

## Prime minister-elect Harper must follow through on defence

By Bob Bergen

It is remarkable that the Conservatives made national defence a cornerstone of their election-winning campaign platform and there is reason enough to expect Stephen Harper's minority government to do as it says it will on defence.

But the question remains: Where and when will the Conservatives begin to reverse decades of neglect foisted on the military?

The Canadian Forces needs so much including heavy strategic and tactical airlift aircraft, search and rescue planes and new replenishment and transport ships – not to mention thousands of new recruits even as up to 2,000 Canadians are being deployed to Afghanistan in combat roles.

Dr. Elinor Sloan, a political scientist at Carleton University, says the fact the Conservatives raised defence as an election issue is significant.

"'Canadians are interested,' is what that is saying, because they (politicians) only respond to and they only talk about things that Canadians are concerned about," she said.

Dr. David J. Bercuson, Director of Programs of the Canadian Defence & Foreign Affairs Institute (CDFAI), thinks what is needed first is some of the \$5.3 billion more the Conservatives' said they would spend on defence than the Liberals between 2006 and 2011.

Under the Liberals' last budget, annual defence spending would peak at \$19 billion by 2010, compared to roughly \$13.5 billion in 2004-2005.

During the campaign, the Conservatives pledged to boost defence spending by \$1.2 billion per year over and above the roughly \$1.1 billion the Liberals budgeted to add in the first two years.

Dr. Bercuson is optimistic saying that achieving at least some of Harper's early spending goals should be straightforward. He thinks opposition parties are unlikely to defeat the minority government's first budget and plunge Canadians immediately into an unpopular election.

"He (Harper) put a lot of emphasis on it (defence) and he won't be defeated on the budget so why not try to get most of it through this time around?" he said.

Political scientist Sloan thinks the Conservatives' promise to add \$1.2 billion to the defence budget in the first year over and above the roughly \$500 million the Liberals added in last year's budget may be feasible.

"It's a lot of money, but it's not a dramatic change over and above the Liberal promises," she said from Ottawa.

Drs. Bercuson and Sloan agree that one of the Canadian Forces first priorities could be the replacement of its aging fleet of CC-130 Hercules tactical transport aircraft.

"The planes are literally going to be falling out of the sky pretty soon," Sloan says.

Having said that, Sloan said she wouldn't be surprised if the Conservatives re-opened the Liberals' \$4.6 -billion plan to purchase 16 transport planes to replace the Hercules.

The Conservatives claim the Liberals by-passed competition and all but ruled out any plane other than the U.S. built Lockheed Martin Hercules C-130J.

To speed the purchase, the Liberals created a "fairness monitor" to fast track the badly needed plans to ferry equipment, troops and munitions.

“They (the Conservatives) could possibly focus on what the Department of National Defence says should be a priority – search and rescue aircraft for the North. That would fit very well with the Harper platform of increased sovereignty and security of Canadian territory,” Sloan said.

Lt.-Gen. (ret'd) George Macdonald said he perceives problems with some of the Conservatives' defence platforms, such as the plan to provide new territorial battalions of 100 regular force soldiers and 400 reserve personnel in Vancouver, Calgary, Regina and Winnipeg. There are already reserve units in those cities.

It is not a question of “soldiers with guns” on the streets of Canadian cities – mocked in a Liberal attack ad – it is the nature and purpose of a military organization.

“It's one thing to recruit new people, but they have to go through a training system to become fully operationally capable. The training system has been taxed quite heavily over the last few years so it would be a significant strain to ratchet up the recruiting system, although it's clearly possible,” Macdonald said.

“But, to disperse people across the country means that you have to provide them with equipment, proper support and infrastructure which is somewhat contrary to the consolidation of bases which occurred in the early 1990s which was meant to save infrastructure and support money,” he said.

The Harper campaign promised much more on defence including buying a badly needed new replenishment ship, a transport ship and establishing a new long-range unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) squadron with 100 personnel at CFB Comox.

The bad news is these programs all come with huge dollar signs attached.

The good news is Harper ran to put high-profile high-priority defence matters on his government's agenda.

Canadians will be watching just how well he steers that agenda in the coming months, if not years.

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