

Defence: The Budget Let-Down  
J.L. Granatstein

Jam tomorrow! That's the message of the Conservative Party's first budget in its treatment of the Canadian Forces. Like the Martin government before it, Stephen Harper's Tories promise more money for the future, but give too little today.

To be sure, the budget does offer a ritual nod to the Tory election promise of \$5.3 billion to be added to the Department of National Defence base budget by 2011. Another promise kept, we can already hear the backbenchers telling their constituents. That is the same five year horizon the Liberals employed, But in the next two years, the planning timeframe used for virtually every other measure in the federal budget, there is only \$1.1 billion in new money going to the Canadian Forces. That paltry increase is simply not enough even to begin to re-build and re-arm the nation's military.

Consider the list of objectives Finance minister Flaherty laid out for the military. The Government promised to implement its "Canada First" defence plan to strengthen the nation's "independent capacity to defend our national sovereignty and security. Realizing this vision," Mr Flaherty said, "will require large-scale investments in every region of the country to strengthen the Canadian Forces."

There was very little detail, however. The budget statement indicated baldly that the government will continue the transformation of the Canadian Forces, accelerate recruitment, expand training, re-build infrastructure on CF bases, acquire new equipment, enhance sovereignty in the Arctic, put the regular army back into British Columbia, and begin to establish territorial battalions, as promised in the election campaign. And all this on \$1.1 billion in the next two years? Where are the large-scale investments in every region?

The Royal Canadian Mounted Police, by contrast, received \$161 million to recruit one thousand new members. The Canadian Forces are looking to recruit 13,000 new regulars and 10,000 reservists (as well as replacing the thousands of specialists lost through normal retirements). \$161 million for a thousand Mounties, but thirteen times as many regular soldiers—and a host of other objectives—on \$1.1 billion. The aims and objectives, however laudable, do not add up with the funds made available.

Yes, there are laudable aims in the Tory plan. It is absolutely necessary, for example, to get regular army units back into British Columbia. Facing the risk of earthquakes and tsunamis, B.C. may well have need of trained, well-equipped army engineers in the coming years. But is that what the government plans for B.C.? We don't know. It's critically important to protect our sovereignty in the Arctic. But how? With the icebreakers promised in the election campaign? Or with a few more Canadian Rangers doing snowmobile patrols? We don't know.

And what about new equipment for the Forces? The budget says nothing about this beyond a mention that "the full cost of capital acquisitions will be provided on a cash basis in the years they are acquired." Will there be new heavy airlift? New Hercules transports? New trucks? Joint Support Ships, icebreakers, patrol craft? No one knows. To be fair, the government has been in power only for one hundred days, and perhaps the Supplementary Estimates (or a new budget) in the fall will provide some guidance. Or perhaps not. With troops fighting in Afghanistan, with the Canadian Forces struggling to transform itself to meet the new government's objective of "Canada First," this budget

can only be seen as a grave disappointment. The \$5.3 billion in new money promised by 2011 looks good, but it is still only a pledge of jam tomorrow.

Most important, Mr Harper's government is in a tenuous minority position. Paul Martin's government made huge promises of money for the Canadian Forces, but virtually all of it was scheduled to arrive in 2009 and 2010, long after the Liberals went into the dustbin in January's federal election. The Harper government cannot promise spending measures five years ahead with any more confidence than the Liberals. The government genuinely might wish to improve the condition and fighting abilities of the Canadian Forces, but wishes are worthless without political will and the funding to implement them. The debilitating uncertainty over the future roles, capabilities, and equipment of the Canadian Forces will continue to sap the military's strength. Regrettably, in its first budget, the Harper government failed the defence test.

(J.L. Granatstein writes on behalf of the Council for Canadian Security in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. Free use may be made of this column so long as mention is made of CCS21 and its website [www.ccs21.org](http://www.ccs21.org))