



Canada Elections.

Defence and the ‘Seinfeld Election’

by Martin Shadwick

The federal election campaign of 2021 was not, as some pundits suggested, “about nothing”—the catchphrase invariably associated with comedian Jerry Seinfeld’s eponymous and stunningly successful television series of 1989-1998—but it certainly represented a not insignificant expenditure for the sake, seemingly, of accomplishing little more than a slight re-ordering of the seating arrangements in the House of Commons. It also brought uneven or disquieting electoral experiences for most party leaders, including Justin Trudeau (who remained Prime Minister but with a second minority government), Erin O’Toole (who adopted a somewhat more centrist Conservative position but encountered internal ideological pushback), Jagmeet Singh (who registered a solid performance but gained only one NDP seat) and Green Party leader Annamie Paul (who, given the spectacle of a dysfunctional Green Party and a fourth-place finish in Toronto Centre, subsequently announced her intention to resign as party leader).

The dangerous and delusional Canadian tradition of relegating issues of foreign policy and, in particular, defence and national security policy, to mere cameo appearances during federal election campaigns continued for the most part unabated in 2021. Indeed,

one can only despair at the marginalization of such public policy issues, or their virtual disappearance, in every single election in the 21st century (2000, 2004, 2006, 2008, 2011, 2015, 2019 and 2021). The federal election of 2015 was admittedly something of an outlier in that an excellent Munk Debate on foreign affairs actually managed to elevate foreign policy somewhat beyond the threshold of a cameo appearance and fuelled hopes—sadly misplaced—for an expanded foreign and defence policy presence in subsequent elections. The essential question is how much longer this lamentable state of affairs will be allowed to stand.

During the 2021 election, noted the Conference of Defence Associations and the Conference of Defence Associations Institute in late August, Canada’s political parties “should be prepared to address” what “modifications or updates” they would bring to the 2017 defence policy (*Strong, Secure, Engaged*) and whether the allocated funding remained adequate, how they envisioned working with the United States on the territorial defence of North America and whether the latter was “now an urgent priority for which new and additional resources should be provided quickly” and what “specific actions” they would take “to ensure rapid cultural change” in light of the “long-term” and “persistent” problem with sexual misconduct in Canada’s armed forces.” Most of the ‘responses’

to those eminently sensible queries and concerns, and a host of other proffered questions, were lamentably less than fulsome.

This is not to suggest that defence and defence-related issues were entirely absent from the 2021 election campaign. The issue of sexual misconduct in the military—a systemic and exceptionally serious problem with numerous, multi-faceted implications—inevitably surfaced during the campaign. It is intriguing, though, that some of the most candid comments from the Prime Minister and the Deputy Prime Minister surfaced a few weeks after the election. Speaking at a 6 October 2021 news conference, Prime Minister Trudeau observed that “it is obvious that despite the work that the military has done, despite the work that we’ve done, the military still doesn’t get that survivors need to be at the centre... of everything in regards to sexual misconduct and harassment in the military.” Deputy Prime Minister Chrystia Freeland added that “it just seems as if the [military] leadership just doesn’t get the harassment issue.” Such comments almost inevitably generated a post-election firestorm of their own. Campbell Clark of the

Globe and Mail, for example, observed on 14 October 2021 that “it is though the top politicians in the Liberal government don’t realize that it is [defence minister] Sajjan’s job, and their job, to fix problems in the military. Especially when the leadership of the Canadian Forces has shown that it cannot fix itself. Over the last six years, the politicians have abdicated responsibility, except for tut-tutting about the culture.” Academics weighed in, too. “It is appalling that that can’t see that civilian control of the military means civilians controlling the military,” noted Professor Stephen Saideman, the

Paterson Chair in International Affairs at Carleton University and the director of the Canadian Defence and Security Network. In the final analysis, though, there is more than enough blame to go around. As the lead editorial in the *Toronto Star* of 15 October 2021 noted, “both civilian and military leadership have failed Canadians, and the men and women serving in the Canadian Forces. It’s time to turn the page.”

