

## **Messy politics could create a new Sea King legacy in search and rescue**

If Prime Minister Stephen Harper's government is looking for a legacy equally as sordid as Jean Chretien's failure to replace Sea King helicopters, failing to replace the Buffalo search-and-rescue planes could be it.

But, that is precisely an option the government has been handed by the air force: throwing overboard a plan of the previous Liberal government to acquire a new fleet of fixed-wing aircraft to replace the six Buffalos and 10 older CC-130 Hercules now performing search and rescue.

The air force is publicly contemplating putting new engines on the 40-year-old unpressurized Buffalos and keeping the Hercs in a search-and-rescue role instead of buying new planes.

Why? Well, it's not because the \$3 billion earmarked for the project isn't there or has to be used to buy other combat equipment; the reason is how the politics of it might be perceived by the Canadian public.

There are at least three story lines running at once here.

In the first, the front runner to replace the Buffalo is the C-27J Spartan, a robust airlifter developed by the Italian Alenia Aeronautica-Lockheed Martin consortium. It can be used in both search and rescue and some tactical roles.

Call it chutzpah, but so confident is the C-27J Spartan group, its website features a C-27J configured in Canada's yellow search-and-rescue colours and bearing the government of Canada logo.

A competitor is the C-295 produced by the Spanish-based consortium of EADS CASA North America and Raytheon, which has EADS Canada Inc. Its limited fuselage height makes tactical transport more difficult.

Bombardier Canada, located in Montreal, also has the Canadair 415 amphibious Superscooper. It is primarily a water-bomber fire fighting aircraft, but it can be configured for maritime surveillance, search and rescue and personnel transport. It is argued Bombardier's Dash-8 could also be modified for search and rescue.

In order for the Harper government to obtain a Buffalo replacement in a timely manner, it would have to resort to the same fast-track sole-sourcing bag of tricks it recently used to acquire four C-17 Globemaster cargo planes and is moving toward in the acquisition of Chinook helicopters and new C-130J Hercules transport planes.

The bad news is should the government follow the sole-source route and Bombardier and Quebec's aerospace manufacturing industry lose, the result could be disastrous for Harper's government at the ballot box in Quebec.

The second story line is that the Buffalos could easily become a new fixed-wing generation of lemons like the infamous Sea King helicopters.

When the Jean Chretien government was elected in 1993, there was already a \$4.8-billion plan in place by the Brian Mulroney government to replace its 1960s vintage CH-124 Sea King helicopters with 50 state-of-the-art EH-101 helicopters from the Anglo-Italian consortium of European Helicopter Industries Limited.

Chretien called EH-101s "Cadillacs" and one of his first acts was to cancel replacement contract.

In 2004, Paul Martin's Liberal government announced it would finally replace the Sea Kings that were increasingly prone to flameouts, engine stalls, generator failures and gearbox problems with 28 CH-148 Sikorsky helicopters at cost of \$5 billion, which included a 20-year service contract. The first will be delivered in November 2008.

Should the government not replace the Buffalos with new aircraft and merely replace their engines, Canada could easily have a new generation of "Sea Kings" on its hands for decades.

The third story line is that, while the Harper government already has \$3 billion earmarked for the C-27C Spartan, it is being hard-pressed to hold the line on military spending in its upcoming March budget.

The war in Afghanistan is costing it dearly. The government simply doesn't have the money to run the war, fix and expand the Canadian Forces and plan for the future. Something has to give and it's not going to be the army in Afghanistan, at least until its mandate is over in 2009.

It was not for nothing then that naval commanders said very publicly in January that a \$3-million to \$5-million east coast sovereignty patrol would be cancelled as part of a \$25 million navy budget shortfall. Defence Minister Gordon O'Connor intervened and ensured the patrol would go ahead, but the high-stakes game of chicken between the navy, the air force and the government was on.

The Buffalos' potential non-replacement would appear to be but the latest round. There is a bottom line here: the men and women of the Canadian Forces search and rescue teams perform dangerous but vital work in all manner of challenging environmental conditions. Providing them with the proper aircraft to do their jobs is not about killing people overseas in a war that Canadians may or may not approve of. Should you ever require search and rescue, you will come to appreciate that.

There is only one correct course of action: the Harper government must rise above the politics, make the difficult choices and provide the Canadian Forces men and women in search and rescue the right airplanes they need to do their jobs.

What they don't need is flying lemons.

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