

Government missing mark in plan to cut back military spending

Poll shows Canadians like idea of strong, well-equipped armed forces

BY ELINOR SLOAN, FREELANCE MARCH 11, 2010

It is clear that Canadians want their country to play a strong military role in the world. A recent Canadian Defence & Foreign Affairs Institute survey conducted by Innovative Research Group has found that well over a majority of those polled want the Canadian Forces to be able to contribute to humanitarian and war-fighting missions in the future.

And they are willing to put their money where their mouth is. Some 58 per cent think we should spend what the military needs to sustain the Canadian Forces' ability to fight terrorism in places like Afghanistan, support humanitarian missions, such as what we saw in Haiti, and defend Canada's homeland, for example in the North. Over a third of Canadians think we are not spending enough on the military, while less than one in five thinks we are spending too much.

Most remarkably, almost half the people polled thought that military spending should not be cut back to reduce the deficit once our country's military contribution to the mission in Afghanistan comes to an end next year, even if that means cutting other services to reduce the federal deficit.

Such views are testament to the visibility the mission in Afghanistan has brought to the armed forces, and the professional and expert ability with which its members have carried it out. More than ever, the military is part of the average Canadian's interest and thoughts.

There appears to be a renewed desire for Canada to play a leadership role in the world -- one that goes well beyond the soft-power words of yesterday, to concrete action that truly makes a difference.

The government missed this prevailing sentiment in last week's speech from the throne and federal budget. The speech mentioned only that the government has supported the Canadian Forces in words and investment, and that it would continue to "stand up" for our military since its members "stand up for the values and principles Canadians hold dear." The federal budget argues the government has made "major, necessary investments" in military capabilities in support of the June 2008 Canada First Defence Strategy and then announces \$2.5 billion in future cuts to previously planned military spending starting in 2011-12.

But has the government really made the major, necessary investments? On one level, of course, it has.

The defence budget is significantly higher today (about \$20 billion) than it was when the Harper government came into power (about \$15 billion).

Canada's military is also larger, currently standing at about 66,000 active members as compared to around 52,000 when the Martin government was in power. Canada has a significant new military capability, strategic airlift, and is one of only a handful of countries in the world with this asset.

The government has also bought a fair bit of equipment for the army to meet the immediate demands of the Afghan mission, such as tactical unmanned aerial vehicles, tanks, armoured patrol vehicles and a handful of Chinook helicopters from the United States, pending the arrival of our own fleet.

Later this year, new Hercules transport aircraft and Cyclone maritime helicopters will start to arrive, replacing aircraft that were built almost half a century ago, and the navy's frigates will begin a modernization process.

But the hard decisions have been left to the future. Plans for Arctic Offshore Patrol Vessels, necessary for Canada to exercise control over its eastern, western and rapidly melting northern maritime regions have been put on ice.

In less than five years, the navy's destroyers that are at the centre of Canada's independent naval task group capability, critical for things like interdicting terrorists on the high seas, must be dry-docked due to their age. Yet plans for a replacement are on hold.

Canada's two remaining supply ships, without which Canada is entirely dependent on its allies for resupply, whether off the coast of Haiti or elsewhere, are entering their fifth decade; however, years, even decades, of planning for a new support ship were abruptly brought to a halt last summer.

Meanwhile, the airframe of the fighter aircraft on which Canada relies to guard our North American skies will not be air worthy after 2017, but no decision has been made to replace these aircraft.

In fact, of the 10 "major, necessary investments" identified in the June 2008, Canada First Defence Strategy, only one is in hand (the C17s), one is set to begin delivery (the Hercules), and one has a signed contract (the Chinooks, to start being delivered in 2013). All of the others, including ships, fighters, maritime patrol aircraft and combat vehicles, have an unknown future.

The polls are in. There is an unprecedented level of support for a strong Canadian military, and this extends beyond the Afghanistan mission. Critical gaps in army, air force and especially navy capabilities will appear in the second half of this decade.

With a minimum of four years (much more for ships) between contract award and platform delivery, cuts to previously planned spending beginning in 2011-12 will be the worst of timing.

The Harper government must revisit its course if "standing up for the values and principles Canadians hold dear" is to be a concrete sentiment and not just words.

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