

Defence Minister O'Connor has his work cut out for him

By Bob Bergen

For the first time since the early 1960s, Canada has a new Minister of National Defence, Gordon O'Connor, who knows first-hand the magnitude of the Canadian military mess that he has to clean up.

And, many of those who know the former Canadian Forces brigadier-general say O'Connor is the single most qualified politician to do it, despite the political slings and arrows that may come his way stemming from his private-sector past before he was elected to Parliament in 2004.

Former armored corps commander, Maj.-Gen. (ret'd) Clive Addy, said perhaps O'Connor's greatest strength is the knowledge and experience he acquired working at National Defence Headquarters in the 1980s where, among other responsibilities, he was the director-general of land force development.

Addy explained the job required O'Connor to consider the need for artillery, for example, against the need for small arms, tanks and airplanes. He then had to put together procurement programs and address those topics at the defence management committee level and at Public Works.

"He's more knowledgeable than most I know in that field by a long shot," says Addy who, as a young lieutenant-colonel, took over from then-Lieutenant-Colonel O'Connor as commander of the Royal Canadian Dragoons in Germany in 1980.

"It's quite an exciting time," says retired Lt.-Gen. Ray Crabbe, a former Deputy Chief of Defence Staff in 1997-1998 responsible for Canadian Forces operations and intelligence worldwide.

"But, I've always been somewhat leery about former senior officers becoming ministers of national defence because, I would think, there would be a tendency for him to get involved in the details of running the department simply because of the nature of the individual's background.

"On the other hand, on the positive side is his knowledge and his experience in the Department of National Defence," Crabbe said.

One thing is certain, both O'Connor and his Chief of Defence Staff, Gen. Rick Hillier, share a bond few ministers and their chiefs of defence staff ever do: they both have armored corps blood in their veins. Then-Lieutenant-Colonel O'Connor even commanded then-Captain Hillier in Germany in the 1970s.

In a tribal culture like the Forces, that will have the air force and the navy thinking the armored corps has virtually taken over Ottawa.

But, here is where O'Connor's former life as a private-sector lobbyist after he left the military could come back to haunt him politically as minister.

Prior to the election campaign, O'Connor was a fierce critic of the Paul Martin government's plan to fast track the purchase of 16 sorely needed Lockheed Martin C-130J Hercules transport aircraft to replace Canada's aging fleet of Hercules.

Among the Conservatives' many election campaign platform planks was a plan to re-open the aircraft bidding to other companies, including Boeing and Airbus Military.

O'Connor claims he wants a legitimate competition and, to that end, he will have far more influence as minister overseeing the government's military procurement programs than he ever had as the Tory defence critic.

But, one of O'Connor's former private-sector clients was Airbus, which was trying to sell the government its A400M transport plane as a Hercules alternative. That could create a perception – real or imagined – of potential ministerial conflict of interest.

Where some might see O'Connor's lobbyist past as a potential conflict, military scholar Dr. Douglas Bland – Chair in Defence Management Studies in the Queen's University School of Policy Studies – thinks the new minister's private-sector experience is an asset.

"I think it's actually of great value to be able to have someone who understands both sides of the street, as it were," Bland said.

"I think that people should expect the new Conservative government and Gordon O'Connor to do exactly what they said they were going to do."

Bland also said that the new Conservative government will now have access to classified military information and briefings from officials and officers they didn't have in opposition.

"I expect the government will review every aspect of defence policy including the Liberals' recent statement on national defence and they'll look at Afghanistan, for sure, and decide how that's going and how they might modify it if they do modify it," he said.

During the election, the Conservatives' key platforms included boosting military spending to \$25 billion by 2010-2011 and spending 25 per cent of the military budget re-establishing military operations in Western Canada and Quebec, creating urban army bases of up to 500 regular and reserve personnel in Vancouver, Calgary, Regina, Winnipeg, Toronto, Quebec City and Montreal where reserve units are already established.

They said they would create a 650-member rapid-reaction battalion to replace the disbanded Canadian Airborne Regiment, double the size of the Disaster Assistance Response Team, buy new replenishment and transport ships, build new ice breakers for the Arctic and buy strategic and tactical airlift.

O'Connor, the defence critic, was the author of much of the Conservative defence election platform and he raised the bar high.

The question is now whether National Defence Minister O'Connor can deliver on all those ambitious, expensive and mostly badly-needed and promised programs.

He certainly now has the power to try.

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