

DEFENCE AND THE ELECTION

It is no less true for being obvious that defence policy rarely makes more than a cameo appearance in Canadian federal election campaigns. Even elections where one might have anticipated a modicum of informed debate on defence, such as the November 1988 federal election, the first to follow the Mulroney government's controversial 1987 White Paper – now safely ensconced in the science fiction sections of reputable libraries – failed to deliver. Admittedly, the free trade fixated election of 1988 was something of a special case, but it speaks volumes about Canadian strategic culture, Canadian politics and Canadian public policy that national defence has not played a noteworthy role since the Diefenbaker-Pearson slugfests of the early to mid 1960s.

Writing early in the 2004 campaign, Nic Boisvert of the Council for Canadian Security in the 21st Century expressed the hope that the “diametrically opposed worldviews” of the Liberals and Conservatives would help to make defence “an election issue for the first time in decades.” Indirectly, it was, but more as background noise in an election deeply troubling on several counts. These included, but were not confined to: a distressingly low rate of voter turnout, the decidedly imperfect way in which our first-past-the-post electoral system translates votes into seats (although proportional representation is no panacea, either), a seriously factionalized House of Commons in which no party enjoys truly broad-based, cross-country representation, a surfeit of negative advertising (i.e., “attack ads”) and last, but certainly not least, fresh kindling for a new round of constitutional and national unity challenges.

And just where did defence fit into this mélange? In *Moving Canada Forward*, their core campaign document, the Liberals unveiled a ‘Peace and Nation Building Initiative’ which pledged to “increase the Canadian Forces by 5,000 personnel, creating a new brigade and greatly enhancing Canada’s capacity for peace support.” More instructive, at least in theory, was Paul Martin’s pre-election 14 April 2004 speech at CFB Gagetown. Although derided in some quarters as merely a reaffirmation of the maritime helicopter, mobile gun system and fixed-wing SAR aircraft programmes (plus three newly approved joint support ships), the Gagetown speech was arguably more sober and pragmatic. It stressed the need for a “capable, useable, deployable, sustainable and interoperable” defence establishment, and offering a security broader than the human security mantra of the mid 1990s.

Still more sober was Stephen Harper’s 31 May 2004 speech outside CFB Trenton. As Boisvert notes: “The Conservatives see the world as a nasty, brutish Hobbesian construct requiring troops with true combat capabilities to project stability.” Arguing that “the response of the ... Liberal government to the new security environment has been underfunding to the point of strategic and moral neglect,” Harper pledged an immediate \$1.2 billion boost per year for procurement, an increase in the strength of the Regular Force “over the long term” to at least 80,000 personnel, the acquisition of a “modest number” of pre-owned main battle tanks, the regeneration of the air force through CF-18 upgrades, new tactical and heavy-lift transports and new maritime helicopters, and the acquisition of “at least two hybrid carriers” for helicopter support and strategic lift.

The NDP pledged to make “peacekeeping and peacemaking operations under UN auspices the priority for Canadian Armed Forces operations overseas,” to work with “other nations to develop replacements, based on the principle of cohesive human security and organizations like the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), to NATO and NORAD,” to cancel “offensive, expensive and unnecessary weapons systems” for the Canadian Forces, and to reduce DND bureaucracy and reallocate “savings to invest in reserve and regular personnel and better training and equipment.” Like the Conservatives, the NDP advocated a strengthened Coast Guard (an intriguing similarity in that it implicitly endorsed the American, as opposed to the British or Australian, approach to coastal security). Like the Bloc Québécois, which also attached considerable attention to peacekeeping operations, the NDP opposed participation in ballistic missile defence.

Here, in theory, was the raw material for a useful, if modest, debate over defence. That it did not develop was hardly surprising, given our perennial preoccupation with domestic and social issues and the reality that very few Canadians cast their ballots on the basis of defence policy. What did develop, as the increasingly nervous Liberals cast about for ammunition, was the conscription of national defence into the rough world of negative advertising. In short order the Conservatives were being castigated for their “massive military build-up”, their flirtation with “aircraft carriers”, and their supposed choice of defence over domestic priorities. Some of the criticisms were clearly overplayed for political effect, but the Conservatives, for their part, were remarkably ineffective at parrying these thrusts. The early campaign

prominence given to defence by the Conservatives invited political attack, as did their use of the word “carrier”. “Through-deck joint support ship” would have been convoluted, but perhaps more prudent.

The Conservatives’ proffered defence strategy, in and of itself, did not cost them the 2004 election. On the other hand, the spin placed on that strategy by their political opponents – when combined with perceived Conservative vulnerabilities on the domestic and social policy front – did materially assist their opponents, particularly in the waning days of the election. It was unfortunate, too, that some of the attack ads may help to foster the belief that one can

have health care or defence, but not both. The Swedes, of course, would beg to differ.

To the Liberals – shorn, regrettably, of the knowledgeable David Pratt – once again falls responsibility for the defence of Canada and Canadian values and interests. Although some of Paul Martin’s statements on defence provide grounds for cautious optimism, the Liberals must be very careful to eschew a replay of the Chrétien government’s approach to defence.

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Griffon helicopters from 430 Tactical Helicopter Squadron lifting off the pad at the National Command Element camp in Port au Prince, Haiti, 14 May 2004.

DND Photo: HS048066d08 by Corporal Matthew McGregor