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Thursday, November 29, 2007

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Chair

Mr. Rick Casson

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• (1205)

[English]

Hon. Peter MacKay (Minister of National Defence): With me is someone who is probably not very well known to you: the Chief of the Defence Staff, General Rick Hillier; and also with me is the Deputy Minister of National Defence, Rob Fonberg.

The Chair (Mr. Rick Casson (Lethbridge, CPC)): Very good. We are glad to have you here, Mr. Minister.

As you know, we requested you on two different subjects. This is the first, the estimates, and we want to see you back on procurement. Hopefully that will happen soon.

It is set up to give you time to do your presentation. Then, depending on the time, the opening round is 10 minutes for each party, so that's a 40-minute window. Hopefully we will have at least that to question you.

Sir, the floor is yours.

Hon. Peter MacKay: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I will try to be succinct in my presentation and answers out of respect for committee members.

I want to begin by thanking you as committee members for the work you do on behalf of Canadians with respect to the committee on national defence.

It's a pleasure for me to be here today to discuss with you the Department of National Defence supplementary estimates for the fiscal year 2007-08, which, as you would expect, has been a very busy year, an active year.

As the members of this committee are certainly aware, the supplementary estimates provide a more detailed picture of the government's spending and are reflective of the priorities of the Department of National Defence. This year's estimates are particularly important as the funding requests are part of the government's plan to strengthen our sovereignty and international influence by investing necessary resources in our military personnel and equipment. As you would expect, the mission in Afghanistan figures very prominently in both.

This government's priority with the Canadian Forces is rebuilding them into a first-class modern military.

[Translation]

A military that can serve Canadians, a military that can protect Canadian interests and values, because the world remains an

unpredictable place, and we must be prepared to meet the unexpected.

We're facing a number of complex defence and security challenges today, including: failed and failing states, international terrorism, the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, and a host of regional conflicts and tensions.

To meet these challenges, Mr. Chairman, we need a multi-role, combat capable military. And that is exactly what the government is building with the *Canada First* Defence Strategy. In Budget 2006, the government committed \$5.3 billion over five years. This level of funding demonstrates the government's resolve to meet the defence challenges facing our nation. These funds are building a first class military. We're accelerating recruitment, we're providing modern equipment, and we're positioning ourselves for operational success. Budget 2007 reaffirmed the government's commitment to rebuilding defence, and accelerated the distribution of funds allocated in the previous budget.

[English]

Mr. Chair, the throne speech identified the strengthening of the ability of National Defence to protect Canada's own interests and North America's, as well as to exert international influence through key missions. At home, asserting Canada's Arctic sovereignty is a priority mission. We need to enhance the ability of the Canadian Forces to operate in the far north and establish a greater presence there.

There are several reasons for doing this. Reduced Arctic ice levels could eventually make the Northwest Passage a commercial shipping route, and we must prepare for this possibility. There is also the increased economic activity in our northern land, air, and space. This includes mining, fishing, oil and gas exploration, cruise ship traffic, tourism, and international aviation, among other things, and we need to enforce our laws there and protect our citizens, our territory, and the environment, and of course, fulfill responsibilities to conduct search and rescue operations for those in distress.

I might just add a word of respect, if I could, for the work that's done by our search and rescue. They are truly unsung heroes within the Canadian military, and the training, the professionalism, and expertise that go into some of these search and rescue operations, particularly in those harsh climates in the Arctic, is nothing short of heroic and exemplary.

Extending the government's reach into our vast Arctic territories, as you would expect, can be challenging, and for this reason the Canadian Forces are regularly called upon to carry out their own missions and to support other departments to fulfill their mandates. We work very closely with Public Safety, Indian and Northern Affairs, DFAIT, and the Department of Fisheries and Oceans, to name a few.

To assert our sovereignty in the Arctic we need a military that can conduct surveillance and control over the north. We need a military that can operate effectively in some of the harshest climates and terrains in the world.

The Speech from the Throne also identified Afghanistan as a top priority, and we join with like-minded nations that stand for freedom, democracy, and respect for human rights and the rule of law. The United Nations-mandated, NATO-backed NATO mission was launched because Afghanistan was being used by international terrorists as a base to plan and prepare the 9/11 attacks on North America. The world responded after the democratically elected government of Afghanistan asked the international community for help. Canada and 36 other troop-contributing nations then answered the call. We have roughly 2,500 Canadian Forces personnel in Afghanistan, most of those in the southern province of Kandahar.

The mission is part of an integrated whole-of-government effort in helping the Afghan government establish its authority over and across the country. That includes securing their own sovereign borders. As signatories of the Afghanistan Compact with 60 other countries, we know that the benchmarks of development that are set out are goals that we seek to attain by 2011. Guided by this compact, the international community is providing the Afghan government with assistance in governance, development, reconstruction, and security. Of those, security is the essential precondition for Afghanistan's democratically elected economic and social development to go forward, and without a secure environment there, these critical efforts will be in vain.

The Canadian Forces is doing its share in this international outreach by helping the Afghan army and police build their capacity to establish security in Kandahar. These operational liaison mentoring teams now include a similar type of working relationship with police, for which Canada is also playing an important role through the department of public security.

