collaboration in cases of this kind. It seems to me that it would be a signal failure for us to see that record shattered in the third session of the 40th Parliament because we lacked the will or the wit to find a solution to this impasse” (*The Globe and Mail*, April 28, 2010).

He then gave the government and opposition parliamentarians two weeks in which to reach an agreement on how the necessary documents would be made available. It is his expectation that the two groups will find a compromise that will respect both Parliament's fundamental right to demand the documents and the government's concerns to protect national security.

Failure to reach a compromise could well result in the opposition bringing contempt charges against three government ministers. This would be viewed as a motion of no confidence in the government and result in a snap election.

Comments from the Parties Involved

"Is it possible for the two sides, working together in the best interest of the Canadians they serve, to devise a means where both their concerns are met? Surely that's not too much to hope for."
— Speaker Peter Milliken

"We welcome the possibility of a compromise while respecting our legal obligations as acknowledged by the Speaker." — Justice Minister Rob Nicholson

"The Prime Minister's not king and everybody in that chamber has to be respected." — NDP Leader Jack Layton

"If you can't trust MPs, you can't trust the Canadian people." — Liberal Leader Michael Ignatieff

Source: All quotes from *The Globe and Mail*, April 28, 2010.

The Story So Far

By the time you read this, the Speaker's deadline will have passed, and a crisis will have either been averted or the crisis will have deepened, and we will be in the midst of an election.

The four parties have met and are attempting to work out a settlement. Several different scenarios have been suggested, and include:

- Members of the Special Committee take an oath of secrecy, and the government gives them the documents to personally review. This would be similar to what happens in the United States, where members of congressional committees responsible for national security have access to classified information. The drawback: There are probably tens of thousands of pages to look at, which would tie up the members' time for months. An oath of secrecy would also mean that they could not reveal anything they learned to other members of their party.
- Ask a third party—perhaps Iacobucci—to review the documents, but to report to Parliament rather than the government with his results. The House could also give him powers of subpoena, allowing him to obtain documents not initially submitted for his review. This is something the government has failed to do up to this point.
- Have the documents reviewed and leave the decision about release of the documents to the Security and Intelligence Review Committee, which already oversees the Canadian Security Intelligence Service (CSIS), our spy agency.

If the parties fail to compromise, there will be a House of Commons vote on whether the government is in contempt of Parliament. The government might try to forestall this vote by asking the Supreme Court to rule on the matter. Most observers suspect the court would refuse to take the case and would send it back to the House and the government for resolution. If the court did take the case, its ruling could dramatically alter the way Canadians are governed—and permanently strengthen the Court's own power.

A “yes” vote would almost certainly be seen as a vote of no confidence and result in an election no one really seems to want. A “no” vote would require at least one of the opposition parties to back down, an extremely unlikely scenario given the length of the current dispute.

What Is at Stake

In his analysis columnist John Ibbitson writes that “the very legitimacy of Parliament” is dependent on compromise. He quotes the Speaker: “It seems to me we would fail the institution

if no resolution can be found” (*The Globe and Mail*, April 28, 2010).

Ibbitson goes on: “Failure will come in the form of a bitter election that would damage the country . . . Every arrow of reason points to compromise. Only passion or ambition could force an election. And then the 40th Parliament and those who served in it would go into history as the greatest failure since Confederation.”

By the time you read this, the fate of that 40th Parliament will have been decided.

Follow-up

1. How did the discussion between the government and the opposition play out? Did a compromise result, or was an election called? Prepare a brief timeline outlining the activities by the two parties during the Speaker’s two-week moratorium.
2. Are there heroes or villains in this story? Was the government really at fault in resisting the demands of the opposition that it release the documents before a clear ruling by the Speaker? Should the opposition have worked out a policy on national security questions before demanding the release of documents?
3. Columnist Margaret Wente of *The Globe and Mail* thinks that all the debate on the release of documents dealing with detainee transfers misses the point. She writes: “Despite the high-minded outrage, there has been a shocking lack of moral seriousness in this debate. In Ottawa, it’s all about scoring points. You’d be right to suspect that hardly any of our politicians give a rat’s derrière about a few wretched Afghans. And even as this quarrel eats up all the air time, there is no substantive debate at all about our role in Afghanistan—past, present or future” (April 29, 2010).

Do you agree with Wente that this debate is all about scoring points? Why or why not?

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Activity: Pick Your Corner

A four-corners debate gives students the opportunity to express their opinion on a controversial topic, discuss the topic with other students, and modify their opinion if they wish to do so.

1. To begin the activity, read the following statement to the class: "Even if information related to national security might become public, the government of Canada must always share all classified (secret) information with parliamentary committees."

(You may choose to use other statements related to the story—for example, "Prisoners of war are not entitled to the same rights as ordinary citizens.")

2. Ask the students to take a few minutes to make some notes describing their reaction to the statement.
3. After they have made their notes, ask the students if they strongly agree, agree, disagree, or strongly disagree with the statement. Depending on their response, they should proceed to the appropriate corner of the classroom and meet with those others who have similarly responded. (The corners should have been posted with signs for each response.)
4. Once in their corners, students should be given about 10 minutes to discuss the reasons for taking the position they have.
5. Following the discussion, one person from each group should share with the class the main ideas raised by their group.
6. Having heard these ideas, some students may wish to change their position and move to another group. This should be allowed.
7. Following the presentation, each group may continue its discussion for another five or 10 minutes. Students should be making notes and choosing the main points that indicate the reasons why they hold their final position.
8. Following the discussion, students should be asked to write a summary statement detailing the reasons why they strongly agree, agree, disagree, or strongly disagree with the statement.