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A New Government
by John McLearn

A new government, a chance to clean the slate or change direction. The promises of the election are still new, and many are invested in ensuring that they also are brought to fruition. Expectations are high and our new leadership has promised much in the first hundred days.

The new Minister of National Defence, Mr Harjit Singh Sajjan, is a retired Reserve Force lieutenant-colonel, with one tour in Bosnia and three in Afghanistan. He was also the Commanding Officer of a Reserve Force armour reconnaissance regiment, The Duke of Connaught's Own, in British Columbia. He was a highly effective adviser to the then-commander in Afghanistan, David Fraser, on human intelligence issues, in particular to understand better the local culture. "Word" at the time said he was in the right place at the right time. People who know him stated that he did well and was someone one could work with, who was able to form his own ideas and opinions. These are not bad attributes for the new minister.

While I like the idea of holding a politician's feet to the fire, I am also aware of the need for (pardon the cliché) sober second thought based on the advice of the civil service and the military as well as interest groups with suitable expertise. Key or far reaching decisions should be measured and considered. A promise that was made in the heat of an election should not merely be kept simply because it was stated before all the facts were known. Two very important promises were made by the Liberal Party - one was to stop the F-35 fighter program and re-start the competition for a future fighter for the Royal Canadian Air Force¹. The second involves the withdrawal of fighter aircraft from the coalition bombing campaign in Iraq and Syria. Both these promises were made before elected members were brought up to speed on classified material. The exact ramifications of these two promises will be far reaching both internationally and within Canada.

One issue that concerns me and perhaps it should concern all Canadians is the decision to stop air strikes by Canadian aircraft against Islamic State (IS) targets in Iraq and Syria. It sounds like a return to the Canadian policy of the middle of the last century when Canadian peacekeeping was in its heyday. Large questions exist, such as what about our surveillance aircraft, mid-air refuelling aircraft and transport aircraft? Are they too supposed to depart, as an example? They are not shooting but provide support to our allies. What do our allies think? How will a quick decision affect the overall coalition mission? Importantly, how might IS turn this into an information warfare victory? I suspect there has been little consideration of any of these issues and many more that fall out of this decision.

There is another question to be asked of the new government and there needs to be time given them to consider a fuller answer. At what point will the Canadian Government take action against a real threat? The brutal excesses, including genocide, mass murder, mass rape, human slavery, etc., of IS apparently are insufficient for this new government to take an active part in operations. Under what circumstances would the new government take action on a threat to the country?

The new Prime Minister stated to President Obama that the military trainers in theatre would stay and perhaps increase in number. However, our trainers have been at times calling in air support on behalf

of the personnel undergoing training in northern Iraq. Will this cease as well? As already seen, our trainers have been close to the forward lines, resulting in one fatality and three wounded by “friendly fire.” It begs the question, what does the government intend?

The military mission in the Middle East is just one of several active missions. Russia’s moves in the Crimea followed by in the eastern Ukraine and more recently in Syria are of increasing concern. Canadian aircraft have provided fighter cover over the Baltic States and in southern Europe. Canadian soldiers have participated in NATO exercises designed to show the determination by NATO to deter further Russian inroads and provocations. Are these to cease as well and are we going to ease our relations with the Russians despite their actions? This relation will be increasingly important as Russia flexes its muscles in the far north. Recently, Russia made a new submission to the UN regarding the Lomosov Ridge in the Arctic, reinforcing its overall claim. Russia is also actively re-opening naval and air bases in the far north, and re-equipping land formations there, including two motor rifle brigades and a naval infantry brigade, as well as exercising elements of their airborne forces consisting of four airborne divisions as well as independent brigades.

Will the new government provide a reward for Mr Putin’s aggression and ease tensions, whilst stating how “upset” we are about their actions? Will Mr Trudeau and his government provide “Peace in our time” and make like things are on the up and up?

What of China’s passive aggressive nature, bullying neighbouring countries in the South China Seas? What of China’s interest in the Arctic? What will be Canada’s response - a severely worded letter, perhaps?

Do we change our support to Israel, albeit with a problematic democratically-elected government in a sea of despotic or near so Arab countries? Will we side with those countries in the UN Human Rights Council made up of many despotic nations in condemning Israel but not Egypt, North Korea, Zimbabwe, etc?

The new government has made grand gestures to be inclusive and to show a “sunnier” way ahead. There are many storm clouds on the horizon; many will effect this country in some way. Sunny answers may not be the best way.

Note: 1. The F-35 issue and new fighter competition will be addressed in a future comment.

John McLearn is a retired member of the Canadian Armed Forces with extensive experience abroad and at home serving in international and Canadian army headquarters. This work is the sole opinion of the author and does not necessarily represent the views of the Canadian Armed Forces, the Canadian Department of National Defence or the Royal United Services Institute of Nova Scotia. The author may be contacted by email at: RUSINovaScotia@gmail.com.