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People, Partisanship and Political Games: The Defence File

by Alan Stephenson
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POLICY UPDATE

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People are at the core of Canada's new vision for Defence. Ensuring that our women and men in uniform are prepared and equipped to succeed on operations, and that they are fully supported from recruitment through retirement and beyond, is fundamental to our success.

– Strong, Secure, Engaged 2017

People are Defence's most important resource...Looking ahead, several major equipment fleets will reach the end of their operational lives within the next 10 to 20 years, and will need to be replaced. Decisions on acquiring critical new systems to replace these ageing fleets must be made in the near term.

– Canada First Defence Strategy 2008

Reflection on the first anniversary of *Strong, Secure, Engaged (SSE)*, the Liberal government's defence policy, demands evaluation of its political promises against the real-world consequences of government behaviour. Hope is woven throughout the document with its chapters assuring enhanced personnel care, long-term investments in capabilities and the comprehensive funding commitment. There are many positive, well-intentioned pledges, but hope may be the first casualty as political gamesmanship continues to define the defence file.

Central in the “soldier’s” acceptance of “[unlimited liability](#)” are faith in leadership and hope for support from the system they are bound to defend. Leadership starts with the prime minister of the day, but hope transcends governments. The rank and file of the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) – the “people” – are well aware of unaltered facts surrounding defence issues despite government strategic communications. Military personnel understand and accept that politics is the essence of national defence decision-making in a liberal democracy. However, they lose faith in both leadership and the Canadian polity when political gamesmanship and interference continually take precedence over their well-being – where well-being is more than personnel policies, it is the well-being of their military institution as a whole.

Successive governments have let capabilities atrophy for short-term parochial political purposes. It is not as if government was unaware that the Royal Canadian Navy (RCN) needed to replace its replenishment ships and that the Royal Canadian Air Force (RCAF) fighter fleet was at the end of its operational life – the *Canada First Defence Strategy (CFDS)* identified those in 2008. Ten years later, Canadians continue to witness the political gaming that surrounds the recapitalization of these core military capabilities, none more apparent than that of [replacing the CF-18](#). The Harper government initiated the politicization of the fighter replacement and the successive Trudeau government continues apace.

Once elected in 2015, a responsible government would have taken the time to understand the fighter file, made use of the 40,000 person-years of public service analysis, and immediately run a fair and open competition as promised. A responsible government would be directing the \$1



billion needed to refurbish and operate the used Australian F-18s toward cost avoidance to fund a modern replacement fleet instead of unnecessarily delaying the decision past the next election. A responsible government would not have fabricated a narrative to favour a specific aircraft and forced public servants to sign an unprecedented non-disclosure agreement to prevent the military's factual analysis from being disclosed. Although *SSE* increased the size of the fighter fleet to where it should have been originally, it provides no strategic rationale for this determination. In continuing the fictitious “capability gap” narrative to further justify program delays, the government brought into question the integrity of its own leadership.



Figure 1: An aging Canadian CF-18 Hornet takes off. As the author notes, the CF-18 replacement program has been plagued with problems, delays, and politicization. (Source: Canadian Armed Forces)

One may ask, so what? The problem is that the CF-18 replacement file is endemic of problems with Canadian defence policy writ large – political gamesmanship. By refusing to articulate defined political objectives in an overarching national security strategy document, successive governments have made use of policy imprecision for short-term partisan purposes. As James Cox notes, *SSE*'s “intellectual reach extends only as far as military considerations associated with the CAF”¹ and fails to articulate national goals and security interests. The Harper government's approach was similar in producing the *CFDS*, another so-called 20-year plan. The “people” referred to in both these documents are well aware “that the policy and funding commitments made in such well-intentioned documents rarely survive half a decade [and] ... have easily been undone ... in a 30-minute meeting in the Prime Minister's Office.”²

¹ James Cox, “Canada Still Has No Real Defence Policy,” Macdonald Laurier Institute, June 14, 2017.

² Eugene Lang, “Use It or Lose It: *SSE* and DND's Chronic Underspending Problem,” Canadian Global Affairs Institute, May 2018, 4.



David Perry reinforces this understanding when he writes that although “the overall funding allocations on defence are tracking close to projected levels outlined [in *SSE*] ... capital allocations are lagging significantly.”³ To observers, this does not bode well for the progress of the two most expensive recapitalization projects in Canadian history that require funding following two future elections, the CF-18 replacement and the Canadian Surface Combatant (CSC). Thus, the minister of national defence’s words ring hollow when he declares that “*Strong, Secure, Engaged* is a long-term, fully funded plan built around people”⁴, as few believe the particulars will survive past the next election.

