

## **Defence budget a water torture of information released drop by drop**

There is one thing to be said about the 2007 budget information provided by Stephen Harper regarding its fiscal plans for the Canadian Forces: at least they are consistent.

“Consistent with what?” you might ask.

The answer must surely be consistently providing Canadians with information about the Canadian Forces and its defence policies drop by drop, like a water torture meant to drive one crazy, just as the Conservatives did in 2005 and 2006 during the election campaign.

As Canadian taxpayers living in an increasingly complex and unstable world, we have the right to know where and how our money is being spent in national defence and in a forthright and transparent manner. But, what do we get instead?

We'll look no further than Chapter 6 of the 2007 budget: “A Safer Canada: Building a Stronger Canada in a Modern World.”

You will have to search for that on the Internet. Long gone are the days when Canadians could obtain a hard copy of the budget from local federal government offices on the same day as it is released in Ottawa.

Individual Canadians so inclined can still obtain a hard copy of the budget from the closest Service Canada office, but it won't be until between two and five days after its Ottawa release.

From what can be learned on the Internet version of the budget, on the face of it, it appears the government intends to accelerate its 2006 Canada First five-year plan to pump about \$5.3 billion in extra funding to the Canadian Forces.

The problem with that plan was that it would have provided the bulk of the increases in 2010 and 2011, as if the same government would be power in 2011 and as if it would have exactly the same defence priorities despite changing world-wide events and circumstances.

The budget the government announced this week appears not to provide any new money to the Forces, but appears to accelerate the 2006 plan by providing \$3.1 billion of that extra \$5.3 billion to the Forces over the next three years: \$900 million in 2007-2008; \$1 billion in 2008-2009 and \$1.225 billion in 2009-2010.

That has shortened its funding window by one year from its 2006 plan, but the bulk of the increases – \$2.225 billion in all, or about 72 per cent of the promised \$3.1 billion increase - are back ended so their full effect won't be felt until 2009 and 2010.

In other words, the bulk of the “accelerated” funding for the Forces appears to kick in two years from now.

What's wrong with that is exactly the same that was wrong in 2006: who can tell what government will be running Canada in 2009 and 2010 and what its priorities will be?

That intellectual slight of hand is galling, because the cash-strapped Canadian Forces desperately need a massive infusion of money now, if not yesterday, and not beginning two years from now

It wasn't for nothing earlier this year that naval commanders threatened to call off a \$3-million to \$5-million east coast sovereignty patrol due to a \$25 million navy budget shortfall.

Defence Minister Gordon O'Connor intervened and ensured the navy's patrol would go ahead, but the air force joined in the hat-in-hand show before the news media and by extension the Canadian public in February.

It mused about putting new engines on its 40-year-old unpressurized Buffalo search and rescue aircraft and keeping them and its aging Hercules transport planes – desperately needed for transport – in search-and-rescue roles instead of buying new search and rescue planes.

Moreover, what the budget documents the Harper government posted this week don't do is provide an overall picture of defence spending as was the practice of past governments.

Sure the Harper government may add \$900 million to the budget in 2007-2008, but add it to what?

Here's where the water torture comes in: For clues about the government's overall defence spending plans, one has to look to the Treasury Board of Canada's main estimates for 2007-2008 released on February 27, 2007.

The estimates provide a list of the financial resources required by individual departments for the upcoming year.

In them, it appears that the National Defence Department's main estimate calls for \$16,881,605 in spending in 2007-2008, compared to \$14,789,222 in 2006-2007.

That looks to be a more than \$2 billion increase in spending, but that's not the final word, however. Additional changes can be made later in the year in supplementary estimates. Where this 2007 budget's increases fit into that is anybody's guess. This is enough to make one long for the old days of Jean Chretien's Liberal government budgets. Chretien's government may have decimated the Canadian Forces in the 1990s, but at least it was upfront about it in its budgets. Then Canadians could get up in arms about what the government was saying instead of what it wasn't saying, which is what we're faced with now.

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