



THE MACDONALD-LAURIER INSTITUTE



COMMENTARY/COMMENTAIRE

Keeping Canada Strong and Free

By Brian Lee Crowley, Managing Director, MLI
and
Alex Wilner, Senior Researcher, Centre of Security Studies

Especially at a time when Canada is at war on two fronts (Afghanistan and Libya) the near total absence of thoughtful debate about defence and foreign engagement in the recent election campaign was disappointing. And given that foreign entanglements can arise with little warning in unexpected places (who knew three months ago that we'd be protecting civilians in Libya with air sorties?), 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.

With a government freshly returned with a majority mandate and Canada facing a number of foreign policy challenges, now is the time to have the discussion we failed to have in the election. 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

Let's start with the role of parliament in the use of the military. It is always good to keep parliament involved. We're a democracy. Also, governments of democratic societies who wage war without popular support have a long history of coming to grief. But in our Westminster style of government, the prerogative of the executive branch is not constrained as it is in the US system, 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.

But in carrying out those responsibilities the government is accountable to parliament and, ultimately, the voters. The government that misreads parliament or the popular mood pays the price in a vote of non-confidence or the loss of an election. But that is a completely different matter than getting into the habit of asking Parliament to approve any international intervention in advance. Not only would this be foreign to our parliamentary tradition, but 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. It is that latter judgment that properly lies in the hands of parliament and the electorate.

Exit Strategies

Exit strategies seem to preoccupy many opposition parties and media commentators. But to view your foreign undertakings through the lens of how you get out of those undertakings is to see things exactly backwards.

The issue is how to accomplish your objective, not to make a good show and get out. Canada didn't go to war twice in Europe or in Korea with a view to getting out. We went to war to achieve something concrete. Having achieved what we set out to do, we then "exited". Today's talk of "exit strategy", on the other hand, reflects uncertainty about our foreign and defence policy objectives and accompanying nervousness that we will get stuck. Far better, in our view, to be crystal clear about what constitutes success, know what it's going to take, and then decide whether the game is worth the candle. If you decide it is, do it and don't look back. Win. If you decide it's not worth it, try to make that decision before you go in. Just stay out of the in-between zone. In other words, the exit strategy will be immediately apparent once you have achieved what you set out to do, provided that your goals going in are clear. An exit strategy is a poor substitute for clear goals and the will to achieve them.

White Papers

In that regard the call of some parties for a new white paper on defence is a welcome one. White papers serve a useful purpose in sorting through ideas and strategic interests, making plans to ensure we have means equal to our ambitions, and then helping the electorate understand what the intent of government policy is. A useful white paper would talk about the military and defence needs Canada may reasonably expect to face in the short to medium term, relates them to our treaty and other international obligations, and explains what personnel and equipment will be needed to allow Canada to take up such challenges successfully. We should aim high. By preparing our military to face a variety of threat contingencies and by planning now for unforeseen future challenges, Canadians will ensure they have a robust strategy that properly identifies and defends our national interests. Put it this way: the military is our national insurance policy and defence planning is about deciding what sort of coverage we need.

Such a document thus becomes a useful catalyst and background resource for a reasoned national debate.

The Paul Martin government tabled Canada's last comprehensive defence strategy document in 2005, and Stephen Harper's government has followed with a few addendums. Given the rapid and monumental shifts taking place in North Africa, the Middle East, and Asia, it may be time to once again revisit Canada's defence strategy. Our priorities need to be repeatedly updated to ensure that our objectives properly reflect global developments. Unfortunately, however, several political parties seem to believe that they should decide what the white paper should say before the careful thinking and research that is necessary for a sound white paper has been done. This is analogous to the substitution of an exit strategy for a victory strategy. A white paper cannot be a catalogue of populist slogans; it should be the sober and detailed analysis of when and

how and why Canada might be called upon to risk blood and treasure in the defence of vital national interests.

Procurement

What about the equipment we need? In a white paper we can and should tackle the longer term questions. Unfortunately, Canada has a poor record of anticipating its future military needs. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, for instance, Canada all too easily expected to reap a “peace dividend”. We slashed military spending and balked on procurement because in the coming era a “global peacekeeping”, we thought 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.

Today, we have urgent decisions to make, such as the purchase of F-35 joint strike fighters and the modernization and expansion of the Canadian navy. Do we need the F-35? As both the Kosovo and Libyan missions demonstrate, and as Canada’s national security and foreign treaty obligations require, Canada needs to have fighter capability, and the F-35 is the one most compatible with the equipment our allies will be using. Better to ask, what’s the alternative -- buying a European or Russian or Chinese fighter? There’s not a lot out there to choose from. It is perfectly acceptable to argue against the F-35, but it is incumbent on the critics to explain how their proposal is superior in meeting Canada’s needs.