Mr. Chair, we're increasing our efforts to train Afghan national security forces so they can take responsibility for defending their country's sovereignty and democratic institutions. This is very much in keeping with the throne speech and the recognition of the importance of Afghans taking responsibility for their own national security.

Having been to Afghanistan recently, and having been there three times as a cabinet minister, I've witnessed first-hand some of the positive and tangible signs of incremental progress on the ground in Afghanistan. Each visit has confirmed for me that progress is being made, step by step, in reconstruction and governance, and of course, the all-important provision of security that is required and necessary to allow for this progress to continue. The visits have also confirmed for me that the members of the Canadian armed forces are focused,

motivated, and very proud of the role they continue to play in this international effort to help Afghanistan.

● (1210)

In addition, we as Canadians are very proud of the members of the Canadian Forces who do their jobs every day on our behalf. We are witnessing public displays of gratitude and appreciation across the country for our men and women in uniform. I expect that all members of this committee, in attending Remembrance Day services, would have seen a sharp increase in attendance and public displays of affection for our military, both past and present.

I also remind you, as I'm sure you're very aware, that we now have veterans in this country who are 20 years old.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Chairman, whether our troops are operating in the Arctic, Afghanistan or another theatre, they face incredible challenges every single day. Even when they aren't in the headlines, members of the Canadian Forces are actively engaged in domestic and international operations on land, in the air and at sea.

Just last week, the Canadian Navy had just over 3,000 sailors at sea conducting exercises off our coast and participating in international missions.

The Air Force is no less busy. Without their efforts, we simply couldn't sustain Joint Task Force Afghanistan.

I'm sure we can all agree that our men and women in uniform conduct their missions with determination, resolve and incredible courage.

● (1215)

[*English*]

Mr. Chair, the supplementary estimates we're looking at today demonstrate the government's continued commitment to providing the Canadian Forces with the necessary tools to do their ever-important job. It builds on the many initiatives we've already put in place for our military over the course of the last 20 months.

I'll briefly describe the key items included in the supplementary estimates.

The government is providing National Defence with \$875 million to strengthen the Canadian Forces' independent capacity to conduct its missions. Among other things, this includes money for expanding the number of personnel in the force and for sustaining infrastructure and equipment.

In addition, the estimates include some \$340 million to support ongoing operations in Afghanistan. The money will enable Canada to play a strong leadership role in Afghanistan. As well, in February 2008, we once again will be taking command of NATO's Regional Command South. An initial \$130 million is provided through supplementary estimates for the program to acquire up to 100 main battle tanks.

National Defence will also receive approximately \$162 million to accelerate the delivery of the following approved major capital equipment projects: strategic and tactical airlift, main battle tanks, and precision artillery.

The estimates include \$14 million for the Arctic patrol vessels program and associated infrastructure and the Halifax-class modernization frigate life extension project, which is allocated some \$50 million. These ships, as you would know, Mr. Chair, are the workhorses of the Canadian navy, at home and abroad. We currently have ships deployed: the HMCS *Toronto* and the HMCS *Charlottetown*. Modernizing them will very much strengthen our sovereignty, our international influence, and our capacity to be where we're needed when we're needed.

Defending Canada and contributing to international stability clearly begins with recruitment. Without people, ships don't sail, armies don't march, and planes don't fly. As such, the estimates allocate \$10 million to the Canadian Forces' recruitment campaign.

Mr. Chairman, I'm pleased to report that those recruitment efforts are going very well, and we are seeing young people, in particular, taking an increased interest in the Canadian Forces as a career.

I'll conclude, Mr. Chair, by saying that the Canadian Forces, certainly in my estimation and in that of many, are doing a tremendous job representing our country and our citizens. Our men and women in uniform are operating at home and abroad defending our sovereignty and protecting our interests and values. They stand ready to conduct operations in some of the most challenging environments, whether it's in Canada's High Arctic or in the dusty mountains of Afghanistan. They make great sacrifices. They spend a tremendous amount of time away from their families, their loved ones, and they put their lives on the line for Canadians every single day when they're in a theatre of operations. They are our best citizens, and they are the best soldiers in the world. The Government of Canada is absolutely committed to giving them the tools they need to fulfill their missions and to protect their lives. The funding allocations in the supplementary estimates stand as a testament to this fact.

I'll be happy now to take any questions the committee may have on these estimates.

Again, Mr. Chair, through you, I'd like to relay to members of this committee appreciation for the important work you do in the exercise of reviewing these supplementary estimates on behalf of the Department of National Defence.

Thank you, *merci*.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Minister.

We'll get right into our round. It appears that we have exactly enough time for one 10-minute round.

Please go ahead, Mr. Coderre.

Hon. Peter MacKay: Mr. Chair, just before we do, I also have with me today Admiral Denis Rouleau, who is the chief of programs, to answer any questions you might have on programs. Admiral Brian Weadon is also here. He is Assistant Deputy Minister of Finance and Corporate Services for DND.

The Chair: Thank you.

[*Translation*]

Hon. Denis Coderre (Bourassa, Lib.): Thank you very much, Minister.

It's a pleasure to see you again, General Hillier and Mr. Fonberg. Congratulations on your new position; we'll be calling you often.

