



Supply and unreal demands

Canada's flawed plan to buy spy planes could create an Israeli presence in Afghanistan

By **GREG WESTON**

Today's tour of the federal funny farm takes us (yet again) to the Department of National Defence, this time coming to the aid of our troops in Afghanistan with rented Israeli spy planes. Really.

Four months ago, Stephen Harper said the government had ordered a fleet of unmanned surveillance aircraft to help reduce the amount of time our troops have to spend travelling heavily landmined roads of Kandahar.

In fact, the prime minister said in January, the government "has had them on order for some time."

Or not. Truth is, the government still hasn't ordered the planes, the bidding to supply them having closed only this past week.

Sources in the defence industry say the requirements for supplying the unmanned drones are so onerous that most of the world's suppliers politely said thanks, but no thanks.

That left only two companies in the running -- both Israeli.

The concept of Canada's deploying Israeli spy planes to watch over a Muslim country we are occupying definitely risks some indigestion in diplomatic, if not military, circles.

But the planes may be only part of a much larger Israeli presence joining our Canadian troops in Afghanistan.

Government documents stipulate that the winning supplier will also have to provide the crews needed to maintain the drones at the Canadian base in Afghanistan, prepare the craft for flight, and actually remote-pilot the planes through all takeoffs and landings.

If nothing else, the prospect of an Israeli contingent moving into Camp Canuck in Kandahar should cause no end of fun over at Foreign Affairs.

The story of how Canada will likely wind up with Israeli drones has caused considerable chatter in the defence industries, and shows just how much federal contracting has changed since the bad ol' Liberal days.

More than a year ago, the Harper cabinet was apparently ready to approve the purchase of American-made Predator drones for use in the Afghan conflict.

The Predators are one of the few unmanned aircraft anywhere that can be outfitted with weapons, including Hellfire missiles.

Besides, it made sense: Both the American and British forces fighting alongside our troops in southern Afghanistan are already using the unmanned Predators.

Integrating a new Canadian fleet for everything from ground control to spare parts would have seemed a no-brainer.

But a funny thing happened on the way to the cabinet table last year.

Word is at least one minister, an unabashed booster of all things Israel, convinced his cabinet colleagues to put the Predator order on ice, and to open the process to, ahem, other suppliers.

ALARM BELLS

Almost a year later, nothing much had happened when the Manley report set off alarm bells, recommending Canada acquire a fleet of unmanned drones by February, 2009, as a condition of staying in Afghanistan.

In spite of the PM's expressed optimism at the time that new drones were just over the horizon, there was none for sale for delivery to Afghanistan by next winter, and no way to train Canadian crews in such a short time.

That's apparently when someone came up with the rent-a-drone plan, with one other major change.

The winning plane no longer had to have any weapons capability, just surveillance, a provision that opened the door to the two Israeli companies.

(In practice, that means Canadian forces will be able to spot an enemy target, but can't do anything about it except

call in armed aircraft from the Americans or Brits. Brilliant.)

All of which may have seemed like a good idea at the time, but not to most of the would-be suppliers.

General Atomics Ltd., maker of the American-made Predator, was the first bidder out the door, saying no company could deliver a fleet of drones in just six months, while the rest of the requirements were unreasonably risky.

That left the two Israeli firms -- Elbit Systems and Israel Aerospace Industries.

But on the eve of the May 20 deadline for bid submissions this past week, the Canadian Defence Review reported that Elbit's prime partner, U.K.-based Thales, had pulled out of the deal, too.

ISRAEL FAVOURED

Federal officials say Elbit's bid is still active, but industry sources say Israel Aerospace is now the odds-on favourite to win the bid.

Turns out that company's Canadian partner in the deal is MacDonald Dettwiler & Associates (MDA), the same Vancouver-based firm that just tried to sell itself, the Radarsat satellite, and the iconic Canadarm to the Americans.

The Harper government blocked the \$1.35-billion sale of MDA, but maybe a \$93-million drone deal would help ease the pain.

Say shalom to Kandahar, baby.