

Keeping Canada Strong and Free

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OTTAWA, ON and ZURICH, Switzerland, June 2, 2011 - Canada is at war in Afghanistan and Libya so the near total absence of thoughtful debate about defence and foreign engagement in the recent election campaign was especially disappointing. And given that foreign entanglements can arise with little warning in unexpected places (think Libya), we need to have a reasoned democratic debate about Canada's long-term military ambitions and how to equip our armed forces to carry them out.

Here are four ideas that should be front and centre as Canadians debate the future of our military and its contribution to our ambitions in the world.

Parliament's role

It is always a good idea to keep parliament involved: we are, after all, a democracy and governments of democratic societies which wage war without popular support have a long history of coming to grief. In Canada, however, unlike in the U.S. where only Congress can declare war, the Crown (and its government) is supreme and can take whatever action it deems necessary in the national interest.

However, the government is still accountable to parliament and, ultimately, the voters and any government which misreads parliament or the popular mood pays the price in a vote of non-confidence or the loss of an election. That, however, is a completely different matter than getting into the habit of asking Parliament to approve any international intervention in advance. Not only is this foreign to our parliamentary tradition, it would compromise future governments' freedom of action when the international situation calls for quick and decisive measures. Our tradition holds that we elect a government to govern, and we let it do that until it demonstrates it cannot.

Exit strategies

Canada didn't go to war twice in Europe or in Korea with a view to getting out. We went to war to achieve concrete results. Having achieved them, we then "exited".

Talk of an "exit strategy" before the mission is undertaken, on the other hand, reflects uncertainty about our foreign and defence policy. It is far better to be

crystal clear about what constitutes success, know what it's going to take, and then decide whether to get involved. In other words, the exit strategy will become apparent once our clearly-stated objective has been achieved.

White Papers

For a new white paper on defence – to sort through ideas and strategic interests, ensure we have the means equal to our ambitions, and to inform the electorate of the intended consequences of government policy – to be useful, it must explore the military and defence needs Canada may reasonably expect to face in the short to medium term. These needs must then be related to our treaty and other international obligations, and explain what personnel and equipment will be required to allow Canada to take up such challenges successfully.

Preparing our military to face a variety of threat contingencies and planning for unforeseen future challenges, Canadians will ensure they have a robust strategy that properly identifies and defends our national interests.

Procurement

Canada has a poor record of anticipating its future military equipment needs. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, for instance, Canada, expecting to reap a “peace dividend,” slashed military spending, believing, in the coming era a “global peacekeeping”, we could do more with less. Turns out we were wrong. Canadians have been involved in more shooting wars between 1991 and 2011 than between 1953 and 1990. And we've used every piece of equipment in our arsenal in those conflicts.

Every major weapons acquisition program is dogged by charges that either the weapon isn't needed or that the one chosen is wrong or that the buyer (i.e. the government in question) has been duped into paying too much. This not only happens in Canada but in the US, Britain, France and elsewhere.

But unless there's serious evidence of fraud or incompetence behind a government's action in a particular decision, critics are simply asking voters to accept their judgment over that of the government of the day. While we would never claim that governments cannot make mistakes, its decisions tend to be better informed (by a professional and knowledgeable bureaucracy) and reached only after long analysis and reflection.

Canada should only undertake foreign military missions to protect its core national interests and when it is firmly committed to a strategy of success. Defining those interests is the function of a white paper and other related policy documents. And while taking pot-shots at procurement decisions is as old as warfare, such politically-motivated second-guessing is no way to protect Canada or to equip our armed forces to deal effectively with the challenges ahead.

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