Other defence-related issues were unexpected. The newly-unveiled security pact linking Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States (AUKUS)—clearly much more than a mechanism to equip the Royal Australian Navy with a fleet of nuclear-powered attack submarines—prompted a wave of unflattering late-election and post-election analysis. Some Canadian observers labelled it a ‘strategic snub’ by close allies while others bemoaned the lack of timely advance notification (although, for much better reasons, so did the French) or the Prime Minister’s downplaying of the pact as simply “a deal for submarines.” Looking further afield, Professor Paul T. Mitchell of the Canadian Forces College opined that “Canada’s exclusion from the pact represents

growing suspicions about the Canadian commitment to rules-based international order.” The hasty American withdrawal from Afghanistan also made an electoral appearance, raising questions about the perceived lack of timely consultation with allies and about the adequacy of Canadian preparations—whole-of-government preparations—to evacuate Canadians as well as Afghans who had laboured alongside Canadian military personnel and Canadian diplomats.

The foreign and defence policy components of the 2021 party platforms offered a decidedly mixed bag—and at times a decidedly thin gruel—of campaign pledges. As a package they offered a measure of commonality on some issues (most noticeably, perhaps, on the need for measures to address sexual misconduct within Canada’s armed forces. Also apparent was the somewhat increased (but still cryptic) attention to NORAD modernization and the future shape of continental defence cooperation with the United States, the increased attention to the ‘greening’ of defence in the context of climate change and a perceived requirement for enhanced

disaster relief capabilities (most notably the Liberal and Green platforms) and the curious overabundance (as in the New Democratic and Green platforms) or the complete or almost complete absence of references to international peacekeeping (as in the Liberal and Conservative platforms). There were also a few surprises, such as at least one entry on the Conservative list of projected naval procurements. On balance, though, it is difficult to disagree with Professor Wesley Wark’s contention that “the Conservatives produced the most exhaustive list”

of foreign and defence policy promises but that they were “scattered and unfocused,” that the New Democratic Party “made some general pledges without a lot of specifics” and that the “Liberal government’s position [was] status quo.” Tellingly and disconcertingly, he concluded that “none of the parties have a central coherent statement on national security. What is it? What does it mean to us?”

The 2021 Liberal platform posited that “global challenges like the COVID-19 pandemic and the climate crisis underscore how the health, security, and prosperity of Canadians are profoundly impacted by the world around us. Rising authoritarianism and reemergence of great power competition is undermining international peace and security, the rule of law, and respect for human rights.” Canadians, it asserts, “understand that building a safer and more stable world requires investments in our strength at home and active engagement with our partners abroad.” On defence, “Canada faces a host of global threats, including rapidly evolving risks posed by cyber attacks, foreign interference, and climate change. Canadians deserve a 21st century military that is



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Canada’s Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Finance Chrystia Freeland speaks during a news conference in Ottawa, 6 October 2021.



Two CF-188 Hornet jets, 425 Tactical Fighter Squadron, fly in formation with four F-16 fighting falcon aircraft, 120th Fighter Squadron, from Buckley Air Force Base, Colorado, over the skies of Labrador during a NORAD Arctic Air Defence Operation, 20 September 2020.

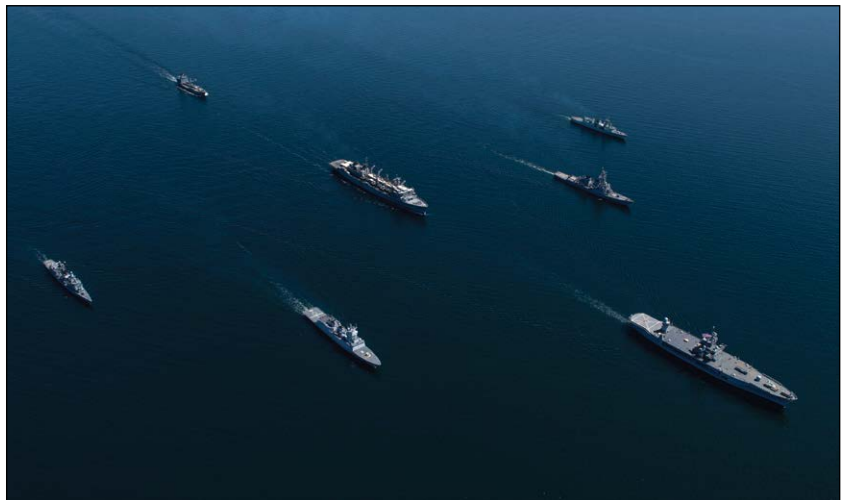
equipped to respond to emerging threats to our national security.” Building on 2017’s *Strong, Secure, Engaged*, a re-elected Trudeau government would “ensure that our military has the equipment and resources needed to keep Canadians safe, secure our Arctic sovereignty, and respond to the full range of hostile, cyber, and environmental threats we face.” It would “work to modernize NORAD, including by upgrading the North Warning System, deploying new technological solutions to improve surveillance and monitoring, improving command and control systems, and investing in the infrastructure and capabilities necessary to deter and defeat threats to North America.” Regrettably, there were no explicit references to the relevant sections of the 23 February 2021 *Roadmap for a Renewed U.S.-Canada Partnership*.