• (1220)

[*English*]

Today it's about estimates, so we're talking about spending and saving. There are two issues I'd like to talk about. I want to talk about the Auroras. As well, you've rightly said that we have to be respectful of our veterans, so I would like to talk about our veterans.

Of course we only have 10 minutes. I'll try to save some time for my friend Mr. Savage, because he has some very important questions to ask too, so I will have short questions and I'm expecting short answers.

First, in November the air force cancelled Aurora surveillance flights in the north for several months because of long-term maintenance issues in the aircraft fleet. We know that you decided to take a final decision just before Christmas to eventually cancel the Aurora program. We had already spent \$955 million to modernize the Auroras. That was not only a great program; it would have been a good way to save taxpayers' money, and at the same time the Auroras would have been able to fly until 2025.

The decision that you take on December 18 will cost the Canadian base in Greenwood approximately 1,000 jobs. For the aerospace industry in Nova Scotia and the Maritimes, for Canadians, it would be a loss of more than 2,000 jobs. Now we're talking about 3,000 jobs.

I want to tell you, Mr. Minister, that the Liberals are totally against that. We believe the Aurora program is great not only for the sake of search and rescue, which you supposedly have respect for, but at the same time because of the Arctic, which I think is important.

I would like to hear from you. I asked the Auditor General to take a look at that. I asked her to make a formal inquiry into it. Would you confirm to us that you have already taken the decision that you will cancel the Aurora program? Why do you want to cancel it? It takes only \$600 million to \$800 million, instead of buying new planes that won't be ready until after 2016.

Hon. Peter MacKay: Mr. Chair, there is so much in those questions that is completely factually incorrect that I'm not sure where to begin.

The Auroras were purchased back in the 1980s. We are looking at an aircraft that is very versatile and continues to provide invaluable surveillance. I should also note that the comments about reduction in surveillance are simply not true. They continue to conduct long-term sovereignty patrols over the Arctic and over our maritime approaches. They do fly out of Greenwood, and we have every intention, Mr. Chair, of maintaining the surveillance capabilities, both in the short term and in the long term, for the protection of both our coastal sovereignty and our Arctic sovereignty.

That having been said, we're looking at options to ensure that they're going to remain effective and continue to provide that surveillance safely and effectively. We do not want to find ourselves in the position that the previous government did, when we were flying Sea King aircraft that were over 30 years old; we are looking at a number of options, which of course include looking at the eventual purchase of a replacement aircraft that would provide that same type of capability.

With respect to Greenwood, we've just invested, incidentally, about \$74 million to upgrade that airfield, including a new approach tower, a new fire station, and new infrastructure on the base. It has been a long time coming.

With respect to the Auroras and their operations at Greenwood and at Comox, British Columbia, they will certainly be there and conducting maritime surface and subsurface surveillance for the foreseeable future.

Hon. Denis Coderre: Thank you, Mr. Minister.

Hon. Peter MacKay: We intend, of course, with respect to the aerospace contract, to look at what is feasible, to look at what is the right thing to do. I will rely heavily on the advice of the Chief of the Air Staff and individuals within the department who have years of experience, and we will be making a decision very soon. No decision has been taken.

Hon. Denis Coderre: Minister, maybe you should take a look at the point of view of Colonel Ed Fairbairn, a defence analyst, who is saying that "the unintended consequence of the good intention to replace the Aurora is almost certain to result in a very limited capability for Arctic and Maritime surveillance in the near term and no long range aircraft capable of ASW for many years."

I have another question. General Hillier, I want to talk about Operation Plumbbob. It is a total disgrace that we have veterans from 1957—and now they created the Canadian Atomic Veterans' Association—who have been suffering. They don't have any news, they don't have anything. Would you confirm to me by a yes or no that you, along with former defence minister O'Connor, on February 27 met those representatives, including Sergeant Jim Huntley?

•(1225)

Gen R.J. Hillier (Chief of the Defence Staff, Department of National Defence): Mr. Coderre, I met with representatives from that group. I don't remember the name, but I think there were five or six of them who met with Mr. O'Connor and me, yes.

Hon. Peter MacKay: I remember the name because I spoke with this individual recently. It's a Mr.—

Hon. Denis Coderre: That was for General Hillier, thank you.

You said to them—

Hon. Peter MacKay: I had a conversation directly about the atomic veterans.

The Chair: Just one at a time.

Hon. Denis Coderre: That's it. I asked a question, I had an answer. Thank you.

I know that Minister MacKay spoke to them afterwards. It has been nine months that they are waiting. You spoke about Chalk River, but it was the case of Operation Plumbbob where they had some atomic experience and they were in the trenches or very near, and after that all they had to do was walk after those bombs.

Hon. Peter MacKay: We'll have an announcement very soon with respect to it.

Hon. Denis Coderre: I want to know today if, first of all, you will be able to table to the committee every document, because it seems that since October everybody is outraged, and I am one of them. That is also what General Hillier said to them, and that was true, but it seems that they cannot get any documents.

I would like to make sure, Mr. Chair, that we table all documents regarding Operation Plumbbob. I want to make sure also that we have the medical records of those individuals.

I would like to know, and then I will pass the puck to my friend Savage, do you have an intention before Christmas of apologizing on behalf of Canada and to give them some alimony? The Americans already did it in 1991. They gave them \$75,000 as compensation.

