

Bold Talk – But Can We Bank On It?

By Nic Boisvert

“There is no more fundamental – or important – role for government than protecting its citizens from harm.” Like an echo in the Chamber, there were those words again, first stated nearly a year ago, in the Martin government’s inaugural Throne Speech (see CCS21 Archives: [“The Core Responsibility of Any Government...”](#), April 5, 2004). This time they were pronounced by Finance Minister Ralph Goodale in last week’s budget. And like before, it only took him an hour into the address to get around to uttering them, suggesting that security is only fundamental after all the other priorities clamouring for attention on the Liberals’ social agenda.

Credit, however, must be given where it is due. The whopping \$12.8 billion dollars of projected spending on defence over the next five years fits very nearly the estimates prescribed over the past several years by successive Parliamentary committees, the Auditor General, and CCS21 and other like-minded organizations. All that clamouring appears to have paid off. Who would have thought our government leaders actually were listening? It is indeed possible to budget for both health and defence.

But can we take it to the bank? Not just yet, apparently. Very little of it is up-front cash-in-hand. The coming fiscal year will see only a \$500 million increase over this last, and the one after that just an incremental notch up of \$600 million. The real money doesn’t kick in til three years from now. On the surface, that is a logical schedule, as it will take that long to stabilize the decline of the CF and ramp up the capital programs requiring the massive infusions.

That still leaves the question: is the short term funding sufficient to stem the decline? The way government departments hide their bottom line from the tax paying citizenry, it is difficult to determine just how far in the red the Canadian Forces are operating. Most readings peg the annual deficit at a fairly steady \$1.6 billion. The difference seems to leave a significant continuing shortfall of at least a billion dollars a year. Then there is the question as to whether the Martin government, subject to the whims of the global economy and the electorate, will be successful at keeping to its Five Year Plan. Chief of Defence Staff General Rick Hillier was beaming to the cameras on budget day, but prudent watchers would advise keeping the pressure on this government – they are adept at announcing with the one hand and never fulfilling with the other.

What is playing to General Hillier’s advantage is that the pressure is on. After a decade of going along with ignoring our military decline, the media finally have fixed on the deathwatch of the Canadian Forces as the story of the moment. Expectations have been raised that Hillier is the man who can save it. How long can he hold their attention? His bold new vision deserves careful watching. The broad outlines are one of the worst kept secrets in Ottawa, being slowly revealed through a carefully orchestrated media campaign. It promises to be nothing short of a revolutionary re-structuring of the Canadian Forces.

That alone is probably enough to condemn it. Things like that just don’t happen in safe and comfortable Canada, at least not when it comes to defence. The last time was the bad old

days of Paul Hellyer and Unification. At their essence, Hellyer and Hillier share a vision of the Canadian Forces fighting as an integrated whole. In part, Hellyer failed because the strategic situation did not allow for it: within the NATO alliance, each of the services had their discrete assigned roles, fighting alongside the sister services of other members. Hillier actually stands a chance of succeeding, because today's geostrategic context has changed fundamentally. The pattern of brushfire wars that emerged over the past decade demands precisely the type of expeditionary forces now envisioned.

Which brings us back to just how committed this government is to the promised support. More critical to Hellyer's failure was that the Pearson and Trudeau governments refused to commit the long term funding necessary to realize the logic of unification, preferring instead to shovel money into the bottomless pit of social programs. That has not changed. It is all too easy to see the Martin government throwing up its hands in dismay at the bill for Hillier's reforms: "Whoa! We didn't think it was going to cost more than day care!"

Seeking to prove its commitment, the Prime Minister's Office has been floating the line that the budget generosity towards the Canadian Forces was calculated to dull the blow to our American allies of the negative decision on Ballistic Missile Defence (BMD). Getting past the spin, however, reveals the precise opposite. The failure to go along with the United States on BMD is a political slap that will condemn us as unreliable in the eyes of the Bush Team for longer than the period it will take for the new building programs to kick in. Back home, the handling of the BMD issue should inspire little confidence that the bold words spoken last week will prevail as budget fact three years from now.

One honestly wants to remain cautiously optimistic that the desperately needed budgetary largesse will be delivered. But I wouldn't count on taking this one to the bank.