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THE MILITARY AFFAIRS COLUMN BY TIM DUNNE

Trudeau flies by night on F-35 replacement

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I could be forgiven for concluding that Justin Trudeau's Liberals are ambivalent about Canada's military and simply hate the Royal Canadian Air Force.

When Pierre Elliot Trudeau was prime minister, he allowed the Canadian Armed Forces to deteriorate to rust, rot and rubble. When the venerable Argus long-range maritime patrol and submarine hunting aircraft was retired, 33 planes were replaced in 1980 by 18 Aurora aircraft — exactly half the number requested by the project team.

During the 1993 campaign, Jean Chrétien made good on his promise to cancel the EH-101 maritime helicopter. The result was almost \$500 million in cancellation fees and Canada's maritime rotary wing community was left to fly 50-year-old Sea Kings.

Then Liberal leader Michael Ignatieff tried to avert defeat in the 2011 federal election by promising to cancel the F-35 Joint Strike Fighter aircraft project, but was beaten nonetheless. Justin Trudeau is repeating that threat in his policy statement: "We will not purchase the F-35 stealth fighter-bomber."

"We will reduce the financial procurement envelope for replacing the CF-18s We will plan to purchase an equal or greater number of lower-priced, but equally effective, replacement aircraft," the Liberal manifesto states. But the F-35 is a fifth-generation aircraft, the most modern and capable aircraft available to the Royal Canadian Air Force. Short of taking the ill-advised step of offering to buy China's Chengdu J-20 or Russia's Sukhoi PAK-FA fifth generation jet fighters, there are no "equally effective, replacement aircraft."

Bluntly stated, aerial warfare requires the best equipment and the best training. To lose is fatal. An airframe made by the lowest bidder could easily become a flying coffin.

From the early 1960s to 2003, Canada's Armed Forces have been passed the dirty end of the stick, but have deployed and achieved all that was demanded of them by successive governments. Their service, often rendered under the most demanding and dangerous of circumstances, made many Canadians proud.

But the F-35 joint strike fighter is only one of a series of acquisition programs that may be on the political chopping block. As we approach election day, many Canadians share concerns about the equipment and material the women and men of our military need to achieve the missions in which they will be deployed. We'd like our political leaders to share their intentions about upcoming requirements, such as:

- The Canadian Surface Combatant ships slated to replace the Halifax-class frigates that are now at their mid-life point;
- The battle tank replacement, light armoured vehicle and close combat vehicles for the army;
- The replacement for the Victoria class submarines, which may have to include nuclear submarines, if we are truly serious about maintaining sovereignty in the Canadian Arctic;
- The Canadian Defence Research Vessel;
- A tactical, multi-role fighting vehicle for the army;
- Space-based tracking and observation systems.

There are many more acquisition programs, large and small, that have been put in place to protect Canadian safety, security and sovereignty, and to provide Canadian troops the resources they need to fulfil the international missions they are assigned while affording them the greatest possibility of simple survival.

The world is becoming increasingly inhospitable to Canada and our allies, and our westernized way of life with its many freedoms. We frequently forget how privileged we are to belong to one of those relatively few democracies in which we can live without fear of interference (or worse) from a repressive government, and where our police and security services are accountable for how they interact with all who live within their jurisdictions.

Canada's armed services are the ultimate line of defence of all things Canadian. They have helped fight forest fires, floods and civil disasters as well as exercised Canada's right of "projected defence," where we engage our adversaries on their soil so they will not engage us on ours.

Our military personnel have voluntarily joined our armed services, which often requires that they place themselves in harm's way to meet the obligations we place on them.

These Canadians deserve better than to have our political leaders treat them as expendable pawns in their efforts to attract votes.

I'd prefer a leader who has the courage of his/her convictions, who would commit to provide our military personnel with the resources they need and deserve.

That takes someone with spine, spirit and strength.

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