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 happens not only 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 for that of the government of the day. We would never claim that governments cannot make mistakes in this or any other area. On the other hand, governments’ decisions tend to be better informed (by a professional and knowledgeable bureaucracy), based on rules that try to remove interests and biases from the equation, and are arrived at only after long analysis and reflection.

In the case of the F-35, there’s no reason to believe that the critics’ judgment is superior to that of the government in respect of what is needed and affordable, whether we are talking of the Liberal government which first involved Canada in the F-35 consortium or of the Conservative government which has decided how many planes Canada will buy.

Procurement is not a zero sum game. Canada needs a navy as well as an air force (and an army) to defend the country effectively and contribute to international operations whether led by the UN, NATO or others.

There's no doubt the Canadian navy is much smaller than it should be for a country with such enormous coastlines and that is so dependent on maritime commerce. And it is rusting out. The challenge is to commit the resources to correct the situation -- following which the exact same controversies will arise about which ships were selected and why.

The Road Ahead

To sum up: Canada should only undertake foreign military missions in order to protect its core national interests and when it is firmly committed to a strategy of success. Our exit strategy will follow logically from that success. If we're not committed to success, we shouldn't get involved. Knowing what success is requires us to think about our strategic interests in the world and then to match the equipment and the forces to those interests. That is the function of a white paper and other related policy documents. Taking potshots at procurement decisions is as old as warfare, but such politically-motivated second-guessing of a careful process is no way to protect Canada or to equip our armed forces to deal effectively with the challenges ahead.



THE MACDONALD-LAURIER INSTITUTE



“True North in Canadian Public Policy”

The Macdonald-Laurier Institute for Public Policy exists to make poor quality public policy unacceptable in Ottawa. We will achieve this goal by proposing thoughtful alternatives to Canadians and their political and opinion leaders through non-partisan and independent research and commentary.

The Macdonald-Laurier Institute is an independent, non-partisan registered charity for educational purposes in Canada and the United States. We are grateful for support from a variety of foundations, corporations and individual donors. Without the support of people across Canada and the United States for our publications on policy issues from aboriginal affairs to democratic institutions; support for our events featuring thought and opinion leaders; and support for our other activities, the Institute would not be able to continue making a difference for Canadians. For information on supporting the work of the Macdonald-Laurier Institute by making a charitable donation, please visit our website at www.macdonaldlaurier.ca/supportMLI

The notion that a new think-tank in Ottawa is unnecessary because it would duplicate existing institutions is completely mistaken. The truth is there is a deep dearth of independent think-tanks in our nation's capital.

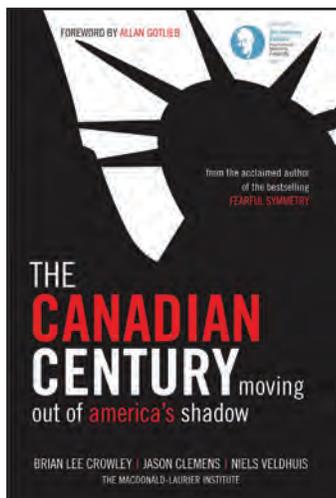
Allan Gotlieb, former Deputy Minister of External Affairs and Ambassador to Washington

To surmount the enormous challenges of getting Canada's place in the world right and taking advantage of changing opportunities, we need more ideas, input, discussion and debate in Ottawa-- that is where the crucial decisions about our future are made. That's why MLI is so vital to Canada today.

Hon. James S. Peterson, former Minister of International Trade and Member of Parliament for 23 years

MLI has been registered by the IRS and CRA as a charitable organisation for educational purposes.

**Making a
Name for
Ourselves!**



**Sir Antony
Fisher**
International
Memorial
Awards

**Winner, Sir Antony Fisher International Memorial Award
Best Think Tank Book in 2011
as awarded by the Atlas Economic Research Foundation**

**“Top 20 New Think Tank” in the world for 2010
as rated by the University of Pennsylvania**



What people are saying about MLI:

Very much enjoyed your presentation this morning. It was first-rate and an excellent way of presenting the options which Canada faces during this period of “choice.” ... Best regards, and keep up the good work.

Preston Manning, President and CEO, Manning Centre for Building Democracy

Congratulations all for the well deserved recognition. You’ve come a long way in a very short period of time.

Marc Patrone, Commissioner, CRTC

The reports and studies coming out of MLI are making a difference, and the Institute is quickly emerging as a premier Canadian think tank.

Jock Finlayson, Executive Vice President of Policy, Business Council of BC

In the global think-tank world, MLI has emerged quite suddenly as the “disruptive” innovator, achieving a well-deserved profile in mere months that most of the established players in the field can only envy. In a medium where timely, relevant, and provocative commentary defines value, MLI has already set the bar for think-tanks in Canada.”

Peter Nicholson, former senior policy advisor to Prime Minister Paul Martin

Where you’ve seen us:



and in other major Canadian and international media

www.macdonaldlaurier.ca