

Canadian reservists' job protection a moral obligation

By Bob Bergen

Stephen Harper's Conservative government seems refreshingly bold with its outspoken support for the Canadian Forces and long-range plans to acquire desperately needed ships, planes and vehicles after decades of neglect.

But, it's time for the government to do something concrete now for reservists risking their lives daily in combat in Afghanistan and on duty elsewhere in the world.

The government should introduce job protection legislation that will guarantee that reservists get their former jobs back when they return from places like Afghanistan, Haiti, Croatia and Bosnia where there are not enough regular forces to do the job.

This is an issue that has been bandied about for far too long and which has been punctuated with half-hearted measures by previous governments that paid lip service to the well-established need.

Corporal Anthony Boneca – the latest Canadian fatality in Afghanistan and the third reservist to come home in a coffin – was typical of about half of Canada's 24,000 primary army, navy, air force, communications, health services and other reservists who are students.

Primary reservists are civilians who voluntarily take paid part-time military training around 30 to 45 days a year usually one night a week and on weekends, depending on their courses.

There are about 300 reservists among the 2,300 Canadian troops currently taking part in Operation Archer, Canada's contribution to the war against terror in Afghanistan.

Reservists like Cpl. Boneca are either finished school or are able to take time off from their studies for extended periods of military duty overseas and this was Boneca's second tour in Afghanistan.

Unlike Boneca, the rest of the reservists hold full-time or part-time jobs.

The issue for them is getting time off for work-up training with the regular forces and then a six-month deployment and still having a job when they return.

This is a serious matter that is being addressed at the highest levels in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization with Canadian Major-General Herb Petras now in the lead.

On July 7, last week, Maj.-Gen. Petras, who is Canada's Chief of Reserves and Cadets, assumed the chairmanship of NATO's influential 20-nation National Reserve Forces Committee (NRFC). He will serve both roles concurrently.

One of the most critical issues the NRFC will tackle is the re-integration of reservists into their respective communities after overseas deployments or, more simply, ensuring that reservists get their old jobs back.

There was a five-day Employer Support for Reservist Conference on just this issue in Ottawa in May and June of last year which included Canada, the United States, the United Kingdom, Singapore, Poland, New Zealand, the Netherlands, Latvia, Italy, Germany and Australia.

The fifth such conference will take place in the United Kingdom in 2007. That's how important this is internationally.

The United States, the United Kingdom and Australia are leaders in this because they have instituted legislation that requires employers to re-instate their reservist employees after protracted military duty.

But, what has Canada done?

In 2002, as part of its Anti-Terrorism Plan, Jean Chretien's Liberal government introduced the Public Safety Act which would protect reservists' jobs if called up for compulsory emergency duty in the event of insurrection, riot, invasion, or armed conflict.

In 2004, the Act received Royal assent, but the regulations which would bring the amendments into force were not approved by cabinet.

Even if they were, they would have done the reservists now fighting in Afghanistan absolutely no good at all. They were not called up, they volunteered. As a result, they would not be afforded job protection under the Act.

In fact, a compulsory call up of Canadian reserves hasn't taken place since the Second World War.

Let's call a spade a spade here. Canada is at war in Afghanistan and the fact that reservists fighting alongside the regular forces aren't afforded the job protection contemplated by the Public Safety Act is appalling.

To its everlasting credit, the Canadian Forces Liaison Council acts in support of the Department of

National Defence in absence of such legislation.

The Council is a volunteer organization of prominent business leaders who work with Canadian employers encouraging them, of their own good will, to allow reservists in their employ to deploy abroad and re-instate their jobs upon return.

The council has the expressed support of about 4,700 employers nationally and claims about a 90 per cent success rate when dealing with businesses reluctant to give reservists their jobs back.

But, you don't have to know many reservists at all before you meet good ones who have left the military because they had to make a choice between their jobs or overseas deployments because there is no job protection legislation.

Canada has a moral obligation to reservists risking their lives serving their country that goes far beyond good will.

They deserve meaningful job protection legislation and they deserve it now.

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