

# Editorial

## Fact and Fiction in Naval Procurement

*It was a dark and stormy night....* This really is an editorial and not the start of a novel but today in any story or commentary on Canadian defence procurement, it is hard to separate fact from fiction. I could continue the opening line with ... *and two politicians sat in a cave* and write a rant about communications failures at high levels of government. I will spare you that and look instead at the web of confusion being woven in a corner of the cave about the navy's shipbuilding program, the National Shipbuilding Procurement Strategy (NSPS).

Army trucks and F-35 fighters make good fodder for sceptical and cynical journalists, but the NSPS has become a veritable feast. Why is such a far-sighted and logical program turning into a train wreck? At least, that is what the media and some defence commentators would have us believe. Maybe some of the expressed concerns are valid, maybe some are sheer nonsense. Let's look and see.

The key concerns seem to be: (1) that paying off both fleet support ships and the three remaining *Iroquois*-class destroyers has left the RCN as a glorified Coast Guard; (2) funding constraints, mainly the declining purchasing power of the money allocated in 2011, are already prompting a drop in numbers of hulls to be built, particularly the Arctic Offshore Patrol Ship (AOPS); (3) Canada's shipyards are not up to the job; and (4) the present shipbuilding 'shambles' is entirely a function of politics, especially the lack of priority given to retaining the capabilities built up so carefully and used so effectively in the first two post-Cold War decades. The standard old chestnut of the respective costs of buying offshore versus building the ships in Canada always manages to find its way into any such discussion.

Is fleet capability really declining to insignificance? Anybody with any real knowledge of RCN history or experience of its operations during and after the Cold War would dismiss such claims as abject nonsense. Why?

The RCN has nearly always existed at the whim of the government. For some reason a naval capability has never been recognized as an essential component of the national fabric. It has been said, on several occasions, that Canada tends to think and act like a continental state rather than as a maritime state. Against such facts as the size of Canada's ocean domain, the economic dependence on seaborne exports and imports, the potential of offshore resources, and the role of shipping in the founding of this country, one might well wonder why governments seem



*The key to operational reach and flexibility. The RCN replenishment oiler HMCS Provider (AOR 508) at Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, during RIMPAC 1986.*

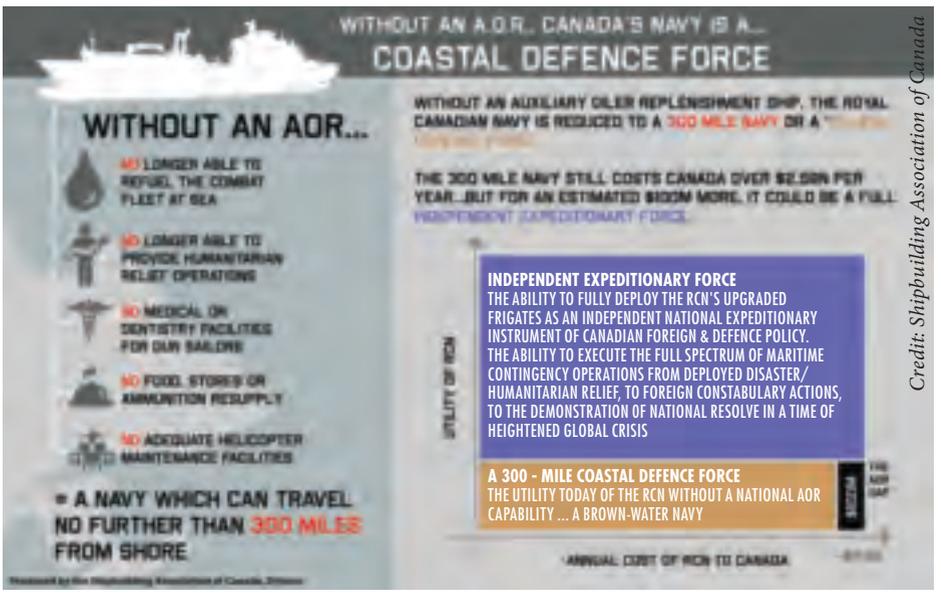
Credit: Wikimedia Commons

to have this blinkered view of their country's status in the world. Until that perspective changes, the RCN is going to remain well down the national priority list.

