

Election silence on Canada's world role is deafening

By Bob Bergen

It is appalling that Canada's major party leaders didn't have a chance to debate vital national defence and security issues and Canada's place in the world during their four nationally televised debates.

In fairness, they didn't pick the questions they were asked, but Canada does have a significant role to play.

In a matter of weeks, Canadians may learn about its deadly seriousness when a 2000-member Canadian battle group arrives in Afghanistan's dangerous province of Kandahar amid a threatened offensive by former Taliban supporters and their al-Qaeda allies.

There is more: Down the road in 2007, Canadians will also learn – likely much to their traveling chagrin – just how determined the United States is to safeguard its own national security when the Western Hemisphere Travel Initiative (WHTI) takes effect.

Under the WHTI, after December 31, 2006, everyone entering the U.S. by air or sea from Canada, Mexico, Bermuda, Panama or the Caribbean – including Americans – will be required to carry a passport or other secure document.

Those security requirements will be extended to land border crossings as well as air and sea travel after December 31, 2007.

There is still more: Canada's involvement in NORAD – the North American Aerospace Defence Command, the foundation of the Canada-United States defence architecture since 1957 – is up for renewal on May 12, 2006, but the only comment on it comes from the Liberals demonizing weapons in space, as if enemy missiles wouldn't fly through space.

Agree with them or not, only the Conservatives have contributed anything meaningful and coherent in the way of national security and defence alternatives to the Liberals' established policies since the election campaign began November 29.

The Conservatives say they would spend up to 25 per cent of their military budget re-establishing military operations in Western Canada including urban army bases of up to 500 regular and reserve personnel in Vancouver, Calgary, Regina, Winnipeg and Toronto. Similar sized bases would also be established in Quebec City and Montreal.

The Tories would boost military defence spending to \$25 billion by 2010-11, beginning with \$1.8 billion per year over the Liberals' base line which is sorely needed after years of Liberal neglect.

Leader Stephen Harper also announced the Conservatives would create a 650-member rapid-reaction battalion to replace the Canadian Airborne Regiment disbanded by the Liberals, double the size of the Disaster Assistance Response Team (DART), buy three heavy strategic lift aircraft and continue to replace the military's fleet of smaller Hercules tactical lift aircraft.

On the other hand, the Liberals' suppressed attack adds equating "soldiers with guns" on the streets of Canadian cities as something evil reveals the party's true colours.

Ask those who needed military assistance during the Quebec ice storms, the Manitoba floods and the British Columbia forest fires what they think of soldiers in their streets.

As for the New Democratic Party and the Bloc Québécois, asking them this week to elaborate on defence policy statements posted on their websites was not helpful.

Everyone at their respective party headquarters was working on the leaders' televised debates, including those able to best answer pointed defence and security policy questions.

That said, the New Democrat Party's defence policy statements are long on criticism of the Liberals' record and short of alternatives.

They bemoan the deep budget cuts Liberals imposed on the Canadian Forces in the past 12 years and that barely one-fifth of the \$13 billion the Liberals would add to the defence budget won't flow before 2009. But, they but don't say how much the NDP would spend on defence or when they would spend it.

Similarly, the Bloc Québécois criticizes the Liberals for realigning the Canadian Forces' primary mission away from United Nations peacekeeping to interoperability with their combat-oriented U.S. military counterparts.

The Bloc goes on to ridicule the Liberals' \$800-million purchase of used British submarines and a \$174 satellite communications system that they claim has never left the hanger in which it is stored.

The Bloc would like to see any government defence spending exceeding \$100 million reviewed by the House of Commons Standing Committee on Defence and Veterans' Affairs.

In addition, the Bloc demands that there be real consultation on the purpose of the army before going forward with "huge spending."

Given that the Bloc is a party committed to sovereignty, it seemed fair to ask what thought, if any, had been given to a sovereign Quebec establishing its own military force to pursue its own foreign policy objectives serving the values and interests of Quebec.

Reached in Montreal, a worker in the party headquarters would only say: "For now, it is a discussion that has yet to be had."

That is not the only discussion that has not taken place. Notwithstanding the various defence policy statements that have been made to date by all parties, they don't amount to informed debate.

Talk about a democratic deficit.

The absolute worst part about all of this is: There are only two weeks left for Canadians to raise and understand these complex issues, not the two months Canada's place in the world deserves.

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