

Some Questions for the Prime Minister on Defence

Canadian defence specialists generally agree that Stephen Harper's Conservatives have built on the Paul Martin government's budgetary and planning foundation to improve the condition and capabilities of the Canadian Forces. But there are still many questions that need to be asked of Stephen Harper, not least because he appears to be on the cusp of a majority government.

The first questions concern defence procurement. The government did well in quickly acquiring four CC177 Globemaster transports, the huge aircraft that can move mountains. Kudos all round for this one. But it has done much less well in placing orders for three Joint Support Ships as replacements for the navy's forty-year old tubs. Nor has it managed to place orders for search and rescue aircraft or, as yet, for Arctic offshore patrol vessels, necessary for the government's signature Canada First policy and its emphasis on Arctic sovereignty, or for Chinook helicopters, desperately necessary for the Canadians in Kandahar. And there are more delays with announced equipment purchases elsewhere. Why?

What's wrong with military procurement is history. In the mid-1990s, the navy, for example, cut back its numbers of procurement specialists, moving them sideways to fill vacancies in operational roles. Better a ship driver than a ship design specialist, or so it had to be. More than a decade later, when ship design is back in vogue at National Defence Headquarters, the navy simply has too few members on its procurement teams and nowhere to find them quickly enough. Complicating everything, the Alberta boom is taking skilled workers west, leaving shipyards and construction firms scrambling to find trades workers. On top of this, rampant inflation in the cost of steel and metal has increased costs. Thus the order for three Joint Support Ships gets scrubbed because none of the bidders can make a profit on the money the government is offering. Will there be more money? More important, what will the government do to fix its defence procurement system? Will it consider setting up an arm's length procurement agency as Australia does? We need answers, Prime Minister.

Then there is recruiting. The Canadian Forces remains woefully understrength, both in regulars and reserves. There are lots of recruits, but also many retirements as specialists and technicians hit their 20-year mark and depart with a pension. Others, after a tour or two in Afghanistan, decide that enough is enough and quit, while still more, worrying about the impact of repeated overseas postings on their families, decide to leave a service they love. What will the government do to keep such officers and NCMs in the CF? Will your government offer retention bonuses, Prime Minister? Will you increase the training system's capabilities so that more recruits can be put through their basic and specialist training? Moreover, what will your government do to encourage the recruitment of visible minorities? If immigrants from Asia, Africa, and Latin America are Canada's future, how can the military begin to reach into these communities for its recruits? And, Prime Minister, what about reforming Canada's all but invisible Supplementary Reserve, made up now of those retiring CF members who choose to join, so that everyone who leaves the Canadian Forces must belong and thus be available in a crisis? Anything else simply wastes the skills and training the members of the Canadian Forces receive at public expense. What will you do, Mr Harper?

And finally there is the Afghanistan War. Those Canadians who support the war—and those members of the army who fight it—were heartened by your remarks, Prime Minister, on your March 2006 visit to Kandahar. Canadians don't cut and run, you said, and you then pulled off a piece of political legerdemain by getting the Liberals to agree to the extension of the mission into 2011. Terrific, but that was then and this is the election. We're leaving the combat role in 2011, you tell us now, abandoning the Afghans to fend for themselves. Just how will this end date to the mission work, Prime Minister? What will it do to the credit you told us Canada built up with its allies by taking up a heavy burden and performing so well? You told our allies to do their part, but which other allies now may decide to follow Canada as it slinks away? What will your announcement do to the perception that Canada keeps its word even when the going gets tough? And just what extra dangers will an early departure place in front of our troops as the Taliban watch their resolve weaken?

These are important questions, Prime Minister, and you owe the Canadian electorate—and especially Canada's men and women in uniform who are also voters—some detailed answers.

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