A third Trudeau government would “expand Canada’s long and short-range strategic airlift capability”—‘short-range’ being something of an oxymoron—“in order to increase Canada’s contribution to NATO, coalition and allied military operations abroad” and “improve support for domestic and international emergency response,” expand cooperation and assistance to “partners, allies and international organizations” in humanitarian assistance and disaster recovery, including health and climate emergencies, and conflict response,” as well as “remain a leading contributor to NATO operations, including...Operation Reassurance in Eastern Europe.” It would additionally “work with international partners to establish a NATO Centre of Excellence on Climate and Security in Canada” and “lead international efforts to establish a global coalition to respond to wildfires and other climate emergencies.” Peacekeeping, unlike the 2019 and oft-cited 2015 platforms, was not—unsurprisingly given *very* modest Canadian contributions—explicitly referenced in the foreign and defence policy sections of

the 2021 platform. Pledges to implement “the recommendations of the Independent External Comprehensive Review led by Justice Arbour to address sexual harassment and misconduct” in the military, to “modernize” the military justice system, to “expand resources available to survivors through the Sexual Misconduct Response Centre” and to “undertake ambitious efforts to improve the diversity of the CAF” did, however, figure prominently in the 2021 platform.

Released unusually early in the 2021 campaign—a strategy offering both advantages and disadvantages—the Conservative platform devoted noteworthy attention to foreign and defence policy. Arguing, in a tone reminiscent of Liberal attacks on Stephen Harper’s foreign and defence policy during the 2015 election, that “the Trudeau government has presided over a Canada with diminishing influence on issues that affect our prosperity and security,” the Conservatives pledged to “make the decisions that the [Trudeau] government has neglected, including updating the 2017 defence policy to the realities of a disrupted international order, investing in Canadian leadership in the Five Eyes alliance, and strengthening ties with new and traditional allies.” The eight priority areas for the new foreign policy included northern and Arctic diplomacy, Canada and the United States, cooperation on the world stage via the United Nations and other organizations, renewed Canadian leadership in the transatlantic alliance, and Canada and the Pacific, the Middle East, the Americas and Africa.

To renew Canada’s commitment to NATO, the Conservatives pledged to increase spending on national defence “to move closer to our [two percent] aspirations,” expand Canada’s contribution to “NATO Baltic Sea Air Policing and NATO’s Enhanced Forward Presence in Latvia,” and to “intensify” Canada’s military training



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Navy ships from NATO member nations sail in formation during exercise BALTIC OPERATION in the Baltic Sea, 8 June 2020. The ships pictured are Royal Canadian Navy Halifax-class frigate HMCS *Frederickton*, German Navy Bremen-class frigate FGS *Luebeck*, German Navy Rhone-Class replenishment oiler FGS *Rhoen*, Royal Norwegian Navy Fridtjof Nansen-class frigate HNoMS *Otto Suerdrup*, US Navy Blue Ridge-class command and control ship USS *Mount Whitney*, US Navy Arleigh Burke-class guided-missile destroyer USS *Donald Cook*, and the US Navy Supply-class fast-combat support ship USNS *Supply*.