The actual strength of the RCN, or the acceptable maximum and minimum numbers of ships, has never been legislated. Rather, those levels have been the result of bargaining processes among the military leadership, bureaucrats and politicians. With each new shipbuilding program, a fleet structure and capability level was essentially agreed. The pre-training and manning of new ships was left to the RCN to manage. In some cases, such as the integrated modernization program for the *Iroquois*-class destroyers and the building of the 12 Canadian Patrol Frigates, not only was a new concept of operations embodied in the plan but so was a very complex training program to match sailors with new technologies. This could only be done through careful fleet management and temporary reductions in overall fleet capability – a case of a little short-term pain for long-term gain.

The NSPS plans to introduce three new types of warship into the Canadian fleet over some 30 years: (1) general-purpose surface combatants as replacements for all existing destroyers and frigates; (2) joint support ships to replace the obsolete fleet support ships; and (3) new Arctic Offshore Patrol Ships. The initial numbers of ships that the government planned to build indicate that the fleet structure of 2010 was thought adequate for the future: a flexible, combat-capable fleet able to undertake distant and home operations in more than one place at a time. The centrepiece of the fleet will continue to be the joint task force that has served Canada so well for the past two decades.

I agree that on first glance and applying a healthy inflation factor, it might seem that the amount of money allocated



The Shipbuilding Association of Canada argues that without supply ships, the RCN is confined to operations within 300 miles of shore.

in 2010/11 will not pay for the full number of ships in the NSPS. Maybe, but it is not only too early to tell but this view overlooks the fact that the cost per ship is not constant throughout the program. Follow-on ships are invariably less expensive than the lead ship. That certainly was the experience of the frigate program.

Getting from the fleet of 2010 to that of 2020/2025 was never going to be easy. Because NSPS has been late getting going, especially the new fleet support ships, gaps in fleet capability were inevitable. This is not a new situation for the RCN, it has often been required to improvise. This is the beauty of the NATO naval organization: a missing capability for an operation could easily come from another navy. For that matter, Canada often provided missing capabilities to NATO formations such as support ships and submarines. In the Pacific, parallel arrangements have existed with the Americans and from time to time the Australians and other countries.

The capability gaps caused by the demise of the *Iroquois*-class destroyers and the two fleet support ships is not the end of effective Canadian sea power. Far from it! The 12 frigates are still available as are the four submarines and the 12 *Kingston*-class coastal patrol vessels, all of which have worked with other navies and with the Canadian Coast Guard (CCG). In fact, CCG large icebreakers are quite capable of supporting RCN operations in the Arctic.

Admittedly, the situation caused by the present capability gaps is far from ideal, but it certainly doesn't mean that the RCN is suddenly rendered impotent, only a fool would think that. Sixty-five years ago the RCN was able to keep three destroyers deployed to Korean waters for four years with only 11 destroyers in the fleet. Moreover, there was a major modernization program to implement and a NATO commitment to uphold. It's all about good management and flexibility.

How could the dependence on other navies be lessened? First, it is not difficult to modify, on a temporary basis, a frigate so that it has the command and control capability necessary to lead a task group. Similarly, should the threat assessment dictate, it is not impossible to fit a local area-air defence system in a frigate. Other capabilities in that ship, such as the helicopter, may have to be sacrificed but if the aim is to create a balanced task force, then that is a small price to pay. Second, there are three possible solutions to the lack of fleet support capability.

- Build a commercial product tanker with mini-

imum capacity to work in a task group. HMCS *Provider* was acquired in this manner in 1964 and took less than five years to build and deliver. In her case, the key was strictly controlled minimum navalization.

- Buy or long-lease a suitable product tanker and convert it to meet fleet support requirements. The Australians did this very successfully with HMAS *Sirius* for less than A\$100 million in 2004.
- Lease a surplus fleet support ship from the Americans.

If the intention is to cover the deficiency as quickly as possible, then the second or third options are the logical solutions.

I am not qualified to judge whether the Canadian shipyards are able to meet the objectives of NSPS and so I will not comment on that issue but rather leave it to the experts in such matters, as I suggest the media do!

Finally, and by way of a conclusion, in Canada as in most liberal democracies the military is always under political control, and should remain that way. Without unlimited money, the determination of political priorities is not only the essence of politics today but also enormously difficult. In defence and security issues, the government has to assess the degree of added risk from delaying or cancelling a recommended project. It is then up to military leadership to make best use of the resources available and press the government for interim funds for improvisation and innovation. This is something the RCN has been very adept at doing over the years.

To bring this discussion back to bad fiction, it was indeed a dark and stormy night simply because some of those who comment on the early stages of a major naval program do not understand the complex political history of the RCN! Le plus ça change, le plus c'est la même chose! 🍷

Peter Haydon