

# **This is no way to run a modern military**

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The intersection between our political parties and the Canadian Forces is littered with wreckage. There are large pieces of equipment that never made it off the ground, like helicopters. There are disagreements over funding, with the NDP always wanting less for the military, pushed off the pavement. And there are those who believe in UN blue-beret peacekeeping as an article of secular faith scattered across the tarmac under the juggernaut labelled Afghanistan.

This is no way to run a modern military. What Canada needs is a bipartisan defence policy, one that can win acceptance from the government and the Opposition. Nothing militarily credible will ever satisfy ideologically committed NDPers or Bloquistes, but it ought to be possible to work out a modus vivendi between the Grits and Tories. In Australia, there is such an arrangement, so much so that the recent change in government did not derail defence policy, procurement, or planning.

How could this work in Canada? Well, in fact, it has worked in the past, most notably in the 1950s and 1960s, when there was consensus among the parties that Canada should be in NATO, that North American air defence needed to be shared with the U.S., and that the military needed a full range of kit.

There has been, however, a glimmer of hope in the recent agreement between the government and the Liberals on the Afghanistan resolution extending the mission by three years. Behind the scenes negotiations, the incorporation of Liberal amendments into the motion, and substantial persuasion within the Liberal caucus on party leader Stéphane Dion from knowledgeable MPs such as Bob Rae and Michael Ignatieff brought the Liberals and Conservatives together.

Now we need more of the same. The government's lacklustre Canada First defence strategy proposed a funding scheme extending well into the future. Everyone knows a new government could scrap this the day after its election (much as Jean Chrétien scrapped the big helicopter purchase in 1993). But what if the Opposition bought into the strategy, recognizing the obvious fact that the Forces need secure funding to plan for the strategic environment we will face? What if government and Opposition could agree on a naval shipbuilding outline to remake the fleet and to institute a continuous build plan to restore shipyards? On acquiring new fighter jets, search-and-rescue aircraft, surveillance planes? On increasing the strength of the armed forces?

Such questions aren't as difficult as brain surgery (or climate change), but they do go right to the heart of national interests. They tell defence industries that deals with Ottawa won't be scrapped mindlessly and that they can plan with reasonable assurance that deals will be consummated. They tell workers that a retraining program might pay off with a long-lasting job. They tell soldiers that the nation recognizes their continuing worth.

And what if there were an informal "defence caucus" that regularly brought together members of all parties to hear from knowledgeable military figures, scholars, industrialists? It would be possible over time to create a group of informed parliamentarians who could improve defence expertise in the Commons and Senate in a way that could benefit all Canadians and the Canadian Forces.

What is all too clear is that playing "gotcha" politics with defence has been, and is, a disaster. Canada is fighting a war today and doing it rather well despite 40 years of governmental neglect of defence. But if our parliamentarians could agree on the broad outlines of a defence policy for the next 25 years, and if individual MPs could begin to develop the expertise they need to comment intelligently on the Canadian Forces' roles, equipment, personnel needs and budgets, these would be long steps toward national maturity.