

# ARGUMENTS



SPENCER PLATT, GETTY IMAGES

Afghan girls attend a rural school in the village of Sandarwa in eastern Afghanistan. The misconception that democracy is alien to Afghanistan's society is wrong. Afghan women fought for and achieved certain important rights prior to the Taliban.

## Why Afghanistan needs democracy

Afghans don't want to abandon the accomplishments they've made in protecting their freedoms, including equal rights for women

BY KHORSHIED SAMAD

In the midst of deliberations about the strategy and scope of the Afghan mission in the U.S. and elsewhere, when the country is preparing to take part in another historic election this year, some analysts are trying to put the emphasis purely on the military, while others still hold importance in democracy-building and reconstruction activities.

Meanwhile every poll and survey continues to show that everyday Afghans, while critical of some aspects of the mission over the past eight years, believe in further developing democratic values and structures as a safeguard against extremism and injustice that are considered universal threats.

Many in the West fail to realize that if the mission focused solely on military gains, or, worse yet, if the window were to close on social-economic development, the Afghan people, especially women, would not only lose the gains achieved over the past few years, but would face an uncertain, grim future.

Increasing U.S. military forces and reinforcing NATO coalition troops are a necessary strategy, especially during an election year, in overcoming the Taliban and al-Qaeda insurgency plaguing Southeastern Afghanistan. Last year, according to a recent UN report, 2,100 civilians were killed as the result

of fighting and terrorist activity. That is a 40-per-cent increase from the year before, and it includes many innocent women and children, the most vulnerable victims in times of war.

The efforts to stabilize Afghanistan, however, cannot purely be military. That would inevitably wreak more havoc on a people who have already suffered nearly 30 years of war, invasion, civil strife, drought and famine, not to mention six harrowing years of oppression under the Taliban regime, where human rights and civil liberties did not exist, and women were regarded as non-citizens.

The efforts to save Afghanistan from tumbling into failed state status once again must include "smart" and focused nation-building and reconstruction, allowing for the seeds of democratic values to take hold and flourish as the country renews and rebuilds itself. This is necessary to ensure that a healthy civil society can grow and develop, protecting such ideals as freedom of speech and equal rights for all citizens, which today are upheld in the 2004 Afghan constitution. Afghans do not want to abandon these accomplishments.

The misconception that democracy is alien to Afghanistan's society is wrong. Afghan women fought for and achieved certain important rights prior to the Taliban. The 1964 Afghan constitution recognized men and women as equal citizens with

equal rights, and the first female politicians ran and won seats in the newly formed parliament that very same year. Women were active in all professional fields up until the Taliban takeover.

Afghanistan's new constitution guarantees women equal rights and a quarter of the parliamentary and provincial council seats. Out of the 5,800 registered candidates who participated in the historic parliamentary elections in 2005, 565 were women. Women won 68 of the 249 parliamentary seats, and 26 were named to the 102 seats reserved for the senate. Many women have become more socially and politically involved in their daily lives. Millions of women and girls have returned to work and school.

A joint UN and Inter-Parliamentary Union report released earlier last year revealed that with 27.7 per cent of women MPs in the Lower House and 21.6 per cent in the Upper House, Afghanistan ranks 27th in a list of 188 countries on giving representation to women in national parliament.

The first political party for women was also formed last year to develop a stronger national political platform for women's rights, and now boasts more than 25,000 members. These are significant developments which could not have occurred without the help of the international community, and without a focus on democra-

cy building, helping to improve standards and access to education, health care, economic opportunities and civic participation.

There is no doubt that there are still significant challenges for Afghan women to overcome, including the highest level of maternal mortality and epidemic illiteracy rates. The volatile security situation and certain archaic norms continue to put pressure on women and limit women's and girls' roles in public life, denying them the full enjoyment of their rights. Human rights violations, including domestic violence, rape, child marriage and honour killings, are still reported.

Without sustainable peace, security, economic opportunities and education providing new avenues and choices for the Afghan people, these disturbing realities will be difficult to reverse down the road.

