

24 Jan 06

The Election and the Future of Canadian Defence

J.L. Granatstein

“Tonight, friends,” Stephen Harper said when the results were in, “Canadians voted for change.” So they did, but very carefully, putting a new government in place with its ability to move dramatically constrained. The much-maligned First Past the Post system delivered the result the people wanted. The West is in. And Québécois delivered a stinging rebuke to the cocky separatists—there is now a new federalist party on the march in Quebec. All in all, good day for Canada.

A good election for the Canadian Forces, too, even if it didn’t always look that way. First, there was almost no discussion of foreign policy in the campaign. This is frankly amazing, almost as if a parochial Canada existed on an island separated by impenetrable ice from every other nation. Yes, Paul Martin took a few bumbling shots at the United States that had no impact. Does this prove that anti-Americanism no longer works in our elections? Not at all; only that even here the ham-handed Martin fumbled the ball. Note too that Jack Layton pronounced the Afghanistan commitment a flight from Canada’s “traditional” peacekeeping role. Extraordinarily, however, even the suicide bombing during the campaign and the casualties it caused did not give this issue electoral traction.

The one party policy statement that said something new on Canada’s relations with the world was Harper’s which called for our foreign policy to be based on the nation’s “core values”. For once, however, those values were not multiculturalism, gender equality, and good governance, all phrases beloved of our previous government. Instead the values were defined as freedom, democracy, the rule of law, human rights, free markets, free trade, and compassion for the less fortunate. A National Interest-based programme might have been more appealing, but if we must have values, these “hard” principles at least are the right ones.

If foreign policy was scanted, defence policy received much more attention. The Liberals’ foolish “troops on the streets” TV advertisement was one of the icebergs that sank the good ship Martin (flying under the Liberian flag, of course). The hostile public response demonstrated clearly that Canadians trust the Canadian Forces. The NDP platform predictably expressed Jack Layton’s doubts about NORAD. Nothing good, it seems, could come from being on the same continent as the Yanks.

The Tories, however, made the Canadian Forces a major part of their campaign, offering four Harper speeches and at least one by deputy leader Peter Mackay on the subject. The Conservatives promised more money, more troops, a return of the army to British Columbia, and new heavy lift aircraft. They called for a bigger military role in the north, an increased emphasis on sovereignty, and new ships and icebreakers. All this was good news for the Canadian Forces, the only false note being the Conservative call for mixed regular/reserve territorial battalions in the cities. If implemented, this foolish idea will fritter away scarce trained regulars in penny packets. Far better to build up existing reserve units and give them the resources to act in a crisis in their communities.

So what can the Canadian Forces expect from a Conservative government? Will the military get everything Harper offered? Probably not, but as a minimum, there will be a

more sympathetic fiscal response to the need to re-build. There will be an end to gratuitous slurs at the Bush Administration from ministers and M.P.s and more interest in working with the United States on continental defence and possibly in coalitions abroad. There will be a willingness to look at Ballistic Missile Defence with a fresh eye, though this will inevitably be muted by the parliamentary numbers. All these steps will help restore trust in Washington. And NORAD, whose continued existence would have been in doubt in a Liberal minority government dependent on NDP support and with anti-military Bloquistes waiting to pounce? A Harper-led minority government will be difficult to control, but NORAD seems almost certain to be renewed as the basis of the US-Canada defence relationship.

But let us be clear. Every peacetime government—particularly, every minority government—has many items on its agenda more important than the state of the armed forces, and the Harper campaign's proclaimed five key priorities left out the military. Tax relief, health care, day care, fiscal imbalance—these Harper promises will have their proponents. Of course, the CF needs new aircraft, we can already almost hear ministers telling Prime Minister Harper, but will they win the government any votes in the next election in 2007?

In other words, all those who believe that defence is important cannot stop exerting pressure on the assumption that nirvana has arrived. Governments, whatever their political stripe, renege on commitments at will, and heat needs to be kept up to make the new government act quickly. The coming months in Afghanistan will almost certainly make our weaknesses on the ground apparent. And if Canadians want to play a role in the world, and they do, those military deficiencies need to be fixed soon. No one, least of all our soldiers, sailors, and airmen, can wait for a fifteen-year procurement cycle to cough up the goods.

(Historian J.L. Granatstein writes on defence and foreign policy. This article may be freely reproduced providing that credit is given to the Council for Canadian Security in the 21st Century (www.ccs21.org.)