

Arctic patrol ships 'dumb'

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THE FIRST SHIPS to roll out of Halifax as part of the national shipbuilding program shouldn't even be built, a Liberal senator says.

Colin Kenny, a Trudeau appointee to the Senate, says the government should renegotiate the \$25-billion contract with Irving Shipbuilding to include large icebreakers instead of the smaller Arctic patrol vessels now planned as the first part of the contract.

"Issues are going to be settled in the Arctic through diplomacy and with lawyers," Kenny said in an interview Thursday. "We're not going to go to war up there.

"Sovereignty is best exercised by having the ability to get around, and a Class 10 icebreaker can break up to 10 feet of ice.

"If we control who can move around in the Arctic, that's exercising sovereignty."

By comparison, Kenny called the Arctic patrol vessels "sort of silly."

"They're just a dumb idea," he said. "They don't break ice and they go 16 knots and that's slower than a fishing boat."

Sixteen knots is about 30 kilometres per hour.

The national shipbuilding strategy outlined building six to eight Arctic patrol vessels in Halifax for \$4.3 billion and later as many as 15 larger warships. Irving Shipbuilding has confirmed the number of patrol vessels has been finalized at six.

Kenny, a former chairman of the Senate defence and security committee, said the government could build three or maybe four icebreakers for the same price tag as the patrol vessels.

The senator is not the first person to call for icebreakers. In fact, icebreakers were part of Prime Minister Stephen Harper's original plan back in 2006. A year later, the purchase was switched to six to eight Arctic patrol ships. Many people opposed the change, and the smaller ships, expected to be about 6,000 tonnes each, were derisively nicknamed "slush-breakers."

Chris McCluskey, spokesman for Associate Defence Minister Julian Fantino, said the Armed Forces requested Arctic patrol vessels. He deferred questions to them about why the smaller ships are preferable.

The Armed Forces had not responded to The Chronicle Herald by Thursday night.

Asked whether the shipbuilding order could be amended this late in the game, McCluskey said by email: "Please refer to the announcement we made last fall."

In 2007, the cost of building the Arctic patrol ships was estimated at \$3.1 billion and they were to be operational by as early as 2013. That date ended up getting pushed back when the program was merged with other purchasing contracts to make up the mammoth fleet rejuvenation contract that Halifax won last October.

Irving Shipbuilding wouldn't estimate how much the ships will now cost to build because the final designs, and negotiations with the federal government, have not been completed.

The plan now is to start building the patrol ships by late next year or early in 2014 and have all six built within seven years. The warships would be built later.

The shipbuilding plan is starting up just as the Defence Department, like the rest of the federal government, is bracing for what is expected to be a budget of severe cuts on March 29.

Kenny said that at a time when the government is looking for savings, it shouldn't be throwing its money away on Arctic patrol vessels that are not truly needed.

"It was dumb then, it's dumb now," he said. "But the government's still persisting.

"You're not going to find a naval officer saying what I'm saying because it would cost them their job."

Premier Darrell Dexter's office declined to comment on the matter Thursday.

With The Canadian Press

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