

Canada's elite clamours for huge increase in military spending

A correspondent
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Canada's Liberal government is under intense pressure from big business and the political establishment to dramatically increase military spending.

On a daily basis, retired military officers, defence analysts, members of the opposition, Liberal backbenchers, and newspaper editorialists decry the alleged dilapidated state of Canada's armed forces. Typical was the lead editorial in last Saturday's *National Post* "Real nations have real armies." It accused Jean Chrétien's Liberal government of presiding over Canada's effective demilitarization.

Invariably figures are trotted out to show that Canada's per capita military spending is among the lowest in NATO, higher only than Portugal's and Luxemburg's. The government has come under especially harsh criticism for last August's withdrawal of the 800-strong infantry force sent to Afghanistan to assist US forces in the hunt for Taliban and Al Qaeda fighters. Due to other commitments, including in the Balkans, the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) did not have sufficient personnel to replace the force on completion of its six-month tour of duty. (Canadian Special Forces continue to operate in Afghanistan, however, and the CAF has ships in the Arabian Sea.) The CAF's lack of troop transport planes capable of rapidly airlifting forces to participate in overseas operations has also elicited much scorn.

Last fall the House of Commons Defence Committee urged the government to increase base military spending by \$1 billion each year over the next five years for a total of \$15 billion. In May, it called for military spending to be increased to 1.6 percent of Canada's total GNP within three years, which would require increases in the order of \$2 billion in each of the next three years and push the annual defence budget

over \$18 billion. Signing on to the committee's recommendations were not only Liberal, Tory and Canadian Alliance MPs, but also the representative of the social-democratic New Democratic Party. The Canadian Council of Chief Executives, which represents the CEOs of the country's largest corporations, has also called for substantial and continuing increases in military spending. In his keynote address to a Liberal policy conference last month, Tom Axworthy, a long-time Liberal insider and the brother of former Foreign Affairs Minister Lloyd Axworthy, called for Canada's Defence budget to be increased to \$20 billion per year and Canada's troop strength raised from 57,000 to 80,000. Without a "radical shift" in Canada's military posture, Ottawa would lose influence with Washington and globally, argued Axworthy.

It is an open secret that the CAF top brass are exasperated at the government's failure to provide them with bigger budgets and new equipment. Earlier this year, when the then Defence Minister Art Eggleton was embroiled in a controversy as to when he was informed Canadian troops had handed Afghan prisoners over to US forces, the generals took manifest delight in being able to show the minister was either lying or unable to comprehend a briefing. Last month, the *Globe and Mail* reported that a senior naval officer was urging "friends" of the military via e-mail to press the government for new ships, missiles and submarine equipment. Chief of Defence Staff General Ray Heneault is known to have told the government this summer, "The status quo is unsustainable."

Canadian defence spending rose by more than 40 percent in real terms during the 1980s and reached its highest, since the early years of the Cold War, during the 1991 Gulf War, when the Defence Department

spent more than \$14.5 billion. Thereafter defence spending fell, and during the Liberals' so-called war on the deficit, dropped under \$11.5 billion. Since 1998, however, military spending has risen significantly, reaching an estimated \$12.7 billion in 2001-02, although much of the increase has been in the form of special allocations, as for example to pay for the CAF's participation in the 1999 NATO assault on Yugoslavia.

During the last quarter-century or more of the Cold War, it was not envisaged that Canadian forces would see combat other than in North America or as part of a conflict between NATO and the Warsaw Pact countries in Europe. Since 1991, however, Canadian forces have thrice been involved in wars, one in the Balkans and two in Asia (Iraq and Afghanistan), as well as participating in the US-led occupation of Somalia.

The push for a massive increase in military expenditure is driven by the need to keep abreast of the changes in armaments technology, but also by the CAF's new role as a partner of US-led military campaigns around the globe.

Canadian participation in the assaults on Yugoslavia and Afghanistan were justified on the grounds that Canada had to retain influence in the counsels of the world. In other words, the Canadian ruling class feared it would lose out in the scramble for markets, profits and natural resources unless it participated and thus ensured its interests were represented in the new imperialist-imposed geo-political order.

In the campaign for increased military spending, the claim Canada must be a global player has been supplemented, particularly since September 11, 2001, by the argument that Canada must accept a greater share of the burden of North American defence if it hopes to enjoy the full benefits of a privileged economic relationship with the US.

Behind the Liberal government's reticence to make further and massive increases in military spending is their recognition that there is little public enthusiasm for big business's imperialist agenda and mounting concern over the deterioration of public and social services, what Chrétien had obliquely referred to as the "social deficit." The \$100 billion five-year tax-cutting plan the Liberals instituted in 2000 means that military spending increases will immediately translate into significant cuts elsewhere.

But the question is when, not if, the Liberal

government will fall in line. Indeed, last week the government made two announcements intended to signal it has gotten the message.

The September 30 Throne Speech pledged the government would make a full review of defence policy. Then on October 2, Defence Minister John McCallum scotched media speculation that the CAF was too overstretched to join in a war of conquest against Iraq, announcing that "If the government calls we will be able to make a sizeable commitment."



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