

Accountability and transparency lie in tatters at DND

By Bob Bergen

It is often said that information is power.

In democracies, it is also held that the news media have the power to provide information about governments, their actions and their policies which allow citizens to arrive at informed opinions about government and act accordingly upon them.

Few understand the tremendous amount of time and effort that responsibility requires and even fewer understand how difficult the job is.

A case in point: this week, Canada's Defence Minister Gordon O'Connor is reportedly asking Cabinet to support some \$8 billion in new equipment purchases for Canada's rusting armed forces.

This is not to suggest that the troops fighting the Taliban in Afghanistan don't have some of the finest combat equipment available, they do.

It includes the heavily-armed LAV-3 and the hull-shaped Nyala which can withstand mine blasts.

But, the navy, air and land forces elsewhere have been waiting decades for long overdue replacement ships, helicopters and trucks.

It is no secret that there are tensions between Chief of Defence Staff Gen. Rick Hillier and Defence Minister O'Connor over which aircraft should be acquired first.

General Hillier would like tactical airlift like the Hercules C-130J to land troops or cargo in confined landing zones, while the minister would like strategic airlift like the Boeing C-17 Globemaster which could quickly transport troops and heavy equipment to the world's hot spots.

There is also talk about new heavy-lift helicopters, search and rescue planes, joint-support replenishment ships, and new army trucks.

But, even if the military gets some or all of that badly needed new equipment, there is no guarantee that the reported \$8 billion it could cost will be the final price.

It may only be a fraction of the real cost and there is no telling if the equipment will arrive when it is needed the most.

This is where the news media will be the most challenged in its democratic role providing Canadians with the information necessary for them to develop informed opinions about the Harper government's national defence policies.

Why can that be said with such certainty?

A new research study by the Canadian Defence & Foreign Affairs Institute tracking 18 high-profile defence procurement projects from Jan. 1, 2000, to Dec. 18, 2004, discovered that it was all but impossible for a dedicated team of researchers to follow either the money or the projects.

The research study – *An Opaque Window: An Overview of Some Commitments Made by the Government of Canada Regarding the Department of National Defence and the Canadian Forces* – has a mouthful for a title.

But, in it are gems of information that show that the principles of accountability and transparency in the procurement process one expects in a democracy lie in tatters on the floor at DND.

It shows, for example, that some projects change their name over time with no explanation why.

In other cases, the military reporting method may as well be expressed in Greek because it is not expressed in a "common sense" way that most Canadians would understand.

On one hand, it is easy to understand why extreme secrecy surrounding the \$119-million project to double the size of the JTF-2 special operations unit by 2005 in the fight against terrorism makes it difficult to judge its success or failure.

On the other hand, projects like the one to acquire Mercedes Benz G-Wagons now being used by Canadians in Afghanistan for camp duty are wholly in the public domain and ought to be subject to public scrutiny.

Originally, the government bought 802 G-Wagons in October 2003 to replace the flimsy 19-year-old Iltis jeep-like vehicles that were originally used in the Afghanistan mission.

Earlier that month, two Canadians were killed and three others were injured in a mine blast that underlined the Iltis' shortcomings.

In 2004 the military received approval to spend another \$81 million for 357 more G-Wagons and \$4.44 million for armour protection systems.

The vehicles were delivered to the troops in Afghanistan five months early, but the project was two years behind on the original estimates and it remains difficult to judge from publicly available documents whether the project was on schedule at the end of 2004 or on budget.

The researchers examined 16 other projects like that including the replacement for the Sea King helicopter, the replenishment ships now being considered for the navy by the Harper government and search and rescue aircraft, also now being considered by the government.

Their conclusions are grim: although there is a great deal of information available, it is difficult to understand, inconsistent or only conveys part of a picture.

Researchers and journalists determined enough or bloody minded enough to wade into that information swamp and sort it all out for their readers, viewers and listeners ought to be worth their weight in gold.

Up until now, no one has set out in black and white terms just how great their challenge is.

Bob Bergen, Ph.D., is a Research Fellow with the Canadian Defence & Foreign Affairs Institute (CDFAI) in Calgary. The opinions expressed in this document are those of the author and not necessarily those of CDFAI, its Board of Directors, Advisory Council, Fellows or donors. Bergen's column appears bi-weekly. Learn more about the CDFAI and its research on the Internet at www.cdfai.org