Hon. Peter MacKay: Mr. Chair, we do have every intention of proceeding with an announcement very soon with respect to atomic veterans. This will be very much in keeping with our government's very proud record of dealing with some of these outstanding issues, like compensation for agent orange, a victims' ombudsman, a veterans' bill of rights.

I have had the opportunity to review the file since taking this position just over three months ago, and I'm very proud to say we met with the veterans affairs minister yesterday on this very issue. We hope to be making an announcement very soon that we think is in keeping with the generosity and the respect that this government holds for Canada's veterans, including those atomic veterans who performed exemplary service in putting themselves in that position to be exposed to atomic radiation.

The Chair: You have two minutes left, Mr. Savage.

Mr. Michael Savage (Dartmouth—Cole Harbour, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Minister, General, and Mr. Fonberg, I want to follow up a letter that was sent I think to the minister and to General Hillier recently from a constituent of mine. She copied me. I spoke to her yesterday.

Her husband is on HMCS *Toronto*, which is returning after a five-month deployment. She, with other families, received recently this announcement, indicating that the return to Halifax has been delayed by two days, until 1300 hours on Tuesday, December 18. The reason cited, among the reasons, was that “the ever-increasing cost of fuel requires us to travel at our most economical speed on the trip home”. She is very disappointed by that.

Minister, you and I and Mr. Cuzner are from Nova Scotia. This is a military community. I am proud to represent the people who serve in the CF and veterans. It may not seem like a big deal to some people, a two-day delay, but I'm sure you would agree that a two-day delay after being away for almost half a year, particularly around Christmas, is very important. The Sunday planned return date is easier for families as well in terms of children not being in school, getting time off from jobs, and things like that.

My question to you is, will you review that decision to see if the original schedule can be followed and make Christmas a little bit brighter for these families, who support our brave men and women in the forces?

Hon. Peter MacKay: Mr. Chair, I already have, although I must say that I heard about this through the media, as is often the case, rather than receiving your letter, because you sent the letter to the media first. So I have yet to actually receive your letter, Mr. Savage, and I'm surprised, quite frankly—

Mr. Michael Savage: Did you receive the letter?

Hon. Peter MacKay: Perhaps I can just answer.

I'm surprised, quite frankly, that you would go to such lengths to alarm and disappoint families when in fact, if I read the e-mail to which you're referring, it clearly states that the reason for the delay is high seas and safety. In fact, it's a—

Mr. Michael Savage: The cost of fuel—

Hon. Peter MacKay: Let me finish. I'm quoting from the actual e-mail.

• (1230)

Mr. Michael Savage: So was I.

Hon. Peter MacKay: Well, I'm quoting. It says “I'm told it's not the cost of fuel that had the impact, that it's really much more of a safety concern”, and in fact, the individual in question here...we're talking about a two-day delay.

I also would be quick to point out that the Canadian navy, when returning from deployments such as this, are also, of course, on call to respond, as they did in a heroic way, to pluck from the waters an army individual from Yemen who was fleeing a volcanic eruption. They were able to react very quickly, so of course one would expect they're going to be prudent with the use of fuel.

But they're certainly more concerned here about the waters, the safety of their sailors. They want to make sure they get home safely, and if it means a 24-hour or a 48-hour delay, I think that's reasonable. I can certainly assure you that, from what I'm hearing from Lieutenant-Commander Gagne, they're going to get home safely. That's the most important thing for Christmas and the best gift they could receive.

Mr. Michael Savage: What is the planned date for return, then, Minister?

The Chair: Your time is up.

Mr. Bachand.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Claude Bachand (Saint-Jean, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Welcome to our guests.

I would like to talk to you about Afghanistan. You mentioned in your presentation that you were going to add \$340 million to that operation's funding this year.

Could one of you tell me how much operations in Afghanistan have cost since the start of the conflict?

Hon. Peter MacKay: Mr. Chairman, the total cost of military operations since the start of the mission in Afghanistan in 2001 now stands at \$3.1 billion.

Mr. Claude Bachand: The committee is increasingly gathering information, and I think this is a legitimate concern. There is a lot of talk these days about accountability. When we went to Kandahar, a number of people showed us that CIDA was doing very poor accountability. Cheques were being signed and no one was concerned about follow-up.

I'm going to ask the Minister of Defence a question about accountability. You seem to be very optimistic, since you say in your presentation that you've been there three times and that you've seen progress.

Incidentally, General Hillier, I'd like you to apologize to Brigadier-General Atkinson for me because I gave him a very bad welcome the last time he appeared before our committee. I thought he had put on rose-coloured glasses in order to give us his monthly briefing.

A number of reports completely contradict what's currently going on in Afghanistan. I could mention the Senlis Council and Oxfam. Most of those reports say that we are losing the war in Afghanistan. There's been a major setback: 56% of the territory is apparently occupied by the Taliban.

So when we talk about accountability, we have to ask ourselves whether our work and what it costs are worth the trouble. Is the department really giving us an accurate picture when it tells us that everything is going well, whereas other reports say that everything is going poorly?

[*English*]

Hon. Peter MacKay: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Perhaps I'll respond briefly to some of your questions and give General Hillier an opportunity to respond as well. He of course has been spending a great deal of time in Afghanistan over the past number of years and can give you his personal observations.