and capacity-building mission in Ukraine, create a “NATO Centre of Excellence for Arctic Defence” in Resolute Bay and to ensure “active” Canadian participation in NATO training missions and NATO centres of excellence in the areas of cybersecurity, strategic communications and energy security. They also pledged to “update and enhance the North Warning System as part of NORAD and extend it to protect the entire Canadian Arctic, including our Arctic archipelagoes” and expand “our current regional defence participation” in the Indo-Pacific by joining the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue. To bolster sovereignty in the Arctic, the Conservatives pledged to expand and better train and equip the Canadian Rangers, refurbish and expand RCAF Forward Operating Locations, complete the Nanisivik Naval Facility and develop “a new Arctic naval base” at Churchill and, in an essentially unnoticed echo of an early but subsequently abandoned Harper-era pledge, acquire “two armed, heavy icebreakers” for the RCN.



Former Supreme Court Justice Marie Deschamps speaks during a news conference upon the release of a report on sexual misconduct and sexual harassment in the Canadian Armed Forces, in Ottawa, 30 April 2015.

The Conservative platform pledged to appoint a Minister for Defence Procurement and reaffirmed a decidedly optimistic 2019 pledge to depoliticize defence procurement. A Conservative government would “fast-track” the selection of a CF-18 replacement, “remain committed to the National Shipbuilding Strategy by proceeding with the Canadian Surface Combatants, icebreakers, Joint Supply Ships, and Coast Guard vessels,” order a second *Asterix*-type conversion from Chantier Davie while “awaiting the completion” of the two purpose-built *Protecteur*-class Joint Supply Ships and replace the *Victoria*-class submarines. The platform also identified a series of measures designed to make the armed forces a “better workplace,” including “enhancing the participation of women, Indigenous people, and visible minorities through proactive, targeted recruitment at the community level,” ensuring a “respectful and professional workforce free from sexual misconduct and discrimination” and calling a public inquiry into harassment and discrimination in the military.

In its 2021 platform, the NDP reaffirmed—at times distressingly word-for-word—its assertions from the 2019 campaign that “Canadians are proud of our role in the world, and they want a government that will make the right choices to help people—but under Conservative and Liberal governments, decades of cynical politicking and cuts have meant that Canada is often on the wrong side of important global issues.” New Democrats believe “that Canadian interests are best served by a strong and principled foreign policy based on human rights, multilateralism and the best interests of peace and security.” To that end, “Canada will be a force for peace. We will support nuclear disarmament, recommit to peacekeeping, and make sure that Canadian-made weapons are not fuelling conflict and human rights abuses abroad.” The NDP

pledged to boost Canada’s international development assistance and to take a “leadership role in helping low-income countries deal with the impacts of climate change.”

The NDP reaffirmed the salience of three core military roles—defending Canada, protecting Canadians at home and contributing to a more stable, peaceful world through operations abroad—but asserted that “decades of Liberal and Conservative cuts and mismanagement” have left the military with “outdated equip-

ment, inadequate support and an unclear strategic mandate.” Arguing that “we need to do better for Canadians in uniform and for the [defence of] our country,” an NDP government “will make sure that our troops have the equipment”—largely unspecified—“training, and support they need.” We “will ensure that funding supports our national defence and international commitments, with a renewed priority of advancing multilateral peacekeeping initiatives around the world.” At home, the NDP is “committed to bringing our

search and rescue response times up to international standards, and ensuring that our capabilities are sufficient to meet the needs of the north.” In contracting for “new military equipment, including ships and fighter jets, New Democrats will ensure maximum industrial benefits and jobs.” An NDP government would “oppose the privatization of services on Canadian Forces bases across the country”, put an “end to sexual harassment and assault in the military,” and “immediately implement the recommendations of the Deschamps Report.”

