

Military Spending in Canada

Message to the Protest Movement against the Ottawa CANSEC Arms Show

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Military spending is out of control in this country. While our social programs are inadequate, we still have joblessness, homelessness, and an appalling lack of justice for aboriginal communities, this government pumps billions into arms.

It's hard to walk down Ottawa's Sparks Street these days without tripping over some lobbyist or public relations consultant for the arms industry. Strategically located only a block from Parliament Hill, the street is a beachhead for firms vying for a larger piece of the military budget.

Year after year defence spending has been rising. Increases brought in by the Paul Martin Liberals, and later boosted by the Stephen Harper Conservatives, have created a lucrative market for Canadian and international (especially U.S.) defence contractors.

Military spending will reach \$22.3 billion in 2010-2011, according to a report by the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives authored by Rideau Institute senior advisor Bill Robinson - 54% higher than before the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001.

As the total budget increases, so does the amount spent on equipment. Last year DND told NATO that it intended to devote 17.5% of its spending to equipment expenditures in 2010, a 38% increase from the previous year.

This is good news for firms such as Lockheed Martin, Boeing, and General Dynamics, who are inside CANSEC right now. These US-based firms have been selling fleets of aircraft, helicopters, and vehicles to the Canadian Forces, and hope to sell a lot more. But how much longer can the party last?

Military-funded lobby groups, such as the Conference of Defence Associations, have lobbied for increases to military spending by arguing we are a relatively small spender and are shirking our responsibility to NATO.

But they are ignoring the fact that NATO and other international authorities rank Canada as the 13th largest military spender in the world in real dollars, and the 6th largest within the 28-member NATO alliance.

Canada's military spending is sure to come under increased attention as the financial deficit increases. Demands for more spending on social programs on the one hand, or tax cuts on the other, will compete with the military's bulging line item on Finance Department

spreadsheets.

The reality is Canadians are turning their attention toward issues at home, such as jobs and social programs.

A Leger Marketing poll this month found that almost 60% of those questioned believe that “Canada should take a peace dividend and cut back on military spending to focus on other more pressing social issues at home” – an increase of 10 points over a similar poll taken a year ago.

Did you know that it was fifty years ago, on January 17, 1961, that Americans gathered around their TV sets to watch President Dwight D. Eisenhower’s farewell speech from the White House? He chose his words carefully, and warned the American people about the growth in economic power and political influence of an immense military establishment and a large arms industry.

Eisenhower’s warning about the military-industrial complex’s “total influence – economic, political, even spiritual” is certainly evident in the modern debate over whether Canada should purchase a fleet of F-35 stealth fighters for the air force.

Canadians are being asked to spend between \$16 and \$21 billion of public dollars, according to Department of National Defence estimates, on these U.S.-built fighter-bombers, without a clear explanation of why they are needed for our protection. The Parliamentary Budget Officer says it could be \$30 billion, and others have said that even this estimate is too low. The truth is: nobody knows for sure.

As President Eisenhower might have predicted, the forces allied in favour of the F-35 program are defence firms and the military. In fact, it is sometimes hard to tell them apart. The former second in command of the Canadian Air Force, Major-General Richard Bastien, is now vice-president of the U.S.-owned aerospace company L-3 MAS, based in Montreal. Predictably, he told Members of Parliament in October that “the Government must do its utmost to ensure that the F-35 is not only a military success, but also a success for industry in Canada.”

Likewise the plane’s U.S. builder, Lockheed Martin, has hired one of Ottawa’s most successful defence industry lobby firms, CFN Consultants, which is composed almost entirely of retired officers from the senior ranks of the military.

These are the forces that gather together at arms shows like CANSEC, and the civil servants and military men and women are bussed in to hear their sales pitch. But it’s not security equipment that these firms are selling – what they are selling is FEAR.

Fear of distant governments, fear of other people, and even fear of our own neighbours. It is fear that creates the vast markets for the arms industry, and a frightened population will allow untold sums of public dollars to be spent on the weapons of war. Arms industries and shows like CANSEC thrive on fear.

And what you are doing today is sending a message. A message that says, “We are not afraid.” And that is what the arms industry, fears the most.

Thank you for calling it like it is. And for sharing with Canadians a vision of a better future, and a better Canada.

As President Eisenhower said fifty years ago, "Only an alert and knowledgeable citizenry can compel the proper meshing of the huge industrial and military machinery of defence with our peaceful methods and goals, so that security and liberty may prosper together." Some things never change.

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