

Just how many wake-up calls do we really NEED?



Jean Jacques Blais

Canada's investment in its military is once again in the headlines. This time due to a fire aboard the *HMCS Chicoutimi*, an 18 year-old submarine purchased from Britain, which led to the tragic death of Lieutenant (Navy) Chris Saunders.

While the causes of the emergency are still under investigation, media across the country have seized on the tragedy as another example of the government's failure to adequately provide proper, modern and safe equipment for our armed forces.

It's unfortunate that the subject of military spending is almost always precipitated by a tragic incident within our armed forces or their inability to respond when needed. This should be a wake up call that we need to seriously examine how we equip our military to represent our nation to the world.

The fire on the *Chicoutimi* brings to mind a report by the *Senate Committee on National Security and Defence* in November 2002. It noted, "In spending on military equipment and personnel – as in most areas of life – there are bargains out there. But the general rule remains that buyers get what they pay for. Although Canada is not a poor country it has gained an international notoriety for trying to defend itself – and what it stands for – on the cheap."

The report noted that Canada spends approximately \$395 per capita on defence, compared to the United Kingdom at \$1,425 and the United States at \$2,000.

Canada ranked 13th out of 18 NATO nations in per capita defence spending, just slightly ahead of Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic, Turkey and Spain, and 153rd in defence spending out of 192 countries based on percentage of GDP.

That data is almost three years old, but little has changed. What Canada spends on its military hardly befits a nation that is recognized around the world for its peace-

keeping efforts and the professionalism of its armed forces.

Perhaps more alarming in the current international environment, is Canada's proximity to the United States and the length of our shared undefended border that makes us an attractive target for terrorists.

Clearly, under these circumstances, the issue of military spending and preparedness deserves priority consideration.

In repeated surveys, Canadians demonstrate great pride in their military, and so they should. However, they need to be persuaded that we have to make a greater investment in our forces and their equipment to protect our national sovereignty, contribute to domestic security, and continue to participate in international military operations, peace-keeping and humanitarian aid. Our national security has to be conducted internationally and our commitment will be measured by our ability to actively participate with our allies in striving to maintain global peace and stability. To date, we have failed to give the required priority to military expenditures.

The Canadian Forces' resources are stretched to the limit. The incident with the *Chicoutimi* has brought focus on our Navy, but there are equally urgent issues with other old and out-dated equipment that needs to be replaced.

Our medium capacity trucks, AORS, Sea King helicopters, and the Canadian Forces' longest-serving workhorse, the C-130 Hercules transport fleet – all need to be replaced. As for the Hercs, this vital capability has an estimated life expectancy

of another five years before they will be deemed too "high risk" to fly.

Canada operates the highest-time military C-130s in the world – most of the fleet was acquired between 1964 and 1967. Reports continue to refer to our Hercs as being in "critical condition" with close to two thirds of the 32 aircraft out of service for maintenance at any given time.

This is not acceptable. For more than 40 years, Canada's C-130s have been indispensable – distinguished by their ability to carry diverse cargo, manoeuvre in and out of difficult conditions, and take-off and land virtually anywhere. They are a major contributor to the public support and visibility of Canada's military – domestically and around the world. I would venture that the Hercules is the single most recognized piece of equipment in the Canadian Forces.

We need to renew this resource that evidence shows will continue to be a fundamental component of Canadian Forces' operations – our military is of no use to us if we can't get them and their equipment to the centre of conflict.

The funding announced for the acquisition of fixed-wing SAR aircraft does not address Canada's tactical airlift problem. Our C-130s will continue to be the only aircraft capable of transporting troops and equipment to theatre and flying in and out of hot zones once there.

There are many issues facing our armed forces. A first step in signalling that the new Government is serious about committing more resources to defence would be to address the aging Hercules fleet.

Given budget pressures, DND will have to prioritize its acquisition programs for the foreseeable future. Revitalization of airlift is recognized by Canadians as an urgent operational priority, and it is the versatile C-130 capability that is in highest demand for the range of forecast requirements. Specifically, the C-130J offers much more operational utility for Canada than strategic airlift and is crucial to our ability to remain a relevant military presence on the world stage. **FL**

The Honourable Jean Jacques Blais, P.C., Q.C., served as Minister of National Defence from 1983-84). He is Chairman Emeritus of the Pearson Peacekeeping Center and Chairman of the Canadian Institute of Strategic Studies. In 2003, he spent nine months in Afghanistan and Iraq on Elections related missions, and has recently returned from Sri Lanka where he chaired a Parliamentary study group on conflict affected societies.