

Politics and Defence

The intersection between our political parties and the Canadian Forces is littered with wreckage. There are large pieces of equipment that never made it off the ground, like helicopters. There are disagreements over funding, with the NDP, always wanting less for the military, pushed right off the pavement. And there are those who believe in United Nations blue beret peacekeeping as an article of secular faith scattered across the tarmac under the juggernaut labelled Afghanistan.

This is no way to run a modern military. What Canada needs is a bipartisan defence policy, one that can win acceptance from the government and the Opposition. Nothing militarily credible will ever satisfy ideologically committed NDPers or Bloquistes, but it ought to be possible to work out a defence *modus vivendi* between the Grits and Tories. In Australia, where politics is fought just as fiercely, there is such an arrangement, so much so that the recent change in government there did not derail defence policy, procurement, or planning.

How could this work in Canada? Well, in fact, it has worked in the past, most notably in the 1950s and 1960s when there was broad consensus among the parties that Canada should be in NATO, that the air defence of North America needed to be shared with the United States, and that the military needed a full range of kit. This bipartisanship broke down when Pierre Trudeau came to power and slashed the Canadian Forces. His successors continued the cutbacks.

There was, however, a glimmer of hope in the recent agreement between the government and the Liberals on the Afghanistan resolution extending the mission by three years. Behind the scenes negotiations, the incorporation of Liberal amendments into the government motion, and substantial persuasion within the Liberal caucus on party leader Stéphane Dion from knowledgeable, able M.P.s such as Bob Rae and Michael Ignatieff brought the Liberals and Conservatives together.

Now we need more of the same. The government's lacklustre Canada First Defence Strategy proposed a funding scheme extending well into the future. Everyone knows that a new government could scrap this the day after its election (much like Jean Chrétien scrapped the big helicopter purchase in 1993). But what if the Opposition was bought into the strategy, recognizing the obvious fact that the Canadian Forces needs secure funding to plan for the future strategic environment Canada will face? What if government and Opposition could agree on a naval shipbuilding outline to remake the fleet and to institute a continuous build plan to restore Canada's shipyards? On acquiring new fighter jets, new Search and Rescue aircraft, new surveillance planes? On increasing the strength of the armed forces, regular and reserve?

Such questions aren't as difficult as brain surgery (or climate change), but they do go right to the heart of Canadian national interests. They tell defence industries that deals with Ottawa won't be scrapped mindlessly and that they too can plan with reasonable assurance that deals will be consummated. They tell workers that a retraining program might pay off with a long-lasting job. They tell soldiers that the nation recognizes their continuing worth. And they tell voters that the government and the Opposition both recognize the national interest.

Another way to improve traffic on the intersection between politics and the military is to have more M.P.s acquire the expertise they need to comment intelligently on defence. To be blunt, the NDP's defence critic, Dawn Black, and the Liberal's former critic, Denis Coderre, wouldn't know an entrenching tool from a LAV III. Such ignorance helps no one and no party.

But what if there were an informal “defence caucus” that brought together Members from all parties on a regular basis to hear from knowledgeable military figures, scholars, and industrialists? The Bloc’s Claude Bachand from Saint-Jean knows his stuff; so too do the NDP’s Bill Blaikie from Manitoba, unfortunately not running again, and Peter Stoffer from Nova Scotia. Add in Senators Colin Kenny and Hugh Segal and M.P.s from ridings with large military bases or major defence industries, and it would be possible over time to create a group of knowledgeable parliamentarians who could improve defence expertise in the House of Commons and Senate in a fashion that can benefit all Canadians and the Canadian Forces.

What is all too clear is that playing “gotcha” politics with defence has been, and is, a disaster. Canada is fighting a war today and doing it rather well despite forty years of governmental neglect of defence. But if our parliamentarians could agree on the broad outlines of a defence policy for the next twenty-five years, and if individual Members of Parliament could begin to develop the kind of expertise that they need to comment intelligently on the Canadian Forces’ roles, equipment, personnel needs, and budgets, these would be long steps toward national maturity.

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