The “people” are conscious of the political gamesmanship and are voting with their feet. [Retention](#) is becoming increasingly harder across the services, while [recruitment](#) cannot keep up with the attrition rate. It is no wonder that fighter pilots flying aircraft built before they were born are leaping at the opportunity to fly commercially when their military career prospects are tied to a 50-year old platform. The pull factors from opportunities in industry are only increased by the push factors of questionable leadership and government commitment to their well-being. The factors associated with retention are complex and multifaceted, but the loss of a single fighter pilot, for example, represents the loss of a \$7 million investment. *SSE* attempts to address some of the retention issues in chapter 1, but the near-sighted manipulation of defence funding for other political party purposes acts as a disincentive to remain in an organization where “people first” is simply another political slogan.

Elinor Sloan believes that the “Mark Norman case highlights a broken procurement system ... as it sheds light on an unwieldy, politicized and complex process that seems incapable of producing military equipment in a timely fashion.”⁵ Under Canada’s parliamentary system, the cycle of major Crown projects is progressively out of sync with the electoral cycle and political parties take short-term advantage of the procurement process. The CSC project will span more than four electoral cycles. As the “people” witness government manoeuvring for party electoral self-interest and respected military leaders such as [Vice-Admiral Norman](#) being caught in political intrigue, they, as well as industry, cannot help but be dismayed.

The Canadian defence procurement system has evolved to include multiple departments that hold varying responsibilities for success, but there is no single accountable authority until it reaches the prime minister. Sloan writes that *SSE* “promises reforms within DND to streamline procurement but does little to resolve the external dynamics among departments.”⁶ All the institutional changes and restructuring of the military procurement process will amount to little without bipartisan co-operation in some form that allows major projects to transcend governments and a whole-of-government approach that does not rely on the prime minister to be the initial and final arbiter.

³ David Perry, “Strong, Secure, Engaged So Far,” Canadian Global Affairs Institute, May 2018, 1.

⁴ National Defence, *Strong, Secure, Engaged: Canada’s Defence Policy*, 2017, p. 6.

⁵ Elinor Sloan, “Mark Norman Case Highlights a Broken Procurement System,” *Globe and Mail*, April 30, 2017.

<https://www.theglobeandmail.com/opinion/mark-norman-case-highlights-a-broken-procurement-system/article34853042/>

⁶ Elinor Sloan, “Organizing for Defence Procurement,” *Frontline Defence*, vol. 14, no. 4, 2017.



If the Liberal procurement plan is indeed fully funded for 20 years, then agreement by the Conservative opposition to retain this funding structure if elected would provide long-term bipartisan incentive to properly equip the CAF. As unlikely as this is within the parliamentary system of government, the fact remains that until some checks on the domestic jockeying for political power are embraced, the defence file will continue to be used as a political pawn at the expense of the “people” who matter most – the women and men in uniform.

Hope has its limits. Canada will continue to under-perform as a nation on security and defence until some means are established to reduce the short-term gains to political parties for unduly politicizing defence issues. Industry looks for stability and commitment to maximize options and minimize costs when pursuing military contracts. The taxpayer is looking for best value for the defence dollar and allies are looking for a capable, devoted partner. One cannot be so naive as to believe that defence issues can be made apolitical. There is a real requirement in a liberal democracy for legitimate political debate and acceptable ways to shape the issues, but the recent political gamesmanship and interference in the procurement process are unacceptable. They lead to uncertainty and ambiguity, especially for those who serve.

There is a need for a strategic [national security policy](#) that links Canadian domestic, international and foreign policy interests. The academic rigour and analysis of national interests required of this developmental process ultimately provide decision-makers with the necessary tools to make informed decisions and provide the overarching direction needed to pursue national security strategies. Political objectives will be translated into achievable and measurable defence objectives by linking ends with means. Establishing an arms-length defence procurement process, whether through a stand-alone agency, Crown corporation⁷ or some all-party agreement⁸ will provide the most balanced approach to delivering defence capability and limit the repercussions of short-term political interests. The best way to put “people first” is to build trust and hope through strong leadership and provision of good stewardship to the institutions they are dedicated to serve.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Comments made by Craig Stone, “Creating a Big Bang: Implementing the Procurement Ambition in *Strong, Secure, Engaged*,” Canadian Global Affairs Institute, Oct. 26, 2017, 9.

► **About the Author**

Col Al Stephenson (*Ret'd*) is an aviation consultant and a 35-year veteran of the Canadian Forces. Stephenson's knowledge of NORAD and NATO follows from his experience as a CF-18 pilot and staff officer at all levels of command. He holds a PhD from Carleton University and is also a Fellow at the Canadian Global Affairs Institute.

► **Canadian Global Affairs Institute**

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