

## **The Harper Government and Defence After Four Years**

J.L. Granatstein, Canadian Defence & Foreign Affairs Institute

*Remarks at Conference of Defence Associations' 73rd Annual General Meeting*

March 4, 2010

*"This Government took office with a firm commitment to stand up for Canada. Fulfilling this obligation means keeping our citizens safe and secure, defending our sovereignty, and ensuring that Canada can return to the international stage as a credible and influential country, ready to do its part. Rebuilding the Canadian Forces into a first-class, modern military is a fundamental requirement if we are to deliver on these goals....*

*Supported by predictable, long-term funding, the Strategy not only delivers increased security for Canadians, but also significant economic benefits for citizens across the country. By unveiling a detailed plan for the future replacement of key equipment fleets, we are providing Canadian industry the opportunity to more effectively meet defence procurement requirements, and to position themselves for global excellence."*

*Stephen Harper's Message on p.1 of the Canada First Defence Strategy, May 12, 2008*

The Conservative Party has been in power for four years, long enough to examine its defence policy and to offer some judgments on it. Canada is part of the West, part of the UN, NATO, NORAD, the closest neighbour of the US, and we are a target of terrorism. Essentially, Canada must do its share of the difficult, dirty tasks—and it is fair to say that the Harper government gave the Canadian Forces the leadership and the funds to allow the military to do its job, to do Canada's part. No government since that of Louis St Laurent in the 1950s had such will and determination to improve the CF. None has put more money into and paid more attention to the CF than Stephen Harper's. The prime minister's message in the Canada First Defence Strategy seemed to be carved in stone.

And because of the fortuitous presence of General Rick Hillier, a Chief of the Defence Staff with ideas and the ability to reach the Canadian public, the CF's standing in Canada has never been higher in the 65 years since the end of World War II. I cannot recall the military standing so high in the public's estimation. Even those who oppose the war in Afghanistan and cry "torture" and "war crimes" are quick to say they support the troops. And they do, sort of, some of the time, as they wage what some have called "lawfare" against the CF. What matters is that the broad Canadian public does support the military. Who ten years ago could have conceived of an Ontario government that would name its principal autoroute the "Highway of Heroes"? Who could imagine the thousands of Canadians who turn out no matter the weather to line overpasses to honour the CF's dead as they are borne by? This is not the government's doing, but it is an indication that Canadians appreciate their CF and how the Harper government has supported it.

As important, General Hillier hit the idea that the CF did only blue beret peacekeeping right between the eyes. Peacekeeping was popular with the public who appeared to believe it differentiated Canada from the US. Governments appeared to like it because peacekeeping was cheap, and Canada's defence budgets demonstrated this. But Hillier stressed the war-fighting capacity of the Canadian Forces, and he persuaded the Paul Martin and Harper governments to go along with him in this cultural shift.

This shift was demonstrated by the very substantial increase in the defence budget over the last four years, something that began under the Martin government when Bill Graham was Defence minister. Defence spending increased by some 50 percent over the last seven years with most coming in the last four years of Conservative government. The current year's defence spending, increased by the Afghan War's costs, is above \$21 billion. Moreover, in the Canada First Defence

Strategy [CFDS], the Harper government promised stable funding, an annual increase of 2.7 percent (of which 2.1 percent is for inflation) leading to a \$30 billion defence budget by 2027-28, and a huge sum in defence spending, almost half in equipment purchases, of \$490 billion by 2027-28. As the CFDS stated, “The infusion of reliable funding will provide the certainty required to conduct longterm planning and meet future requirements.”

Until March 2010, the government had been as good as its words. The battle groups fighting in Afghanistan since 2006 have received just about everything they could ask for—and sometimes with remarkable speed—from tanks to armoured vehicles that can survive IED strikes to enable them to fight in a difficult conflict. New equipment has been purchased, most notably, in my view, the CC177 Globemasters that allowed Canada to support the operations in Afghanistan and to contribute as never before to international relief.

We have also seen the military take on a succession of tasks with great skill. At present, there is Afghanistan, Haiti, the just-concluded Olympics deployment, and the G8-G20 deployments coming this summer. To do so much at the same time would have been impossible, if not inconceivable, a few years ago; that it can be done now, though not without difficulty, is attributable to the CF’s members, regular and reserve, but also to the government that leads and finances the armed forces.