As we celebrate International Women's Day on Sunday, we are reminded that Afghanistan has much work ahead, and hopefully with the continued support of the international community its young fragile democracy will flourish so the Afghan people can become truly self-sufficient, living in peace and security, and with hope for the future.

**Khorshied Samad** is the former correspondent and Kabul bureau chief for Fox News, and is married to the Afghanistan ambassador to Canada. She is also the co-curator of the photojournalism exhibition, *Voices on the Rise: Afghan Women Making the News*, which focuses on the lives and work of Afghan women journalists ([www.voicesontherise.org](http://www.voicesontherise.org)).

## The pay equity system is broken

BY VIC TOEWS

Canada's Conservative government respects the principle of equal pay for work of equal value. Our commitment to this fundamental right is why we introduced the Public Sector Equitable Compensation Act.

The facts are clear: the current pay equity system in the federal public service is broken. It is lengthy, costly and adversarial.

Because our current process is complaint-based, these issues are only addressed as an afterthought when complaints are made.

As a result, women are forced to wait up to 20 years for compensation following gruelling and divisive court proceedings. In fact, many employees have already left the public service by the time complaints are settled.

Why is this happening? Because under the current system, federal public service employers and unions are not required to take pay equity issues into account when they engage in wage setting. This is not fair to women. There is a better way.

Our approach will ensure employers and unions take pay equity into consideration every time they negotiate wages. It will be transparent.

It is time for employers and unions to be jointly accountable for setting fair wages, for reporting publicly to employees and for sticking to the commitments they make at the bargaining table. We should be putting dollars in the hands of women and not into the hands of those directing these costly and lengthy legal proceedings.

Others share our viewpoint. The Federally Regulated Employers Transportation and Communication (FETCO) organization recently told a parliamentary committee that the proposed legislation "makes sense" and both collective bargaining parties must be "responsible for implementing pay equity."

In 2004, a Liberal-appointed task force concluded that

proactive pay equity legislation is a more effective way of protecting the rights of women. The same task force recommended that Parliament enact new stand-alone pay equity legislation. This is exactly what we are proposing to do.

Our legislation addresses the key recommendations of the 2004 report by setting out a proactive and collaborative system to ensure equal pay for work of equal value — it does not change human rights, it protects them.

And we are putting teeth in this legislation.

Fines will be imposed on either employers or unions who do not comply with their duty to ensure fair wages. As a further protection, employees will be able to resolve any disputes through the Public Service Labour Relations Board, an independent tribunal.

**Women deserve fair pay rates now and every time their collective agreements are renewed. Not 20 years from now.**

Pay equity legislation has been continually evolving since the first proactive legislation was introduced in Manitoba in 1986, followed by Ontario and Quebec.

Our new federal model is an improvement over existing models.

It goes a step further by truly integrating equitable compensation into the wage-setting process and ensuring continuous proactive action for years to come.

Women deserve fair pay rates now and every time their collective agreements are renewed. Not 20 years from now.

**Vic Toews** is president of the Treasury Board of Canada and member of Parliament for the Manitoba riding of Provencher.



The Ed Board: Ken Gray, Elizabeth Payne, Leonard Stern, Kate Heartfield and Dave Watson.

## PhDs, clean out your desks



DAN GARDNER

These are tough times. We all need to economize, especially governments. So I have a suggestion for finance ministers coping with swelling deficits.

Fire all the scientists. All of them. Just go through the ranks of the civil service, find everyone with a PhD, and tell them to clean out their desks. Unless their PhD is in philosophy or something. Those people can keep their jobs in the mailroom.

Who needs them, right? Not John Gerretsen. This week, Ontario's environment minister announced his government's ban on the sale and use of pesticides will come into force on April 22. That's Earth Day. Apparently the minister is going to save Gaia.

What makes this announcement particularly promising is that Gerretsen confirmed that one of the pesticides that will be banned is 2,4-D. One of the world's most common herbicides, 2,4-D has been used since the Second War and there's a

small mountain of research on it.

And what does that small mountain say about 2,4-D? Well, like all science, the evidence is often contradictory. And it's extremely complex. Figuring out what it all means on balance is a very tough job that can only be done by highly trained people in broad consultation with other highly trained people.

