

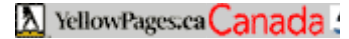


HEADLINE SCAN | E-MAIL UPDATE | NP MOBILE | SUBSCRIPTIONS | SITE MAP | ADVERTISE | CONFERENCES & EVENTS | USER HELP

Sunday » No

14-DAY SEARCH:

National Post



» NEW & UPDATED:

:: [NP Business Magazine](#)

:: [Subscribe to the Post](#)

:: [Paul Martin](#)

- NATIONAL POST HOME
- NATIONAL NEWS
- FINANCIAL POST
- FP INVESTING
- COMMENTARY
- SCIENCE & TECH
- ARTS & LIFE
- SPORTS
- DIVERSIONS
- WEEKLY FEATURES
- SATURDAY POST
- POST MOVIES
- REVIEW
- TRAVEL
- DRIVER'S EDGE
- SPECIALS
- SPECIAL REPORTS
- FORUMS
- CONTESTS

| SEARCH RESULTS - STORY

Our defence policy as political theatre

Mark F. Proudman

National Post

Tuesday, August 05, 2003

ADVERTISEMENT

Last week the Washington Times published a plaintive, not to say humiliating, column by Defence Minister John McCallum, in which he told our friends and allies that Canada's small military must focus its anti-terror efforts -- and that Afghanistan would be that focus. The subtext was that therefore we could not be expected to contribute to the controversial campaign in Iraq, though the four-letter "I" word was conspicuous by its absence from Mr. McCallum's column.

One point comes through clearly nonetheless: The Chrétien government, like most Canadian governments, thinks of defence policy as a source of talking points. At no stage do Canada's leaders sit around a table and seriously debate how to defeat the West's enemies. Instead, Canadian governments consider the impact our military deployments will have upon two audiences -- the internal political audience on the one hand and the external allied audience on the other. Our defence policy has an essentially theatrical character. It is designed only to create political perceptions among these two groups.

Apparently Mr. McCallum imagines the Americans will not be so stupid as to ask whose fault it is that Canada's miniature army has been so long neglected. As historian Michael Bliss has argued in these pages, the Ottawa Liberals have deliberately run down the Armed Forces precisely because they do not wish to be placed in the position of making controversial decisions.

Our deliberately arranged weakness worked out conveniently during the Iraq war: Either the Liberals sent troops, thereby upsetting their core anti-American and Quebec supporters, or they refused to do so, further exacerbating our already parlous relations with the United States. So the Chrétien Liberals must have congratulated themselves on the decision to send a Canadian brigade to run the peacekeeping operation in Afghanistan. Here was an operation sanctioned by the United Nations -- that politically convenient left-liberal shibboleth -- but also favoured by the United States, and hence defensible as a contribution to the war against terror. It is also an operation that has used up pretty well all our deployable forces, so we cannot now be



- Proc
- Con

\$

WEATHER

Select

[Stock Qu

- TSE
- Dow
- S&P 500
- Nasdaq
- C\$ (in U\$)



Utilities

WAKE UP INSPIRED.

POST VOTE

POST X VOTE

Due to technical difficulties, Post Vote is temporarily not in service. National Post Online regrets any inconvenience.

asked to do more.

A neat solution to a political problem, but it may well turn out to have been too clever by half. Our Australian and Polish allies, whose contributions in Iraq we might have emulated, have played an important role while suffering no casualties. Our Forces may be about to step from the potential frying pan of Iraq into the actual fire of an unstable Afghanistan.

The Liberal Mackenzie King government of the Second World War had a similar talking-point attitude to defence policy. Before Japan entered the war, King sent Canadian troops to defend Hong Kong. He could say that we were "doing our bit" while sending our troops a long way from the battle fronts of Europe and Africa. This attempt to avoid political controversy backfired. After the 1941 surprise attack on Pearl Harbor, our troops in Hong Kong were sitting ducks, far from any possible support, and thousands died in Japanese camps.

A similar episode played itself out in Europe. King insisted that Canadian troops remain under Canadian command in England, and not go the battlefields of North Africa. But after two years of inaction in England, both our troops and anglophone domestic opinion were becoming impatient. So King agreed to let Canadians take part in the 1942 attack on Dieppe, which was supposed to be a quick, bloodless and spectacular raid. Dieppe, as everyone but Mr. McCallum knows, was a bloody failure. Once again, an essentially dishonourable attempt to avoid casualties while playing to a political audience had backfired, and once again it did so to the cost of our troops. Mr. McCallum is playing the same game, for the same reasons, in Afghanistan today.

Dishonesty continued to be the leading characteristic of Liberal defence policy during the Cold War. Pierre Trudeau sat around the table with our allies and agreed to a defence spending target of 3% of GNP. Of course he was lying -- our government had no intention of meeting this obligation. The current NATO target is 2%, but of course the Liberals are still lying. Defence spending now sits at around 1% of GNP. Our focus on peacekeeping rather than combat has more to do with justifying these lies than with making any serious contribution to allied defences.

Mr. Chrétien's first response to Sept. 11 was to make speeches about multiculturalism. When that didn't play in English Canada, he pressed the Americans to accept a Canadian battalion for service in Afghanistan. One of Mr. McCallum's favourite talking points is now the disingenuous untruth that we were among the first to come forward.

Liberal defence policy has long shipped our troops -- loyal and enthusiastic young Canadians -- around the globe in order to create talking points for Ottawa's political elite. This purely theatrical policy is a standing and historic betrayal of those keen young Canadians who volunteer to serve. Think of it as a Canadian tradition.

Mark F. Proudman studied Canadian history at McGill and is now working on a doctorate at Oxford.; mark.proudman@new.ox.ac.uk

© Copyright 2003 National Post

[Return to search results](#)



Copyright © 2002 CanWest Interactive, a division of [CanWest Global Communications Corp.](#)
All rights reserved. [Copyright terms & conditions.](#) | [Corrections](#) | [Privacy Policy](#)
Optimized for browser versions 4.0 and higher.