But.... You knew there would be a “but”. The progress made by the Harper government seems to be slipping away. The Canada First Defence Strategy not two years ago laid out the government’s intentions to re-equip the CF in some detail. It is worth quoting what was said there at some length:

In addition to the acquisition of four C-17 Globemaster strategic lift aircraft already in service, the Government is procuring 17 new C-130J Hercules tactical lift aircraft and has announced

plans to acquire 16 CH-47F Chinook helicopters, three replenishment ships [JSS], 2,300 trucks, up to 100 Leopard 2 tanks and 6–8 Arctic/offshore patrol ships [AOPS]. The Government will continue to enhance the capacity of the Forces through balanced investments across the four pillars that form the foundation of military capabilities – personnel, equipment, readiness and infrastructure. Specifically, National Defence will

- Increase the number of military personnel to 70,000 Regular Forces and 30,000 Reserve Forces;
- Replace the Forces' core equipment fleets, including:
  - 15 ships to replace existing destroyers and frigates;
  - 10 to 12 maritime patrol aircraft;
  - 17 fixed-wing search and rescue aircraft [FWSAR];
  - 65 next-generation fighter aircraft; and
  - a fleet of land combat vehicles and systems.

We know that these promises have run into difficulty. The Navy's needs are the most obvious and most pressing to me, but the Joint Support Ships, despite being promised first by the Liberals in 2004 and scheduled for first delivery in 2012, are nowhere. Industry was unable to produce ships for the moneys the government had available, but perhaps, maybe, possibly, they will be coming in 2016. Or not. So might the necessary government shipbuilding policy that keeps being delayed and, I fear, may never appear. The AOPS, despite the government's and the prime minister's apparently genuine interest in Arctic sovereignty, have been scaled down in capabilities and numbers and are well behind schedule (as are most of the government's plans for the defence of the Arctic), and the Navy's new combatant ships are also in limbo. Again, we await the shipbuilding policy. The

acquisition dates for new Joint Strike Fighters, maritime patrol aircraft, and FWSAR aircraft keep sliding backwards, and the orders for the army's Close Combat Vehicles and Tactical Armoured Patrol Vehicles are in disarray, despite being announced less than a year ago. Most of the Leopard II tanks remain in storage. All this suggests a government that is beginning to draw back as fast as it can from its published commitments.

There is also the confusion in procurement that has, if anything, worsened in the last several years in part because of the government's urgent need (and success) to re-equip the CF so it could fight better in Afghanistan. The CF's procurement system is short of project managers, and the dead weight of Public Works and government regional development policies hangs over every equipment acquisition. There is the regrettably strong opposition to the Department of National Defence in key agencies of government—in the Privy Council Office, the Prime Minister's Office, Foreign Affairs, Finance, and Public Works, opposition that focusses on the huge demands for funding to purchase very expensive equipment. How much better if the money could be spent on daycare or M.P.s' or public servants' pensions or subsidies to discourage tobacco growers—at least that seems to be the attitude.

At the same time, this year's defence spending has run into difficulty. The CF in 2009-10 has had to reallocate funding to meet pressing needs, and it did so by hacking at the Land Force Reserve budget, a fine reward for the militia's extraordinary efforts in Afghanistan and at the Olympics. Many Class B personnel were sacked (there were too many of them at approximately 4750 in November 2009), a number of Class Cs had their training for Afghanistan interrupted until the Chief of the Land Staff intervened, and much Class A training was cut short, only to be belatedly restored. The navy, operating its vessels with fewer personnel than required, cut training for its reserves and reduced infrastructure maintenance and repairs, while the air force, already short of technicians, scaled

back on non-operational training and cut flying time and nonessential repairs. There are even rumoured possibilities of a cut in reserve strength—5000 has been suggested—and if this occurs it will set army-reserve relations back to the fratricidal mess of the early 1990s. And now hitherto supportive organizations such as the C.D. Howe Institute are calling for money-saving changes to CF pensions and for limiting growth in military spending to a rate not exceeding inflation and population growth. The budget, delivered on March 4, only worsened matters. It did not completely eliminate growth in the defence budget, but it constrained it severely. Certainly the CFDS' 2008 pledges of stable funding have vanished.

At a time of war and stress on the military's personnel and equipment, none of this makes any sense, but it is a clear indication of coming problems. The St Laurent government of the 1950s pushed defence spending to over 7 percent of Gross Domestic Product; the current government, for all its efforts, has raised defence spending to 1.2 percent of GDP. The Conference of Defence Association's financial analyst, Colonel Brian Macdonald, estimates that defence spending may fall below 1 percent of GDP in the next decade.