First, on the Senlis Council, who are they, who do they report to, and who is on the ground in Afghanistan making these observations? I note that in their reports there is no index, there are no footnotes, and there are no quotes from individuals they've talked to in Afghanistan. I also note that much of their advice or observations appear to be of a military nature. My understanding is that they are a humanitarian group, yet they're advocating a certain troop increase, and that we should be invading Pakistan.

I completely reject their assessment of the percentage of land now under control by the Taliban. I don't believe it to be remotely true.

You asked for my personal observations. I have seen an increase in the ability of our provincial reconstruction team to complete more projects. I am told by officials there and those who have since returned from the provincial reconstruction team that we have a greater capacity to be outside the wire interacting with Afghan people.

I can tell you as well that those projects make a tremendous difference when they involve Afghan citizens and contractors. When they take ownership of the roads, schools, medical clinics, wells, and those types of infrastructure projects, when they have completed them themselves, constructed those items, they defend them fiercely and have greater ownership. To that extent I believe we are doing more.

Of course, all of this only happens behind the envelope of security that is established on the ground. That's where our Canadian soldiers are at their best. They are expanding that envelope and allowing the backfill of CIDA, of the projects they conduct. In addition to that, we have people in the capital of Kabul, with the SAT from our embassy, working directly inside the Afghanistan government to build good governance.

I'll turn it over to General Hillier.

•(1235)

Gen R.J. Hillier: Minister, thank you.

Mr. Chair, I appreciate the apology for handling General Atkinson with slight difficulty, but let me just say that we brought General Atkinson here at your request, on the direction of the minister, to provide a briefing to you. If he shows up and is told he's wrong, we're wasting his time, my time, and your time in having him come here. That is all I would say on that one.

Sir, I would say the best thing to do is ask the Afghans whether we're making progress there or not. We have asked them that question in a variety of ways in recent weeks and months, and their response has been pretty clear. But I don't do polls myself. I base it upon what I see my soldiers, sailors, airmen, and airwomen do, and what I see myself.

Let me just give you a summary of what I have seen so you can judge for yourselves. One is the initiative on the security operations. The Taliban are slightly on a back foot. I don't over-emphasize that, but they have been knocked off their tactical approach of trying to encircle Kandahar city and Kandahar province. They have not been able to control the districts and they have not had the initiative.

With those security operations we have opened a developmental space. We have done that to allow us to build routes like Route

Summit, where I stood a couple of weeks ago; to build a causeway across the Arghandab River, where I stood a couple of weeks ago; and to actually rebuild a school in Masum Gar, where I was several weeks ago to see the three shifts of children going to that school. We have also conducted those operations to allow building the security forces.

Monsieur Bachand, a year ago when I was there, we had no Afghan National Army soldiers whatsoever with us in Kandahar. As of this moment we have three battalions. Yes, they are at various levels of training and readiness, but two of those battalions are with us in the provincial districts conducting operations to enhance their own security.

A year ago we had no police whatsoever. Now we have five police substations and we hope a sixth police substation in the Panjwai area. There are all kinds of problems with the police there with not enough equipment, not enough training, and not enough pay. But it is a delight to have those problems, because last year they were not even present.

While we're doing that to allow the development in Kandahar, in the rest of Afghanistan there is acceleration in economic development and governance development, and people are getting on with their normal lives because the Taliban have been put on the back foot in the south by us, the British, and our other allies working there.

So you can judge for yourself, from what I say, what my assessment of the mission in Afghanistan is.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Claude Bachand: Thank you.

I have one question left, and I'd like you all to answer me together at the end because I want to leave my colleague some time.

I don't want to interfere in ministerial meetings, but there's one thing that I'm concerned about at NATO. Don't you think we should have common funding? It's very costly in southern Afghanistan compared to what it costs in the north. I know that these discussions have taken place in NATO's Parliamentary Assembly. However, I'd like the minister to tell us later whether he is pressing this matter in order to step up the rotation so that it's not always the same ones who pay the price, not only economically, but also in terms of lost lives.

So I hand the floor over to my colleague, who will take one or two minutes, and I'd then like you to answer me together.

Mr. Robert Bouchard (Chicoutimi—Le Fjord, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Thank you for being with us, Minister. General and deputy minister, thank you as well.

I want to talk to you about the Bagotville base. I'm a bit surprised to see that there appeared to be no estimates concerning the reconstruction of two facilities that are important for safety. First, the landing strip is at the end of its useful life. It was built in 1974. Every morning or regularly, military personnel pick up rocks on the strip because of the damage they could cause by entering the engines. The strip has been resurfaced on three occasions, but it is no longer possible to do that because the concrete is too thin. So this is an urgent matter. Even the base commander recognizes that this is a priority. Consequently, I'd like the budgetary appropriations to give priority to reconstruction of that strip in 2008.

Hangers 2 and 3 are also obsolete. The roofs leak. They've even removed the insulation from the roof space because it was falling on people's heads. This is a matter of safety. I'd like this to be recognized as urgent work and that it be entered in a program.

This past summer, Mr. O'Connor before you came and announced an expeditionary support squadron. In 2010, we are supposed to have 250 military personnel. I would have expected to see infrastructure planning in the estimates, but I see nothing.

