

# Harper's Military Plans Only Please Bush, Not Canadians

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**O**n Feb. 6, Prime Minister Stephen Harper appointed Gordon O'Connor—a retired brigadier-general—as his Minister of Defence. This is the latest in a series of events foretelling a radical change in military policy that will bring Canada closer to the United States.

O'Connor's appointment comes shortly after Harper announced, apparently in reply to American Ambassador David Wilkins, that his government had "significant plans" for defending Arctic sovereignty. Harper's sabre-rattling may appease a Canadian public that largely disapproves of the Bush Administration's aggressive foreign policy, but it prepares the ground for increases in

military spending that promise to make President George W. Bush happy.

Before being elected in 2004, O'Connor was a lobbyist for the military industry. Between 1996 and 2004, he represented 21 defence contractors selling goods or services to the Department of Defence. Now, he's doing the shopping.

While Harper promised during the campaign to stop the revolving door between lobbying and holding government office, he has now put a lobbyist in his cabinet. This raises serious legal and ethical issues.

For example, O'Connor represented Airbus Military, a company that develops heavy-airlift planes. O'Connor now says the purchase of such aircraft is his top priority, even though they can be rented far more cheaply.

In 2004, then-Defence Critic O'Connor stated in Parliament that the Canadian Forces require \$18 to \$19 billion a year. Just one year later, when the Martin government exceeded his wildest expectations and increased military spending to \$19.7 billion, O'Connor insisted on more money, proving yet again

that military lobbyists are incapable of putting limits on their spending demands.

The new Defence Minister's avarice is reflected in the Conservative platform on defence. During the campaign, the Conservatives said they would increase spending on the Canadian Forces by \$5.3 billion over five years. This would be in addition to the massive increase of \$12.8 billion over five years made in the Liberal budget in 2005. Combined, these amounts would push Canada's military spending to the highest level in real dollars since Canada was involved in the Second World War.

Increased spending on the military is foolhardy. Canada still has a debt of \$500 billion. The gains made in reducing this debt over the past nine years, through cuts to social programs among others, should not be squandered on overpriced military equipment.

The spending increases play into the hands of the Bush Administration. The United States is pressuring Canada to increase its military spending and transform its military to be more "interoperable" with

their military. This paves the way for Canada to join the United States in future military ventures. But increased interoperability requires costly equipment that is not entirely suitable for the types of peacekeeping favoured by most Canadians.

O'Connor favours "stability operations" and is dismissive of more traditional peacekeeping missions. In a parliamentary debate in Oct. 2004, he stated, "A soldier standing by with a blue beret and a rifle encouraging people just to talk and resolve their problems will not restore stability."

The new Defence Minister also advocates purchasing equipment that emphasizes Canada's combat capacity. In addition to the heavy-airlift planes, the Conservatives are vowing to purchase three heavily-armed icebreakers estimated at over \$2 billion. These expensive equipment purchases are ill-suited for dealing with the greatest threats to Canadian interests.

The real menace to Canada's interests in the Arctic is global warming. As the sea ice in the Northwest Passage melts, the Passage is likely to become an international commercial shipping route between Europe and Asia. Global warming also threatens the Inuit way of life by endangering their traditional hunting and fishing habitats.

Canadian policy-makers worry that the use of the Passage by foreign vessels and the decline of the Inuit presence would undermine our claim that the Passage belongs to us. But sovereignty should be a means and not an end in itself. The priority for Canadian policy should be to ensure that the Arctic is not the scene of an environmental disaster and that the Inuit culture and lifestyle are preserved.

For this, costly heavily-armed icebreakers operating under the Department of National Defence's purview are unsuitable. After all, Canada would never be able to afford enough heavily-armed icebreakers to patrol and enforce its laws in the vast expanse of the Canadian Arctic.

Instead, non-military solutions would be more effective. Take a page from Russia's book, which faces similar problems in the Northeast Passage. It has opened up the Passage to commercial navigation and offers services to companies such as icebreaking and navigational aid for a fee. This provides an incentive for companies to comply with registration regulations.

Canada currently has a voluntary registration system without the means to administer it. The best solution, therefore, is to make registration obligatory and build up the Coast Guard's ability to assist commercial navigation in the Arctic. This could include adding to their fleet of non-militarized icebreakers and setting up high-frequency surface-wave radars that can track ships.

The Inuit should be partners in these efforts. Training and education programs should be established to ensure the Inuit assume responsibility for operating radar stations, conducting search and rescue operations, and possibly conducting environmental clean-ups. This would build on their knowledge of the area and enhance their role in the Arctic. In this way, protection of Canadian sovereignty and of the Inuit could go hand in hand.

The threats facing Canada are fundamentally different than the traditional threats that the Canadian military is used to dealing with. The question is whether the new government will be able to deal with these challenges in a fair and judicious manner. The appointment of O'Connor as Minister of Defence raises doubts that it will.

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