

Where Are You On Defence, Conservatives?

By Bob Bergen

Now is the time for Conservatives to begin discussing what they would do to fix the badly ailing Defence Department.

Why? That is because the Conservative Party is likely the only party – other than the Liberals – capable of forming a majority or minority government when Canadians go to the polls in January,

But, Conservative defence critic Gordon O'Connor says it may take until Christmas for Canadians to learn the Conservative Party's policies and plans to fix the Canadian military.

"From the Conservative point of view, defence is very important. It will be a significant thing inside our platform, but the state of the armed forces is so bad you can't fix it all at the same time. It will take years and years to fix it."

O'Connor said pieces of the Conservatives' platform would begin rolling out Nov. 29, the day after Paul Martin's Liberals were defeated in a no-confidence vote, launching an election which could take place Jan. 23.

But, he also said that it will take three weeks for the entire Conservative platform to be revealed.

"Before Christmas, everyone will have the complete platform. To my knowledge all the defence will be out before Christmas," O'Connor said from Ottawa.

The problem with a slow release of information is that the problems facing the Canadian Forces are complex and they need to be addressed as soon and as fully as possible.

As spotty as the Martin government's record has been on matters of national defence and knowing that the military's need for 16 tactical transport aircraft was urgent, the Liberal cabinet met last week to set the wheels in motion to begin acquiring the aircraft at a cost of between \$4-billion and \$5-billion within a planned three-year time frame.

Those plans will proceed despite the looming election, according to Vince MacNeil, senior policy advisor for procurement for Public Works and Government Services Canada.

A statement of operational requirements for the aircraft will be posted on the Public Works procurement website in the near future. So, too, and likely within the next couple of weeks, will a solicitation of interest and qualifications for a "fairness monitor." The monitor could be either an individual or a company that will ensure bidding on the lucrative transport aircraft contract is open and competitive.

The Liberals are on the record saying that, if they win the election, they will proceed with spending the billions required to buy the transport aircraft.

MacNeil said had the Martin government survived for another two or three months, the procurement plans would likely have included new search and rescue aircraft.

"When it became clear the Liberals were going to be defeated, defence said; 'We can't wait for the airlift.'"

On Nov. 29, the Department of National Defence announced on its website that it also couldn't wait for \$234 million in sophisticated new equipment to carry out its mission in Afghanistan and support 2,000 troops who will be deployed to the dangerous region of Kandahar in February 2006.

Included in the announcement was \$120 million for 50 RG-31 Nyala armoured patrol vehicles (APV) manufactured in the Republic of South Africa by BAE Land

Systems OMC. The APV features enhanced mine blast resistance and protection against improvised explosives and ballistic threats. They are expected to arrive in Afghanistan by March 2006.

Still, the Martin government has been roundly criticized by O'Connor and others for its military spending.

In February 2005, the government announced \$12.8 billion in new spending for the Canadian Forces. But, the way the government allocated the funds meant that only \$500 million would be allocated in the first year and a total of \$2.7 in the following three years.

The bulk of the new spending would take place in 2009 with a \$4.5-billion increase, followed by \$5.7-billion in 2010.

Now, there is no guarantee that a Liberal government will be in place in January of 2006 let alone in 2010 to follow up on those plans.

Despite that budgeting, O'Connor said the Martin government had no focus for the Canadian Forces and said that new focus is provided in the Conservative Party's election platform on the military.

"I authored it, so I know what's in it, but I'm not going to talk about it. They have a plan and we'll let it roll out. You will see our financial plan when it comes out in the platform. We'll tell you how much money we're going to commit and the way it's going to come in," he said.

Dr. David Bercuson, director of programs for the Canadian Defence & Foreign Affairs Institute, says that isn't good enough.

"Where are you on defence, Conservatives? We know where the Liberals are on defence," he says.

As a result of releasing Conservative policies in dribs and drabs – coupled with likely time off over the holidays – there could be just weeks for conscientious voters to examine and debate them, not months.

Canadians deserve much better than that.

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