

Stephen Harper: Bulking up Pentagon North

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Region: [Canada](#)

Global Research, October 08, 2008

The Toronto Star 7 October 2008

With the prospect of a Harper majority hanging menacingly over the country, the mind inevitably turns to the question: Just what is the “secret agenda” lurking behind the friendly sweater?

Actually, I don’t believe there is one. The truth is that Stephen Harper has already laid out an agenda that would fundamentally change this country – in ways most Canadians would oppose.

While this agenda is not “secret,” my guess is few Canadians know about it. That’s because Harper, realizing it would be unpopular, unveiled it when Canadians weren’t paying attention – in fact, we were sleeping. Sometime in the dark of night last June 20, the Harper government posted a plan on the Department of National Defence’s website – called Canada First Defence Strategy – to spend an eye-popping \$490 billion over the next 20 years on the military.

Given all the recent buzz about the size of the \$700 billion Wall Street bailout in the United States, it’s striking to note that Ottawa quietly announced a plan to spend nearly half a trillion dollars on the military, almost in passing.

Steven Staples, a defence analyst with the Ottawa-based Rideau Institute, says that Canada’s military spending is already 27 per cent higher than in 2001.

“The focus of the defence lobby now is on getting contracts signed as quickly as possible,” Staples said in an interview. “They want to make it impossible for future governments to get out of these spending commitments.”

It’s hard to imagine an agenda with more profound consequences for Canadians, beginning with a dramatic reordering of national priorities. Public health care? Child poverty? Fighting global warming? Fine causes, to be sure, but sadly the cupboard will be bare.

The Conservatives won’t even have to look mean-spirited as they say no. There just won’t be any money left. It will all be sucked into bulking up Pentagon North.

Harper knows Canadians would balk at this shift in priorities, if they got wind of it. In a 2008 pre-budget survey conducted for the finance department, Canadians were asked which of 18 different issues they considered a high priority. “Increasing spending on defence” ranked last.

There’s a rich irony in this ramped-up military spending. In the election campaign, Harper has accused Liberal Leader Stéphane Dion of “reckless spending” for his plan to invest \$70

billion in infrastructure over the next 10 years.

Meanwhile, Harper claims to be a thrifty economic manager, even as he quietly plans a massive spending spree on military hardware.

Clearly governments can rack up deficits just as quickly acquiring tanks and killing insurgents in Afghanistan, as they can building public transit or a clean energy grid here in Canada.

While the election campaign has focused on economic issues, the military and its combat role in Afghanistan have actually been the centrepieces of the Harper administration.

Harper has tried to reshape the way Canadians think about Canada, weaning us off our fondness for peacekeeping (and medicare, for that matter), and getting us excited about being a war-making nation, able to swagger on the world stage in the footsteps of the Americans.

In fact, the U.S. has shown where big military spending leads. As the "defence" sector expands, jobs and economic prosperity become linked to war preparation. A bulging defence sector becomes a built-in constituency for war.

Forget trying to figure out Harper's "secret agenda." The really frightening, far-reaching agenda Harper has in mind for us is already posted on the Internet.

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