Canada, argued the Green Party’s 2021 platform, needs “a new approach to foreign affairs and defence” centred on “the promotion of human security” and engaging “in more egalitarian forms of collaboration with a more diverse set international partners. This requires re-tooling and preparing our military to support disaster preparedness and response, while maintaining combat readiness.” It would consequently “pursue a defence policy centred on the pursuit of disarmament, support for disaster preparedness and relief [and] defending Canada’s Arctic sovereignty” and “re-align our defence spending to increase our capacity and speed in delivering disaster assistance (e.g., through the DART—the Disaster Assistance Response Team), responding to domestic crises (e.g., pandemic outbreaks in long-term care homes), our contributions to UN peace forces and missions, and cyber defence initiatives.” It would “reinforce Canada’s Arctic sovereignty through expanded patrols” and “assess Canada’s membership in military alliances including NATO and NORAD to ensure they are meeting Canada’s priorities of diplomacy, development and defence.” The noticeably enhanced attention to disaster relief appeared to signal at least a partial shift from the priorities outlined in the 2019 platform.

The party would also “urgently implement” the recommendations of the Deschamps Report.

In matters of international relations, noted the Bloc Québécois, “le Québec a pour politique officielle la doctrine Gérin-Lajoie. Celle-ci énonce que tout ce qui est de la compétence du Québec sur son territoire est de la compétence du Québec dans le monde. C’est le cas en matière d’éducation et de culture.” The party also restated its long-standing concerns regarding the inadequacy of the shipbuilding work share allocated to Chantier Davie. The People’s Party of Canada reaffirmed its 2019 stance that “Canada needs a common-sense foreign policy focused on the security and prosperity of Canadians, not an ideological approach that compromises our interests.” It pledged to “work closely with our allies to maintain a peaceful international order” but promised to “withdraw from all UN commitments” and once again offered no specific insights into its defence policy.

In his postmortem on the role of foreign, defence and national security policy in the 2021 federal election, Murray Brewster of CBC News observed that “rarely has the world intruded so viscerally—and with so little apparent effect—upon the great national conversation that we call a federal election.” True, he continued, “events in the world beyond our borders did come up during the 36-day campaign. More often than not, however, they were used by campaigning leaders as a cudgel with which to beat down their opponents.” In his analysis, Martin Regg Cohn of the *Toronto Star* opined on 14 September 2021 that “if foreign policy seems more fleeting than ever on the campaign trail, it’s a reminder that the electoral cycle is increasingly captive of the news cycle, just as it was for [Kim] Campbell when she lost the [Prime Minister’s] job in 1993. The dirty little secret of foreign affairs is that for most Canadians, it remains a domestic affair.” Others have attributed the foreign and defence policy disappearing act during Canadian federal elections to micro and macro factors as diverse as “embarrassing” and “lousy” debates and the absence of a permanent Munk or Munk-style debate on foreign and defence policy to the lingering consequences of Raoul Dandurand’s fire-proof house. As Paul T. Mitchell has pointed out, “three oceans and a superpower” have sufficiently shielded us “from having to think about how to achieve national security. Canadian defence policy has never varied from three priorities—defend Canada, defend North America and contribute to international peace and security—that have appeared in every [defence] white paper since the 1950s, regardless of the governing party. This attitude



United Nations (UN) Security Council session within the 60th jubilee session of the UN General Assembly, New York City.

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was evident in the recent election campaign, when discussions about defence were largely absent, despite growing threats from abroad and the turmoil within our own military.” Still others have expressed concern over a perceived erosion of broadly-based public interest in and knowledge of foreign, defence and national security policy and pondered the means by which that interest could be reinvigorated, thereby elevating the discourse—not just at election time—on increasingly worrisome issues of public policy. As Aaron Shull, managing director and general counsel at the Centre for International Governance and Innovation has cautioned us, “the world is a pretty angry place.”

Surely a full court press by journalists, academics, university and non-university-based research institutes, non-governmental organizations, members of the attentive public, those Parliamentarians already genuinely interested in questions of foreign and defence policy—and other voices—to get our political parties to ‘up’ their foreign and defence policy game should not be too much to ask. Similarly, a permanent Munk or Munk-like debate focusing on foreign and defence policy during federal election campaigns should not be too much to ask in what purports to be a fully functioning democracy. But why stop there? Clearly what Canada requires is not just periodic injections of foreign and defence policy during federal election campaigns but a thoroughgoing and permanent deepening and broadening of public interest in and knowledge of foreign, defence and national security issues.

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