

It's Time for the Review to Go Public

By Nic Boisvert

The pundits have been quick to portray the shift of Minister Bill Graham from Foreign Affairs to Defence as a demotion. That betrays more of their shallow understanding of Canada's military condition than any lack of prime ministerial confidence in Mr Graham. Those who follow these things closely know that Canada's military policy is determined largely by our foreign policy. With even the Liberal government finally awake to the perilous decline of the Canadian Forces, they have been promising for some time now a fundamental review of our – note the order – foreign and defence policies. Mr Graham accomplished a great deal in restoring a sense of order in the Department of Foreign Affairs as to Canada's global interests. It is entirely appropriate for someone with his knowledge to shift over to the Department of National Defence where the real heavy lifting remains to be done. It is especially reassuring that the Prime Minister's Office understands the logic, even if the pundits do not. At least, we hope that this is the explanation.

It is probably true, as several commentators have noted, that Graham is not a natural friend of the Canadian Forces. But his instincts are in the right place. Ottawa watchers will recall that, in the lead-up to the Iraq War, Graham (along with then-Minister McCallum) was quite comfortable with the probable dispatch of Canadian troops into Iraq, until Jean Chrétien changed their minds at the last minute. Since then, they all have had time to appreciate that the eleventh-hour switch to Afghanistan has compounded the problems of overstretch and lack of capacity facing the Forces. If Graham certainly knows the “ends” of foreign policy, it is appropriate also that he take some responsibility for restoring the “means” of achieving it. He can implement his share of Prime Minister Paul Martin's pledge that Cabinet will “hit the ground running” by taking a quick tutorial on learning the ins and outs at DND. If he really is a quick learner, this might even prove good for the CF.

Not everyone will be pleased. The NDP will take Graham's appointment as a sure sign that the fix is in on signing up for ballistic missile defence. But that again is a positive sign. Accepting that rational people can have their disagreements, whatever one might think of BMD as a system unto itself is irrelevant. What matters is that Americans generally are united on the issue. John Kerry does not disagree with George W. Bush on it. Our major ally is already going ahead with it, and nothing we do or say will prevent this. If Canada should be seen to imperil continental defence by failing to go along with its implementation, there will be consequences for us all. Canadian sovereignty will suffer as the Canadian Forces are cut out of the loop and the United States assumes responsibility for their northern defence. And we should not be surprised if American senators and congressmen then suddenly discover linkages on more trade issues than beef and softwood lumber. No, the fix being in on BMD should also prove good for the CF.

Of greater concern should be the probability that Graham's appointment indicates a different sort of fix is in: that the review of foreign and defence policies will be concluded in-house, with no opportunity for public consultation. Not a bad idea in itself, if one accepts (as this column observed at its opening) that Graham knows the file: why waste time dealing with a potentially messy public?

If only we could trust the governing party and their bureaucrats to do the right thing. What should continue to concern us more in this whole process is the persistent belief in government – and hence bureaucratic – circles that there will be no increase to the defence budget. Quite simply, the Canadian Forces are insolvent; a review without fiscal teeth will be a sham; and the only way to ensure that additional moneys are found is to give those on the inside in the know the support they require. All parties agreed in the election campaign on the need to re-vitalize the CF. The major difference between the Liberals and Conservatives was that the former actually pledged to spend more (it costs more to man and equip a brigade, even a “peacekeeping” brigade, whatever that might be, than to build a hybrid carrier).

We need a defence policy review, a review that will look at principles and not only programs. We need a public review, a chance to let Canadians tell the government and their parliamentarians what they believe Canada needs to protect its national interests. Yes, the “peace” factions will be out in force; yes, the results of a review are uncertain. But if those of us who believe the Canadian Forces matter and who believe that Canada needs the ability to deploy armed forces to protect its interests are right, we can carry the day. But that will only happen if the defence policy review is a public process. It simply must be.

July 22, 2004

(Nic Boisvert is a former public servant with an interest in defence. He writes on behalf of the Council for Canadian Security in the 21st Century. Free use may be made of this piece so long as reference is made to CCS21 and its Web site – www.ccs21.org.)