

Don Martin: Harper facing dogfight over fighter jet deal

Don Martin October 7, 2010 – 9:33 pm

Confronted by an insider warning against the sole-sourced purchase of a fighter jet dubbed the Flying Credit Card, a furious Stephen Harper on Thursday chose to attack the whistle-blower — and warn against massive aerospace job losses if opponents continue “playing politics” with the lives of Canadian troops.

Such hyperbole suggests the F-35 jet fighter controversy is getting under the Prime Minister’s skin. He may have cause to fret.

Retired assistant deputy minister of materials Alan Williams — an expert who is hard to dismiss — took the parliamentary stand on Wednesday afternoon to denounce the lack of competition for \$9-billion worth of fighter jets as likely to squander billions of tax dollars and lost business opportunities. Mr. Williams warned Defence Minister Peter MacKay’s logic on the F-35 file is “flawed,” and he’s taking public positions that “insults our intelligence.”

This is no opposition cheap shot.

This comes from a 33-year public servant who signed the memorandum of understanding in 2002 committing Canada to \$100-million in funding to develop the F-35 stealth fighter. He’s even written a book on the subject: *Reinventing Canadian Defence Procurement: A View From The Inside*.

The government moved quickly to undermine the witness’s credibility.

“In terms of the individual you are talking about, his advice was very different at the time that he was actually paid to give it,” sniffed Mr. Harper during a brief media chat in Winnipeg.

Well, not really. While the PMO helpfully distributed Mr. Williams’ testimony from 2003 that predicted major Canadian benefits from the ongoing F-35 partnership, he never said the original contract was anything more than a lucrative business opportunity. Nowhere does he state Canada was committed to buying the jet.

“That’s a lie,” Mr. Williams snapped on Wednesday when told of Mr. Harper’s comments. “I’ve never ever changed my opinion about sole-sourcing. I have no idea to what he’s referring to. I take great offence to that.”

Mr. Williams doesn’t dispute this jet might be the best choice for Canada, even though some of our international F-35 partners have rebelled against the soaring price tags and are increasingly concerned about quality control problems.

He just argues good government protocol suggests an open bidding competition would ensure the right fighter lands the best value for taxpayers.

“Procurement demands not only the highest degree of integrity, but also the appearance of the highest degree of integrity,” Mr. Williams warned as Conservative MPs rolled their eyes. “Undertaking sole-source deals leaves the procurement process more vulnerable to fraud, bribery and behind the scene deal making and leaves the federal government more susceptible to such charges.”



Lockheed Martin F-35 Lightning II, also known as Joint Strike Fighter (JSF) in flight. Handout photo

Government MPs are transparently obvious when they sense danger in a committee witnesses — and Mr. Williams was no exception.

By ensuring the Prime Minister was up to speed on the former bureaucrat's position, and by distributing details of every single sole-source deal Mr. Williams ever inked as a government employee, the Conservatives clearly view him as red toxic sludge.

Look, it's possible he's taking a rogue position, but his insights seemed both informed and interesting.

Mr. Williams said our original jet-fighter partnership allows Canada to purchase other jets without losing supplier contracts, which seems to suggest the government can safely sound the market for better deals. And it remains a stretch to insist there's only one fighter on the planet that Canada can use to engage Arctic patrols against make-believe Russian hostiles or, perish the thought, perform Afghanistan flyovers for another dozen years.

This fighter deal is getting cloudier by the day. Perhaps it's time to see what else is out there.

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