

## Of Boy Scouts & Carriers: Competing Views of Defence

By Nic Boisvert

It seemed to start the federal election campaign as the issue that dared not speak its name, with social hot buttons such as same sex unions getting more attention than defence. But then the Conservatives unveiled a platform including the dreaded “c-word” that was outed a year ago and debated since at length: “carrier”. Although it was prefaced by the qualifiers “hybrid” and “helicopter”, the Liberals leapt at the opportunity to insert the more usual prefix “aircraft”, conjuring images of the United States Navy’s *Nimitz* class strike carriers. Americans like to refer to those beasts as “90,000-tons of diplomacy.” The military image more popularly caricatured as the Canadian style of diplomacy, of course, is “peacekeeping”, immortalized by former Prime Minister Chretien’s quip about the Canadian Army being “Boy Scouts with guns.”

Paul Martin, sensing a wedge issue, began telling voters they had “a clear choice between aircraft carriers or health care.” Interesting how the same themes keep cropping up when it comes to defence in Canada. The choice is not between one and the other of medicare or defence. Rather, if we accept the premise of the recent Speech from the Throne (“safety and security... are the foundations for every other right of citizenship”), because it is necessary to have both, the funding choices should be made further down the list of government priorities.

So how do the campaign budget promises stack up? The Conservatives pledge immediate and subsequent annual increases for equipment purchases of \$1.2 billion, ultimately raising troop levels to 80,000 – goals very similar to those recommended by both the Senate and House Standing Committees on Defence, as well as the Auditor General, and CSS21 and other defence associations. The key is the funding level, and if they stick to it, their platform should be achievable. The Liberals, for their part, also have committed to an increase, unspecified but by inference somewhat less, aimed primarily at adding another 5000 soldiers for a “peacekeeping brigade”. (The NDP, Greens and Bloc Québécois have been non-committal, but their platforms echo the pro-peacekeeping stance.)

There is no partisan intent in observing that voters do indeed have a clear choice on the issue of defence. Both major parties are pledging to increase military spending, and significantly both are tying those increases to Canada remaining an active participant in the world, not retreating in isolation behind a shield of homeland defence. It is from there that they differ. The Conservatives see the world as a nasty, brutish Hobbesian construct requiring troops with true combat capabilities to project stability. The Liberals (and others) hold to the more hopeful vision that nation building can be achieved through the distribution of humanitarian aid.

These diametrically opposed worldviews would seem to be an issue for further exploration by the much-touted Foreign and Defence Policy Review. Nominally, one

should think that process has dragged on for so long now that it might as well wait direction by the winning party. Within NDHQ, however, the bureaucrats already have made their choice. As reported by Chris Wattie in the National Post, DND is set to present its part of the report on June 28<sup>th</sup> – the same date the rest of us cast our ballots, ostensibly to make our choice of government. The similarity in date, with no presumption of readiness to stand by for guidance that might be different from that of the past decade, suggests they might be counting on a Liberal victory at the polls. That would seem to be confirmed by a related report that defence planners have been labouring under the assumption of no new money for the first two years of the next government mandate.

What kind of a military would that give Canada? With the CF already running a deficit, a flat-lined budget can hardly produce an increase in peacekeeping troops, let alone lead to the acquisition of a carrier, hybrid otherwise. Unless the DND bureaucrats are expecting an NDP or a Green breakthrough, and presuming we can take the Liberals and Conservatives at their word, the defence planners should be factoring in an increase of some sort. Perhaps they might wish to put the June 28<sup>th</sup> submission on hold. A better plan would be to cancel their summer holidays in anticipation of a re-work.

Since the policy review to date has been anything but the open and candid process promised for ever so long, June 28<sup>th</sup> represents the only opportunity many of us will ever have to exert our stamp on it. Our choice goes deeper than the clear stands presented by the two leading parties. The question we must answer is: have any of these guys really changed? Is Stephen Harper's party really different from the Mulroney Conservatives, who promised massive increases in the 1987 White Paper, but then couldn't wait to cash in their Cold War peace dividend by slashing defence spending? Is Paul Martin (the only Prime Minister ever to grace the Main Concourse of NDHQ) really prepared to take a different tack from Jean Chretien, who consistently failed to fund the 1994 White Paper that anticipated a less dangerous world?

At least defence is an election issue for the first time in decades and that cannot be a bad thing. Come June 29<sup>th</sup> we all will know Canadians' choice.

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