

Den Tandt: Heads should roll for F-35 fiasco

BY MICHAEL DEN TANDT, POSTMEDIA NEWS APRIL 3, 2012 7:02 PM



Two F-35 Lightning II, also known as the Joint Strike Fighter (JSF), fighter aircraft are seen as they arrive at Edwards Air Force Base in California in this May 2010 file photo.

Photograph by: Tom Reynolds/Lockheed Martin Corp/Handout, Reuters

OTTAWA — Here's what a sober-minded, fiscally responsible and cautious prime minister would do, given the outrageous chronicle of incompetence, stupidity and duplicity revealed by Auditor General Michael Ferguson's report on the F-35 fighter program: He would demand and receive the resignation of Chief of the Defence Staff Walter Natynczyk. He would demand and receive the resignation of Defence Minister Peter MacKay.

Such a prime minister would remove and replace these two men now, regardless of their past contributions and regardless of whether they were directly responsible for the outrages outlined in Ferguson's report, because it happened on their watch. Such a prime minister would then lick his wounds and move on, the caucus and senior civil service chastened but secure in the knowledge that really big mistakes have consequences.

That Prime Minister Stephen Harper does not appear inclined to do this — that the government apparently intends to snort and bluff and bluster its way through this latest stink bomb, just as it has

done with such resounding success on the robocalls file — is astonishing. Minority Harper, the man who ditched former minister Helena Guergis on a rumour, would not have done so. Minority Harper would have thrown several of his associates under an eighteen-wheeler Tuesday, without so much as a backward glance.

If you take the time to read the audit, my bet is that you draw the same conclusion I did: Heads must roll. How could they not, when there is a clear pattern of National Defence Department officials, unnamed, misleading government ministers, Parliament and by extension the Canadian people? How could someone not be held accountable, particularly since the government has had ample reason to know, not for months but for years, that something was deeply awry?

Alan Williams, a former assistant deputy minister (Materiel) at DND, and the man who originally shepherded the Chretien government into the first phase of the program in 1997, has been sounding the alarm about his former department's procurement practices virtually since the day he retired in 2005. I can personally confirm, since I am on his mailing list, that over the past six months Williams has sent out missives virtually daily, with links to various F-35 delay, technical-glitch or cost-overrun stories floating in from the far corners of the world (because there are nine consortium partners grappling with soaring costs and technical delays, including the United States).

All through the period when Associate Defence Minister Julian Fantino and his putative boss, MacKay, were standing up in the House of Commons, or in interviews, to reiterate that the program was sound, there has been a growing cloud of ack-ack fire around their heads, credible reports confirming that their math — \$9-billion for 65 planes, not including service costs — no longer held up, if it ever had. Indeed, many of the auditor general's findings were previously raised by Williams months ago.

Are we to believe that no one in the government was aware of these reports? Perhaps no one in Prime Minister's Office thought to ask Williams, a civil servant with 33 years' experience, out for a cup of coffee and a chat? Last month at last, ahead of the coming audit, Fantino began hedging. But it was too little, much too late.

The government may say Williams is partisan. He's not. He was as critical of DND aircraft procurements in the waning days of the Paul Martin government, as he has been of Harper. If Williams has had a singular recurring concern it's the degree to which former chief of the defence staff Rick Hillier, who retired in April of 2008, bent the traditional procurement model into a new shape, which he defined, to suit the exigencies of wartime.

Hillier was a superb leader in many ways, in my view, one of a kind — beloved by the troops and immensely likable. But he had a habit of saying, "This is the plane I need, this is the plane I want." He did this in the case of Chinook helicopters, which he deemed the only machine capable of withstanding the Afghan dust and altitude. If you already know what you need, why go through the whole bothersome tendering process, which can take years? Get the job done.

Except that this philosophy apparently carried through in DND's approach to the F-35, which unlike the Chinook, had not been tested in combat. "Fifth-generation fighter?" Anyone familiar with the aerospace industry will tell you that is a brand, and not a technical specification. There are other aircraft with similar capabilities. But how would the government know this unless it held a full and fair competition?

Given Ferguson's audit, the government is honour-bound to hold a complete and open bidding process, managed independently of political decision-making, as was done with the military shipbuilding contract last fall. If it does not, it runs a real risk of seeing its reputation for decent management permanently tarnished.

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