

There's no life like it? Tell us more, Mr. Harper We need answers on procurement, recruiting and the Afghan war

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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 questions that need to be asked of Mr. Harper, not least because he seems to be on the cusp of a majority government.

The first questions concern defence procurement. The government did well in acquiring four C-17 Globemaster transports, the huge aircraft that can move mountains. But it has done much less well in placing orders for three Joint Support Ships as replacements for the navy's 40-year-old tubs. Nor has it placed 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 the number of procurement specialists, moving them sideways to fill vacancies in operational roles. Better a ship driver than a ship design specialist. More than a decade later, with ship design back in vogue, the navy has too few members on its procurement teams and nowhere to find them quickly. Meantime, the Alberta boom is taking skilled workers west, leaving shipyards and construction firms scrambling to find trades workers. On top of this, rampant inflation has increased steel and metal costs.

Thus the order for three Joint Support Ships gets scrubbed because none of the bidders can make a profit on what 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 has?

Then there is recruiting. The Canadian Forces remain woefully under strength, 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 pension. Others, after a tour or two in Afghanistan, decide enough is enough, 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 people in the military? Will it offer retention bonuses? Or increase the training system's capabilities so more recruits can be put through their basic and specialist training?

Moreover, what will the 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 what about reforming Canada's all but invisible Supplementary Reserve, made up of those retiring Canadian Forces members who choose to join, so that everyone who leaves the military 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.

And, finally, there is the war in Afghanistan. Those Canadians who support the war - and those who fight it - were heartened by Mr. Harper's remarks during his 2006 visit to Kandahar. Canadians don't cut and run, he said, and then he 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, Mr. Harper tells us now, abandoning the Afghans to fend for themselves. Just how will this end date work?

And what will it do to the credit that Canada has built up with its allies by taking up such a heavy burden? Mr. Harper told our allies to do their part, but which other allies will follow Canada as it slinks away? What will his announcement do to the perception that Canada keeps its word even when the going gets tough? And what extra dangers will an early departure put on our troops as the Taliban watch their resolve weaken?

These are important questions, and the Prime Minister owes Canadian voters - especially Canada's men and women in uniform - some detailed answers.