

“The Core Responsibility of Any Government...”

By Nic Boisvert

It is beginning to border on a special type of negligence that, two and a half years after September 11th, 2001, the Canadian Government continues to lag the rest of the world in getting serious about protecting its citizens (that would be us) from the threat of terrorism. Historians will record the Chretien decade as Canada's sleepwalk through history. Paul Martin's less-than-ambitious start shows we are still enjoying the holiday.

This past week, the Auditor General and the Senate Committee on National Security and Defence issued reports joining the chorus of others detailing how our government has failed miserably to take even the most basic steps to secure our safety. Received in the shadow of the Goodale-Martin Budget, those reports underscore how little was offered in it to address the problem. It is not that the government is unaware of its obligations. The day after the budget, Deputy PM and Public Security Minister Anne McLellan spoke to the Canadian Club in Ottawa about how “the core responsibility of any government is to ensure the safety and security of its citizens – these are the foundations for every other right of citizenship, the essential conditions for every other freedom.”

Bold words, and good to hear them uttered by a Minister of the Crown. But she offered no description of concrete measures being taken. Neither could she point to any new money from the budget, just some window-dressing to make the additional \$115 million to be spent this year on national security look like something other than what it truly is – simply the yearly installment of the \$605 million share of the \$7.7 billion package announced in December 2001 to be spread over five years.

All those numbers make you dizzy too? To see just how thinly this gruel truly is spread amongst a myriad of government departments, take this skill-testing “follow the money” quiz. Go to the website of the Ministry of Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness Canada (actually, finding it is the really tough part – save some time and go to this link: http://www.safecanada.ca/menu_e.asp). Now count how many clicks it takes to drill down and find National Defence. Discouraging, eh?

The quick response in the good old pre-9-11 days would be that “security” is not purely a military problem. Even in the subsequently broadened definition, the cold reality remains that the Canadian Forces are the only national institution with the organization, infrastructure, equipment and manpower pool to respond to a national emergency. Now that every other country named by Osama bin-Laden as an infidel state has been attacked, when our turn comes, guess who is going to be left holding the bag? That would be National Defence, the Department that cannot even pay its on-going operating costs. (For those not up with the news, the three services have identified their projected shortfalls for this year, just to meet mandated operations, as: Army \$355 million, Navy \$143M, and Air Force \$137M. The Budget added \$300M to offset the costs of the Kabul and Haiti missions, and DND is exempted from returning to the Receiver-General the

\$200M “efficiency” cuts that former Minister McCallum could not find. However one cuts it, it still works out to about a half-billion dollar shortfall.) Why, then, was there no new money in this budget for DND and the CF, either?

Certainly, this column has argued that any significant new funding should await a full foreign and defence policy review. Although promised long before September 11th, Canada remains conspicuous in failing to undertake such an exercise in recent years. Britain and Australia each conducted wide-ranging reviews within the year before that unhappy day, and then re-examined their findings in 2002. The Americans hastily revised their mandated Quadrennial Review to meet its scheduled publication in October 2001. The last Canadian look was in 1994. Ours is a willful tardiness.

The Canadian Forces have been under-funded for so long that the list of items that should not need a review is staggering. While a future column will examine these at length, one clear example arises on this anniversary of the American war to depose Saddam Hussein. Ex-PM Chretien, former UN Ambassador Paul Heinbecker, and even Prime Minister Martin have crowed of late that “Canada got it right on Iraq” by refusing to openly assist the Americans. Whatever one might think of that decision, seemingly justified in hindsight by the failure to uncover weapons of mass destruction, the fact is that Canada was working on the basis of precisely the same intelligence accepted by all of our allies, indicating Saddam did possess and was likely to use such weapons. France, Germany and Russia might have rationalized their refusal to join so that they might continue to profit from sales to Saddam. Canada was simply incredibly naïve. With no independent intelligence collection agency, and only a minimal capacity to analyze that provided by our allies, we will be in no better position to make an informed decision when it comes to Korea or Iran or whatever. So why is there no funding for a Joint Intelligence Centre?

As it stands, there is little chance anything will be done on any front before the fall, and by then the dynamics will have changed fundamentally. The prospect of a minority government looms, and neither option is a recipe for firm action let alone additional resources. The Liberals and Conservatives will be saddled respectively with the NDP and the Bloc, each with defence policies that are incoherent on anti-terrorism. The only combination that might produce something useful would be a Liberal-Conservative “government of national unity” – an alliance that could be conjured only in the aftermath of the increasingly likely major terrorist attack.

When that happens, heads will roll. The Bush and Clinton administrations might debate the point that “no one saw it coming” or “we did not have time to implement measures”. Having admitted their “core responsibility,” Chretien and Martin will find no such refuge.

(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.)

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