

## MILITARY EQUIPMENT

# Taking politics out of procurement

AARON PLAMONDON  
FOR THE CALGARY HERALD

Canada has throughout its history been embarrassingly weak at designing, producing, purchasing and acquiring the necessary equipment for its military.

But the Commons defence committee will take a positive step this week to produce a draft report in which it makes sweeping recommendations aimed at taking politics out of military procurement.

The report follows the hearings on the 1990s acquisition of ill-fated HMCS Chicoutimi and the three other submarines that were acquired. One man died after a fire aboard Chicoutimi in the North Atlantic.

It is largely believed by defence analysts that the \$800-million lease-to-purchase subs were in a decrepit state due to Canada's protracted procurement process. The subs lay idle in British docks for three years after the purchase was approved in 1995 because then-prime minister Jean Chretien considered the idea politically dangerous.

"We're all fed up with how long it takes to buy major equipment around here," Pat O'Brien, chairman of the Commons defence committee, said after witnesses suggested politics contributed to the deterioration of the subs.

"It is ridiculously slow to get military equipment purchased in this country," added O'Brien, who is also the chairman of the current committee analysis.

Martin Shadwick declared during the sub investigation that if Canada had begun looking for a new army jeep in September 1939 at the rate it moves today, it would not have taken delivery of the vehicles before the war ended in May 1945.

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external threats to their soil.

The electorate in this country rarely thinks strategically and they are unaware that some equipment must be integrated quickly for the safety of our soldiers and to allow adequate training.

Our politicians subsequently fear making any monetary commitments to the Canadian Forces to make them an efficient organization that can carry out the government's international commitments — those made through organizations like NATO and Norad. This lack of political will by our leaders has often led to inordinate delays in procuring the simplest material.

Defence Minister Bill Graham recently acknowledged that the average time for the acquisition of major military systems exceeds 15 years and that it has taken a "12-year quest" to acquire the right military backpack.

Graham told a defence industry conference last Wednesday: "Speeding up and improving the overall efficiency of the procurement process needs to be a top priority ... It is a priority I plan to devote a lot of my time to in the coming months."

As one example for improvements, Graham suggested that strictly military procurements, as opposed to those of office material and supplies, should be managed exclusively by Defence, with larger projects subject to Treasury Board approval.

Another problem that will hopefully be addressed is that military purchasing is often tied up in requirements for industrial benefits, offsets, job creation and technology transfers.

While these things should be considered, the importance on them in Canada often outweighs the relevance of the strategic capability being purchased.

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In a more recent example, the Federal Court of Appeal declared last Wednesday that the case would go ahead to determine if there was political interference in the contract to Sikorsky to replace the dilapidated Sea King helicopters.

While the other bidder, Augusta Westland, certainly has a strong case, if they are successful, the whole acquisition process may have to be restarted, delaying any new aircraft once again.

The replacement process for the Sea King helicopter dates back to the late 1970s.

The primary cause for this trend has evolved from the very essence of what many feel the Canadian nation is: a peaceful people who are free from

pack.

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During the tender process for the 1980s purchase of CF-18 fighter jets, only a quarter of the specifications given to bidders focused on the military's technical and operational requirements — the rest were on regional benefits and employment issues.

Somewhere along the way, the reason for buying the jet was being lost.

The necessity of paring down and speeding up the procurement process in Canada is long overdue, and it remains to be seen if our leaders will finally walk the walk.

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