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F-35 fiasco knocks Conservative spin off its axis

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Where to start in describing the fiasco of the F-35 fighter jet contract?

From the moment the Harper government inherited the F-35 program from the Liberal government, its handling of the file has featured photo ops, deceptions, endless political spin (of course), errors of fact, contradictions and relentlessly upward cost estimates.

The mind blurs with images of ministers smiling and waving in F-35 prototypes; the Prime Minister campaigning at company sites bragging about all the jobs the contract would bring Canada; Conservative MPs defiantly defending the increasingly indefensible on those partisan television panels.

Slowly at first but then with gathering speed, third-party reviews shattered the government's defence of the purchase of 65 F-35s, "next generation" stealth aircraft eagerly sought by the Defence Department. The contract, insisted the government, would cost \$9-billion for the aircraft, and \$7-billion for maintenance over 20 years. Over and over, Prime Minister Stephen Harper, Defence Minister Peter MacKay and the entire Conservative chorus repeated this mantra.

Critics in the U.S. alerted Congress that cost overruns were plaguing the project. The Parliamentary Budget Office in Ottawa said, no, the cost would be more like \$30-billion over 30 years, for which the PBO was predictably denounced by the Conservative chorus.

Alan Williams, a former assistant deputy minister who had forgotten more about procurement than any minister had ever learned, warned repeatedly that the project was off the rails. Predictably, the Conservative chorus denounced him. The Speaker of the House found the government in contempt of Parliament for refusing to reveal the full costs of the program, but that didn't stop the government from being re-elected.

Other countries, alarmed at the F-35's mounting costs and questionable technical reviews, began to delay purchase commitments. Still, the Conservative chorus stuck with the mantra, denouncing all doubters as anti-defence, pacifists and know-nothings.

Deeper and deeper, the Harperites dug themselves into the hole of their own rhetoric – until Auditor-General Michael Ferguson’s devastating report last April unveiled the true costs to be way higher than the government’s mantra. Worse, the report said the Defence Department had told the government that costs had skyrocketed. Yet, the government, campaigning for re-election, kept that information from the public.

It was one thing for the Conservative chorus to denounce partisan critics, media skeptics and the Parliamentary Budget Office, but it could hardly denounce the Auditor-General.

Suddenly, the government spin machine confronted the need to reverse spin. Mr. MacKay was pushed out of the limelight, since he had uttered too many false predictions and had become so personally associated with the project. Public Works Minister Rona Ambrose was put in charge (nominally) of a new review of the project within the government that included outside auditing help. This audit reportedly has shown the cost of the project to have ballooned to more than \$30-billion – this is bad news from a government that presents itself as a careful steward of the public purse.

The Harper spin machine has really got its hands full now. Having insisted that the F-35 was *the* only plane to replace the aging CF-18s, that stealth technology was indispensable, that the costs were what the government had insisted they would be (despite knowing the contrary), that a full review of all available options had already been concluded at the time Canada agreed to join the U.S.-led planning for the F-35, that all the hundreds of millions of dollars already sunk into the project were down payments well spent, the spin machine now must try to make everyone forget these assertions.

Yet, another new process will be unveiled, with outsiders being asked to review the possibility of buying other aircraft than the F-35. Of course, the government will insist the F-35 hasn’t been “cancelled,” for that would be to eat too much crow in one gulp. Willingness to consider other options will fly in the face of every assertion the government has ever made.

Deeper still, the F-35 fiasco reveals systemic problems with military purchasing – problems also apparent with submarines, surface ships and army trucks.