

There couldn't be a worse time for defence spending ambiguity

By Bob Bergen

The Stephen Harper government, which prides itself on opening up government to greater scrutiny, has, in fact, plumbed new accountability depths with its budget for national defence.

Federal budgets are supposed to put specific meat on the bare bones of policy statements.

They are supposed to provide Canadians with information about the government's cost-cutting intentions in specific spending programs while channeling savings into others.

With its budget on national defence Tuesday, Harper's government didn't do that.

Instead, it was even more vague about its plans for the Canadian Forces than the Conservatives were during the election when they promised to lavish new billions on Canada's under-funded and decaying military.

There couldn't be a worse time for such fiscal ambiguity.

Canada is at war, but no where in the Harper government's budget can the word "Afghanistan" be found.

No where in the budget is the Canadian Forces in-theatre need for their own tactical air lift addressed.

And, in a little more than a week, the Harper government is going to have to make decisions on the extent of Canada's involvement in the North American Aerospace Defence Command (NORAD) or if it will remain in NORAD at all.

The current five-year agreement that defends the U.S. and Canada from airborne attack is up for renewal on May 12.

There has been talk about the potential to expand NORAD to include maritime defence (think about ships, including an ice-breaker the Conservatives promised here) and some debate about limited Canadian involvement in missile defence.

There is more: At a level unfortunately far removed from most Canadians, the Canadian government's long-term capital planning for the military is being phased out by a yet-to-be-finalized Strategic Capability Investment Plan.

Simply stated, the new planning concept would move beyond the costs of acquiring new helicopters, for example, to consider all the elements necessary to harness the helicopters' capabilities – including hangers, technology and research, concept development, experimentation and human resources.

Canadians don't – but they need to – fully understand the crises in the Forces equipment and manpower and, importantly, the extent that this budget does not address those crises.

In the meantime, Canadian politicians, military leaders, academics and others are currently considering the Final Report on Canada and the United States (CANUS) Enhanced Military Co-operation.

Some welcome a closer alliance between the Canadian and U.S. militaries, while others are concerned that CANUS foreign and defence policies could become integrated along the lines of NORAD.

All these crucial issues have far reaching budget implications that could have been addressed, but were not.

Even when past Liberal governments were misleading Canadians about their plans in the 1990s to close military bases across Canada and the millions of dollars they would supposedly save, at least they did it with specific dollar figures.

Deceptive though they were, the specific figures allowed observers to pass judgment on the government's unaccountability in retrospect.

During the election campaign, the Conservatives essentially said they would build on the previous Liberal government's plan to increase military spending from \$13.6 billion in 2005-2006 by some \$12.8 billion over five-years.

What was disingenuous about the Liberal plan was that it would have only increased spending in 2005-2006 by \$500 million and by \$600 million in 2006-2007.

The significant portion of the increased Liberal spending was back-ended and was supposed to have come into effect in 2008-2009 when spending was to be increased by about \$4.5 billion and by \$5.7 billion in 2009-2010.

What was deceptive about all of that was there was no guarantee the Liberals would be in government in 2006 let alone in 2008-2009 to see their plan through.

The Liberal government's uncertain future eventually became fact.

But, not to be outdone or to demonstrate true vision, the Conservatives merely promised to up the ante so

that, by 2010-2011, defence spending would be \$1.8 billion higher annually than the Liberal projections. They also left the bulk of the spending to 2010 and 2011.

To that end the Conservatives' 2006 defence budget stipulates that, over the next two years, an additional \$1.1 billion will be added to defence over what the Liberals planned and said that the budget base will increase by \$5.3 billion over the next five years.

But, will a Conservative government be around in 2011 to see that plan through? Who knows?

What is known for sure is that the only specific money committed to the Canadian Forces in the entire budget was \$1 million in 2006-2007 to assist the construction of a new facility to house the Halifax Bomber at the Royal Canadian Air Force Museum in Trenton, Ontario.

The rest of the budget document said it would "proceed" with military operation and defence administration transformation; "accelerate" recruitment of regular and reserve forces; "expand" training; "increase" base infrastructure investment; and "initiate" the establishment of territorial battalions.

Those are not measurable fiscal policy and spending programs, those are superficially rehashed election promises.

Canadians deserve much better.

Bob Bergen, Ph.D., is a Research Fellow with the Canadian Defence & Foreign Affairs Institute (CDFAI) in Calgary. The opinions expressed in this document are those of the author and not necessarily those of CDFAI, its Board of Directors, Advisory Council, Fellows or donors. Bergen's column appears bi-weekly. Learn more about the CDFAI on the Internet at www.cdfai.org