Was that announcement serious? I'd like to have a timetable and infrastructure plan.

● (1240)

[English]

The Chair: Please give a very short response if you can, Minister.

Hon. Peter MacKay: As you would expect, we have enormous demands across the country at a number of bases. Bagotville is a priority, and you're right that some of its infrastructure is certainly old. I would even go so far as to agree with you that it's antiquated.

[Translation]

Mr. Robert Bouchard: The landing strip has to be a priority.

[English]

Hon. Peter MacKay: In any event, we have plans to prioritize all of the various bases across the country when it comes to health and safety. Those operating air strips in particular take on a very high priority. The Chief of the Air Staff is aware of this, and we have had an opportunity to go through the various demands and priorities within the bases, and air bases in particular. We are going across the country and looking at the urgent priority needs.

Clearly, when there is deterioration as you've described, we want to get on with that. You're right that there was no specific set-aside in the supplementary estimates, but there is money available. We are looking at moving forward on that project the way we have on others, such as Shearwater and Greenwood—there have been other announcements—and we'll continue to do so.

[Translation]

Mr. Robert Bouchard: Could you reconsider your programming regarding the landing strip?

[English]

The Chair: Mr. Bouchard, your time is up. We have to move on and get everybody in here. I'm trying desperately to do that.

Mr. Christopherson.

Mr. David Christopherson (Hamilton Centre, NDP): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair, and thank you, Minister, Deputy, and CDS, for your attendance today.

I'm subbing for the regular NDP member from New Westminster—Coquitlam. So let me just take an opportunity to say, no matter how much we may disagree on different aspects of the mission and details of what we ask our forces to do, as someone from Hamilton, with a lot of soldiers serving us, how proud we all are of the work they're doing in carrying out the mandate of Parliament, and our duty is to flesh out what that mandate should be.

My question is around the item on page 207, and it's the "Mounted Soldier Survivability: Non-lethal Laser Dazzler", to the tune of \$10.5 million. My understanding is that this is a relatively new technology, and it's meant to afford soldiers an opportunity to temporarily blind anyone in front of them, for whatever reason they may feel necessary. We all want our soldiers to have the best possible equipment so they can be protected, but this is Canada. And as we're seeing with tasers, that's not where we begin and end our concerns. We've also got to consider the public and others.

So much like the tasers, this new technology looks like a very big buy. Could you give us a sense of how much each of these costs and what this will mean exactly?

But the focus of my question is around the issue of health. We are part of a treaty signed in 1998 that said we wouldn't use any laser weapons that could cause permanent blindness. Therefore, what we of course need to do is make sure we're doing adequate testing to ensure that is not happening inadvertently, much like a concern that now exists for tasers. So I'd be curious to know what steps have been taken, what medical steps have been taken, what kind of technological assurances there are, given that we signed an agreement that's part of the Geneva Convention that would guarantee we do such testing to ensure that we meet the requirements of the treaty we signed in 1998.

So my focus is on exactly how many, and how would they be deployed? My main focus is on how much testing has been done. What kind of assurance could you provide, including tabling documents if necessary, that shows that the proper testing has been done, that we've met our international obligations, and that we're not going to inadvertently be doing something these aren't intended to do, which is to cause permanent blinding.

And if I could put one other question in there, I would also like to know whether or not these would ever find their way into domestic crowd control situations.

● (1245)

Hon. Peter MacKay: Through the chair, thank you for your questions, Mr. Christopherson.

First, we're not currently using them. Extensive tests have been conducted already—three rounds of tests, as I understand. They are intended, as you've alluded to, to allow the Canadian Forces to use non-lethal force in response, in some instances. They're meant to act as a non-lethal means to warn drivers in an instance—as you can appreciate, most notably in Afghanistan—where much of the threat to our soldiers has been through suicide bombers and vehicles approaching. This is a means to deter those who might be encroaching upon soldiers or a convoy. The equipment is thoroughly tested at this point, as far as I understand, and would be further tested before it would be deployed. As I mentioned, we're not using this technology currently. We're aware of the technology and going through very rigorous tests.

The Department of National Defence has looked into this project and is currently weighing the merits of it. So the money has been set aside but we have not purchased any at this point, so I couldn't tell you how much these particular devices cost individually.

The philosophy behind it is clearly to examine all the means we can employ to use and to protect both Canadian soldiers and those who may be approaching for the potential or for the intent of causing harm. So we're looking at all kinds of new equipment in that regard. This is simply one of them and this is set aside until further tests are conducted. I'm aware of the international conventions you speak of. We would never employ or use a weapon of any kind that would be in violation of the Geneva Convention or any other international convention.

I'm also aware we have been working in conjunction with Australia, the U.K., the U.S., and others who have similarly looked at the use of this particular device. But that we are not there yet is the short answer, and we have not purchased.

Mr. David Christopherson: Do you know the procedure—and I appreciate that you may not, off the top of your head, and maybe you could commit to providing it—to give the assurance that the testing has been done, that it's considered safe, that there is no lethal aspect, that there is no permanent blindness? What is the process? Does it go somewhere to an international body where they review the testing and say, “Yes, we agree that it's okay”, or do they go on our word? How does that work exactly?