If ever there were a good reason for governments to employ scientists, assessing the safety of 2,4-D would be it.

And as it turns out, the federal government does employ scientists to assess the safety of pesticides. They work for Health Canada's Pest Management Regulatory Agency. It further turns out that those scientists conducted a comprehensive review of the research on 2,4-D. And by "comprehensive," I mean very, very expensive.

Last spring, after the Ontario government announced its intention to ban pesticides, but before it settled which pesticides would be banned, PMRA released the conclusion of its very, very expensive review: "There is reasonable certainty that no harm to human health, future generations, or the environment will result from use or exposure to this product."

That seems pretty clear. But Gerretsen and his government weren't interested. They went ahead and banned 2,4-D anyway.

This clearly demonstrates that governments don't need scientists. They're a waste of money, what with their big salaries and their labs and computers. Fire the lot of them.

Think of the money we would have saved if, instead of funding PMRA to review the science on 2,4-D, the federal government had told all those Poindexters to get a real job. Drive a cab or something. Whatever. Just take your PhD and your Bunsen burners and hit the bricks.

Of course this doesn't mean governments should abandon science. Oh no. Science is a good thing. Everybody loves science. Even the McGuinty government.

In fact, when he introduced the pesticide ban, Gerretsen cited reviews of the scientific literature produced by environmental activists and groups like the Ontario College of Family Physicians.

Admittedly, the soon-to-be-unemployed scientists at the PMRA looked at the same material and found it to be deeply flawed. In fact, when I spoke to Leonard Ritter, a professor at the University of Guelph and a leading expert

on pesticides, he suggested some of the people doing that work weren't qualified. "I don't offer patients advice on when they should have their gall bladder taken out. And I sometimes think it would be better if physicians, largely family physicians, who really have no training in this area at all, it would be better to leave the interpretation of the data to people who are competent to do it."

Still, let's not get all worked up about "competence" and "agendas." What matters is that by firing all the government scientists and letting third parties tell politicians what the science says, taxpayers will save a bundle.

Now, I know that conservatives may object. But that's only because, in this case, the interested third-parties informing government policy happen to be folks conservatives don't like. But different governments can turn to different third-parties. So sometimes it will be corporations deciding what the science says.

That will balance things out — and keep costs down. Everybody wins.

Everybody except government scientists, of course. But who needs them? Right?

**Dan Gardner** blogs at [ottawacitizen.com/katzenjammer](http://ottawacitizen.com/katzenjammer) and writes Wednesday, Friday and Saturday. [dgardner@thecitizen.canwest.com](mailto:dgardner@thecitizen.canwest.com).

## Debate the Board

The faces you see above make up the editorial board. We are the ones who write the unsigned editorials in these columns and oversee production of the *Citizen's* opinion pages.

Actually, we aren't completely anonymous — we do show ourselves on a regular basis in our signed columns. And as of this month, you can see more of us at "The Ed Board," a new feature at [ottawacitizen.com/edboard](http://ottawacitizen.com/edboard).

As editorialists we are an opinionated group, and there's no better place to ply our trade than Ottawa, a city of policy-makers, academics, politicians, journalists and diplomats. There is always a good argument happening somewhere.

Careful readers will have noticed a change this week. For several years the *Citizen* published two editorial pages — a "national" editorial page and a "local" editorial page. The two pages have now been combined into a single

page, in part because it seemed no longer appropriate to segregate local opinion in the backpages of the city section.

We know that in this city there is an extraordinary appetite for high-quality analysis and commentary, which is why our daily opinion-page package — the editorial page, the op-ed page, the full page of letters — will remain among the most highly regarded in the country. Strong commentary on local issues and by local writers — ourselves included — will always have high prominence, both in the printed pages and at "The Ed Board."

Most important, "The Ed Board" at [ottawacitizen.com/edboard](http://ottawacitizen.com/edboard) will allow readers to engage with us directly and personally — to join the animated and feisty conversations that occupy us all day at the office. You may not always agree with us, but then again we don't always agree with each other either.

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