As the list of cancelled, delayed, deferred, and stalled training and defence projects grows, so too do the delays in increasing CF regular and reserve personnel to achieve the numerical targets set by the CFDS. The pledge of 70,000 regulars and 30,000 reservists, itself rather less than the CF really needs, keeps slipping backwards. The number of CF headquarters and their staffs continue to increase while strength at the sharp end declines, leaving Canada with an increasingly hollow military. The number of combat arms personnel is much lower than needed, the number of infantry especially short, and we continue cannibalizing one battalion to man the next. The rising rate of retirements of key personnel shows no sign of slowing, and many junior leaders are also opting out. The CF openly acknowledges that it is losing the race with the changing demographics of Canada as

it tries to fill its ranks. There are very small numbers of visible minorities recruits and very small numbers of men and women enlisting from the Montreal, Toronto, and Vancouver urban areas that are the drivers of Canada's population growth. The Maritimes cannot continue to carry the CF forever.

Then there is the war in Afghanistan. The cost in killed and wounded, the expenditure of blood and treasure, the extraordinary wear and tear on equipment, has been high. Some critics of the Afghan war talk about how people in Non-Governmental Organizations abroad ask what happened to the kinder, gentler Canada of the Chrétien/Axworthy years and portray Canada as having lost influence. But, frankly, who cares what NGOs say? Most people interested in the military talk to very different people and know that in Washington and Brussels and Kabul a Canadian Forces that has demonstrated its ability to fight with skill and ferocity has increased Canada's credibility in the councils that are truly important to this nation. Building on the Martin legacy, Stephen Harper's government deserves great credit for what it has done.

But—you knew there was another “but” coming—the government regrettably fell remarkably silent as casualties increased and public opinion became increasingly negative on the Afghan war. A strong government response, clear statements of Canadian objectives by the prime minister and his key ministers, might have stiffened public resolve. But there was nothing, nothing comparable to the fine statement of Canadian national interests Stephen Harper offered on his visit to Afghanistan just after taking power in early 2006.

Worse, the incredibly ham-handed and limp way the coming withdrawal of 2011 has been handled threatens to undo much of the gains the Canadian Forces earned for Canada. On February 24, Lieutenant-General Marc Lessard of Canadian Expeditionary Force Command said in

Afghanistan that the battle group, the trainers, the military role in the Kandahar Provincial Reconstruction Team [PRT], and the helicopters will all cease operations in July 2011. That would seem to leave the civilians and police trainers in the PRT unprotected, if in fact they are to remain, but no politician has said anything definitive. Perhaps no one other than the prime minister knows or if someone does know he or she has not told the Canadian public. How does this silence serve Canada's national interests, our commitments to Kabul, the Afghan people, and NATO? How does it square with the sacrifices borne by the soldiers and the work—and the huge sums of money spent by the government—of the PRT? The silence in the government and in Parliament on this pressing issue is frankly incredible, and if the government continues to have nothing to say, the Opposition could perform a useful service by demanding its plans be revealed. Instead, there remains only silence, no political party willing to say anything of substance. Afghanistan has become the issue that dare not speak its name.

My own view is that it is not unreasonable to withdraw the battle group and give the army time to rest and recuperate. But I believe the trainers and the PRT with a military component to provide protection should remain. I also think the Chinooks should stay in theatre to assist our allies with a capability they need. Perhaps we will learn the government's decisions at some point in the near future, or at least before mid-2011 when the troops begin coming home.

Of course, we understand some of the reasons for all of these cuts and confusion. The Canadian political scene remains fluid, and a minority government needs to weigh every action for its political impact on an election that can come at any time. Moreover, at the time the CFDS was issued, the great economic collapse of 2008-09 was not even a glimmer in the future, except to those farsighted few who liquidated their equity portfolios at the right time. Now we have a recession, deficits, debts, high unemployment, and a very different mindset on the part of the

Harper government, which at least has been friendly to the CF. The Opposition parties have been less so. Whatever the changes in the political situation, the next several years will not be good for the the CF. And for the Harper government, the risk is that the one area in which it has had a great success, the CF and defence, is in jeopardy.

We do understand the problems caused by the government's deficits. But unlike many in the bureaucracy and some in government, we also understand that the CF matters in helping to protect our national interests and in keeping Canadians secure. We believe that Canada's military has a role in fighting the enemies of democracy, and we understand that the CF is very important in assisting the wretched of the earth. Now we must try to remind the government as it begins to slash spending in a major way that the CF's capacity as a war-fighting force will continue to matter. The Canadian Forces cannot survive another decade of darkness, despair and despondency.