Hon. Peter MacKay: I believe that after all of the tests were completed there would have to be assurances that there weren't going to be any lasting effects like blindness.

But perhaps, General, you would have something to add on the actual procurement of a device such as this, which is, as I understand it, a new technology that is not currently in use.

Gen R.J. Hillier: Thank you, Minister, and thank you, Mr. Chair.

We are looking at this, obviously, as something to fill the gap between vigorously waving at people who are suspected of being a threat and shooting them. So we are actually looking at this as a way to protect the health of people who are around our soldiers on a high-risk mission as opposed to endangering their health.

We have done three sets of testing on the equipment. We will do further testing. We're going through medical reports on this kind of laser system, but just to show you what it's really designed to do, it's best employed and designed to flash off the windshield of a car. It

doesn't go into the eyes per se. It creates a razzly-dazzly light on the windshield of the car, which gets somebody's attention immediately, and that avoids, perhaps, our having to take a shot at them because they have not paid attention to our warning signs, our waves, or our vehicles, etc.

We will continue with the testing. We'll ensure that the medical testing is done, either through our own medical testing or using other tests that have already been done internationally, and then we will ask our judge advocate general of the legal system to rule on that to ensure that we meet all the things that we have signed on to, as a country, with the Geneva Convention. We are not going to be using something that clearly would be against international conventions that we've signed on to, etc.

But sir, I'll just say that we're not after something here that's really “out there” doing something that's going to harm people deliberately. What we're after is something to save people's lives, to give our soldiers tools besides waving and shooting, and that's something we don't have right now.

If this is promising and allows us to do it, we'll obviously proceed to acquisition and can provide you details then, but if it's not, we clearly won't.

● (1250)

Mr. David Christopherson: I appreciate that. Much like the tasers, it's the same thing. I was formerly the Solicitor General of Ontario, so I know the need to ensure that we have different abilities to respond to use of force situations, and that is why I'm raising it in this fashion. But I also know that, this being Canada, the last thing we would ever want to do is to blind an innocent person from any country.

I just want to focus in on the last part, General. You said that it goes to—I didn't catch the title—the person who makes the finding.

Gen R.J. Hillier: It's the judge advocate general.

Mr. David Christopherson: It's the judge advocate general, and they make the final determination as to whether Canada is in compliance internationally or not? So that's the go-ahead? You would then get a letter from them?

Hon. Peter MacKay: The judge advocate general is basically the military's top lawyer, so that ensures that we have the best legal advice available with respect to how it complies with international law and international conventions.

I want to just make sure that we're clear on the record, Mr. Christopherson. I said we didn't buy any. We have purchased some for the purposes of tests only. So what I'm talking about is that we haven't made any purchases or procurements for use in the field.

Mr. David Christopherson: There was one last wrinkle to this one. I asked about any domestic crowd control. There are plans and circumstances in which local police can be called in if something happens, if something's happening within the boundaries of Canada.

I guess my question would be, is there any expectation that Canadians would see this as part of the equipment that soldiers who were called out for any kind of control would have? It's not that other humans aren't as important as Canadians, but there's certainly a difference between what happens in the theatre of war and what happens in a peaceful country like Canada. So domestic crowd control, it would seem to me, is a potential use for it. Can you give me some assurances or tell me what your procedure will be there?

Hon. Peter MacKay: There are no plans whatsoever for domestic use.

Mr. David Christopherson: Would you commit to notifying Parliament or this committee before any such action is taken, so that if, under any circumstance, Canadian soldiers are called out, we will know whether or not these new technological marvels are attached to the equipment they're carrying?

Hon. Peter MacKay: They don't have access to them now, and they're not using them in the field, so they certainly wouldn't be using them in Canada.

Mr. David Christopherson: I realize that, but I'm saying after the fact, once they're commissioned.

Hon. Peter MacKay: That's a completely hypothetical question, because we don't have them to use, so they're not only not using them in Afghanistan, they're not using them here.

As the general has said, the intent here is really not for crowd control. It's to deter approaching vehicles or motorcycles, by flashing off their windscreen, which is right in front of their face

Mr. David Christopherson: Minister, I understand fully. I also understand why we wanted to use tasers, and there are really serious questions. So I don't think there's anything wrong with questioning new technology that may possibly do damage to innocent people. That's a fair question, and I think it's fair that we get some assurance.

Would there be a signal point from you, after it left that final legal determination, to let us all know that now they are being deployed? Is there a mechanism whereby that would happen, or can we request that?

Hon. Peter MacKay: If we purchase them, certainly you—

The Chair: Please give a short response, Mr. Minister. Go ahead.

Hon. Peter MacKay: Yes, if there is an actual purchase of these items, it will be announced.

Mr. David Christopherson: Very good.

Thank you, Chair.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Christopherson.

For a final 10 minutes, we'll go over to Mr. Blaney.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Steven Blaney (Lévis—Bellechasse, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I'll be pleased to share my time with my colleague Cheryl Gallant.

I'd like to welcome Minister MacKay, the Chief of Staff and the Deputy Minister to the National Defence Committee. Thank you for being available on such short notice.

