

Irving contract must shape up, or ship out – activist

Posted: December 5th, 2012 · Filed under: [News](#) ·
The Halifax Commoner: <http://thecommoner.kingsjournalism.com/?p=24182>

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In all the excitement surrounding who got the contract, when the work will start and how much the province will make, Canadians have forgotten to ask possibly the most crucial question, a peace activist says.

Why is Canada building warships?

The National Shipbuilding Procurement Strategy, announced in 2010, was created to inject \$35-billion into Canada's shipbuilding sector over the next 20 to 30 years.

In October 2011, the largest ever defence contract was awarded to Halifax's Irving Shipbuilding — the \$25-billion combat ship contract.

The shipbuilding strategy has all-party support, but that doesn't mean there are no critics.

Tamara Lorincz, a member of the Halifax Peace Coalition and the board of directors for the Canadian Voice of Women for Peace, says Canadians should have a say in whether we want to focus our industrial base on building warships for the next 20 to 30 years.

With the government's recent promise to restrain expenditures to decrease the deficit, Canada's budget choices are becoming increasingly important, and Lorincz says military spending "is not a national priority."

"We have homelessness in this country, people living on the street, people living in shelters ... aboriginals living in homes on reserves that don't have running water ... why does the navy get new warships?" she asks.

"Why don't we have a national affordable housing strategy?"

Lorincz argues new warships are not necessary, especially while the navy is still completing a \$4-billion retrofit on existing destroyers and frigates.

"I would like the government to answer the question, 'what is the threat assessment that justifies building warships?'" she says. "Who are our naval enemies?"

Defence Minister Peter MacKay could not be reached for comment.

Ken Hansen, a resident research fellow with the Centre for Foreign Policy studies at Dalhousie University who spent half of his 32-year career in the Royal Canadian Navy at sea and the other half as a defence academic, says, "right now, federal policy says that there is no direct threat to Canada," but that we need to be prepared for the uncertainty that comes with a global marketplace.

Hansen is also critical of the shipbuilding strategy, but for different reasons.

"The navy of today was designed and built during the Cold War," he says.

"Because during the Cold War we had a direct military threat, the fleet from that era is very much focused on combat capability. Without a direct military threat, where is the logic for putting probably 80 per cent of the shipbuilding contract's resources into combat capabilities?"

Hansen says Canada should be doing “far more in the way of research and development work (and) non-combat support, so logistics, the ability to move things for humanitarian assistance like disaster relief.”

“The government hasn’t really been upfront about ... what will the Canadian military do in conflict,” says Hansen.

“Will we be at the front line fighting? Or will we be in the background somewhere providing support and assistance?”

He says the lack of information means the navy is just going to “recreate what we’ve already got. Well, that’s preparing for last year’s war all over again ... people die when you do that.”

“In today’s marketplace, to build a modern warship is about \$2-billion apiece,” says Hansen. With the strategy calling for 21 warships and “only \$25 billion in the program for warship replacement, that means there’s already a deficit. So something has to give,” says Hansen. He thinks the quality will suffer, and says it would make more sense to build fewer warships and more non-combat supportive ships.

Lorincz says she thinks the money in the program is the variable that will give.

She says there have been a lot of questions, oversight and scrutiny of the government’s F-35 fighter jet plan, “but for the warships, all the political parties support it, so nobody’s asking any critical questions.”

The fighter jet plan is going to cost more than the government initially said, and Lorincz says, “it’s going to be the same thing for the warships. The warship contract is just going to be a sinkhole of Canadian tax dollars.”

Another criticism — put forward last year by Ugurhan Berkok, assistant professor at the Royal Military College of Canada — is that only 20 to 25 per cent of Irving Shipbuilding’s \$25 billion contract will go to Canada; the rest will have to be spent on a supplier — probably Lockheed Martin in the U.S. — that can produce the weaponry and navigational systems Canada can’t build.

“One of the excuses is that this is going to be great for jobs ... those really technical jobs will be for Americans, not for Canadians, building warships that there’s no need for,” says Lorincz.

The shipyard has agreed to Canada’s Industrial and Regional Benefits Policy, however, which says every dollar spent outside Canada has to be matched with business generated inside Canada.

“What would be a more rational economic policy would be a national green collar job strategy where the \$25 billion dollars got divided, \$2 billion for each province and territory,” she says.

“Canadians could be employed upgrading wastewater systems, installing renewable energy technology, expanding mass transit, ... getting building things Canadians need, doing meaningful work, helping to build a greener, more peaceful, more compassionate society.”

SIDEBAR: Federal spending unevenly distributed

Federal departmental program expenses for 2010-11 show severely unbalanced spending: the Department of National Defence received 26 per cent of federal expenditure, compared to four per cent for Human Resources & Skills Development and only two per cent for each of Environment Canada, Fisheries & Oceans and Natural Resources.

Military spending has more than doubled since 1998, to over \$21 billion in 2011, while funding for each of Fisheries and Oceans, Natural Resources and Environment Canada has increased by less than \$1 billion.

Canada’s projected military expenditure is more than \$30 billion per year by 2028, or a total of \$490 billion between 2008 and 2028.

Sources: *Canada First Defence Strategy* and *Public Accounts of Canada 2011*
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