

Commentary

## When think tanks produce propaganda

**At the very least, credible public intellectuals should disclose the source of their funding**

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The war in Afghanistan is one of ideas and ideologies. Ideologies, in that the Pashtun extremist worldview is far from our own. Ideas, in that our society is likely to prevail only if it makes wiser and cleverer decisions than theirs. That is why, when one adds up Canada's advantages in this war, there is none greater than our values of inquiry and debate.

But recently, a new threat has emerged. The Department of National Defence is intruding on academic financing, spending millions of dollars sponsoring think tanks and scholars to offer up agreeable commentary. When these intellectuals comment, they are not always quick to disclose that the military funds them.

Take the Conference of Defence Associations, a think tank that got \$500,000 from DND last year. That money comes not with strings, but with an entire leash. A current DND policy reads that to receive money, CDA must "support activities that give evidence of contributing to Canada's national policies." Apparently, if CDA's activities were neutral and unbiased, or even-handedly supported and questioned government policy, DND would refuse to pay!

Attendees at CDA's annual conference, which begins today, will hear speeches by Prime Minister Stephen Harper, Defence Minister Peter MacKay and MP Laurie Hawton, a retired lieutenant-colonel. Curiously for an organization that calls itself "non-partisan," no opposition politicians will speak. Chief of the Defence Staff Rick Hillier will lecture, as will NATO's military head, General Ray Henault. The agenda includes a session titled "Contemporary Security Concerns" -- a discussion on Russia and Iran.

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Now consider: If the Prime Minister staged a government event and declared Russia and Iran "contemporary security concerns," some Canadians would be made uneasy by the signal that sends. But if the government finances CDA, which stages an "independent" event where the Prime Minister rubs shoulders with military officers, weapons company executives and intellectuals addressing those same security concerns, it might just pass without Canadians noticing. CDA gets away with shilling because it is so discreet. Nowhere on its website does CDA disclose its half-million dollars of DND sponsorship.

The Harper government knows what the money is for, because cabinet reviewed the funding agreement between DND and CDA, and it has been secret ever since. Nonetheless, Maclean's got CDA's executive director, Colonel Alain Pellerin, to admit that the contract obliges it "to write a number of op-eds to the press" -- propaganda paid for by you and me.

More disturbing still is the manner in which DND spends money to elicit friendly comment by Canadian scholars.

Most people would find it strange that DND sponsors the salaries, research, travel and tuition of dozens of professors, postdoctoral fellows and graduate students. But DND's Security and Defence Forum does exactly this. The list of Canadian universities getting over half a million dollars of SDF money is extensive: York University (\$580,000), UQAM (\$630,000), Wilfrid Laurier University (\$630,000), Université Laval (\$655,000), McGill (\$680,000), UBC (\$680,000), University of Manitoba (\$680,000), UNB (\$680,000), Carleton University (\$780,000), Dalhousie University (\$780,000), University of Calgary (\$780,000) and Queen's University (\$1,480,000).

What's the money for? It's not for the technical work that militaries obviously require -- building better airplanes, for example. Instead, it sponsors policy scholars, who create the ideas, news and views that shape Canadians' perception of the military and the war. And the evidence suggests that the military and government have politicized some SDF grants. The same bureaucrat who administers SDF grants to scholars also manages DND's liaison with cabinet and Parliament. When DND needs a kind word in Parliament or the media -- presto! -- an SDF-sponsored scholar often appears, without disclosing his or her financial link.

There is one Canadian professor who received an \$825,000 SDF grant. For that money, DND expects the professor to "conduct outreach activities with the Canadian public ... and Parliament about security and defence issues." And reach out he does -- eloquently, but not always disclosing that he is funded by DND. He made no disclosure when he testified to Parliament that the government's Afghanistan policy "is the right mission for Canada and the right mission for the Afghan people." He also made no disclosure in a published op-ed where he praised former Conservative defence minister Gordon O'Connor as "an outstanding success," and assailed "years of Liberal [party] neglect of ... defence policy and the Canadian Forces."

I don't ever want this professor to stop saying and writing what he believes. But I do want Canadians who encounter his interventions to know how he has been funded.

That is why, at the very least, credible public intellectuals owe disclosure to their public.

But the government, too, should know better. Rather than have DND dole out cash to public intellectuals -- and risk tainting their scholarship and their conferences -- it should give the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council that money, to award grants on an arm's-length basis. This is how other public intellectuals in Canada get funded.

Parliament, the Auditor-General and journalists need a watching brief on this file. As the war in Afghanistan becomes bigger and longer, it will prove dangerous to let DND sponsor intellectuals. Canada needs fresh ideas - not groupthink - to win.

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