Minister, first I'm going to talk about the first points you mentioned in your address today. You talked about reinforcing Canadian sovereignty and about our international influence. You were consistent with the actions of our government, both in the 2006-2007 budget and today, when you stated in the estimates the amounts allocated to those commitments.

Unfortunately, our predecessors did not necessarily see the importance of ensuring that our Canadian troops had the necessary equipment or of guaranteeing Canada's sovereignty over its territory. I'm from Lévis. On July 1, 1909, Canada's greatest navigator, Captain Joseph-Elzéar Bernier, claimed sovereignty over the Canadian Arctic archipelago on behalf of Canada. That will make 100 years in a few years.

My question is for the minister. What measures is National Defence taking to guarantee our sovereignty in the Canadian Arctic archipelago in terms of personnel, new equipment and strategic directives?

• (1255)

[*English*]

The Chair: Mr. MacKay.

[*Translation*]

Hon. Peter MacKay: Thank you, Mr. Chairman and Mr. Blaney.

You are right. It is clearly a priority for our government to ensure a heightened presence in the Arctic for personnel, infrastructure and the promotion of our sovereignty in this region, which is so important for our country. I think our country is proud to protect the Arctic. Our government must therefore make significant investments in that region. We must also truly demonstrate our sovereignty to the other nations that have interests in the Arctic.

[*English*]

So to that extent, as you would know, the Prime Minister himself has made several trips to the Arctic, and there have been significant announcements as recently as this summer.

We have committed to building a deepwater port in Nanisivik. This will be a docking and refuelling facility in the Arctic, which will allow for a greater presence for our naval vessels. Clearly, the navy's operational range will be enhanced by the ability to refuel at this deepwater port, and that facility will also be in close proximity to the Northwest Passage, which is again an area of significant value and significant strategic importance to Canada.

We're also going to establish an Arctic training centre in Resolute Bay. This will be a year-round multi-purpose facility that will support training within the Arctic. It's intended to have year-round operations and personnel of approximately a hundred. There are real challenges, as you would expect, because of the harsh weather and the daylight. As we approach Christmas in the Arctic, it's literally dark 22 or 23 hours a day. So some of our training equipment and vehicles that we find there are special in their use. What we want to do is give them the increased training and capacity on the equipment to have a quicker response time, and also the necessary support throughout the region. It's a vast territory, in which we have to try to provide that type of response.

I mentioned earlier our search and rescue. Their operations in the north of course will continue to be of vital importance.

The Canadian Rangers, who have been traditionally a tremendous presence for us and a tremendous source of pride for our Arctic citizens, will see an increase in number from 4,100 to 5,000 as a result of an increase in budget. They will be outfitted with new, modern equipment—GPS equipment—because, as you would expect, they are often on patrols far afield. We will be giving them the necessary protective equipment and uniforms to provide that type of reach.

Finally, I would point to the investment in Arctic patrol ships, which is again a very important item.

[*Translation*]

that you have a lot of interest in shipbuilding capacity in Lévis.

[*English*]

These Arctic patrol ships, which we announced last summer, are a Polar class 5 type of offshore patrol vessel. They'll be custom-built and designed here in Canada, which I think will be a great shot in the arm for our shipbuilding industry. They'll be a very heavy, versatile, armed navy vessel, one that will be able to perform the necessary movement in sustained operations in ice. There are very treacherous ice conditions, as you would expect, most times of the year. In fact, one of the misnomers about the increase in open waters in the Northwest Passage is in fact that this isn't necessarily going to make it easier to navigate in the Northwest Passage. In fact, there is much more free floating ice, which makes it in some instances even more treacherous than when there was large and predictable and visible ice within the water of the Northwest Passage.

Those are a few items that I would point to. The patrol and the reach and the increased personnel and equipment for the Arctic are very much in keeping with the Prime Minister's and the government's commitment to expanding our sovereignty and our control over the Arctic.

• (1300)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Steven Blaney: Thank you very much, Minister.

This summer, I was at the launch of the Amundsen, the biggest scientific mission ever conducted in Canada's High North, which will also afford the opportunity for exchanges with the Inuit communities that occupy the territory and that also guarantee our sovereignty there. You clearly emphasized that, having regard to

climate change, it is important to ensure the territoriality of navigation in Canadian waters through the investments announced. One need only recall this year's brilliant stroke by our Russian friends, which you referred to. I hail your investments and I also thank you for emphasizing that the biggest Canadian shipyard is in Lévis.

With that, I turn the floor over to my colleague. Thank you.

[*English*]

The Chair: Ms. Gallant, you have three minutes.

Mrs. Cheryl Gallant (Renfrew—Nipissing—Pembroke, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chairman. If there's any time left, I'd like to share it with my colleague Dr. Lunney.

In the new year, Minister, we plan to study mental health issues within the armed forces. It's a very important area of study, first of all, because we want to protect and care for the brave women and men who serve in our armed forces. Secondly, we can ill afford to lose any soldiers to mental health, especially when we're trying to build our forces after what someone referred to as a decade of darkness.

Can you let this committee know what progress we're making in mental health issues for soldiers and perhaps what extra steps are being taken, if any, considering the stressful situation when they return from Afghanistan?

Hon. Peter MacKay: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Ms. Gallant, I know this has been long an area of interest to you and I know you've advocated on behalf of soldiers from your constituency. This is a subject that has a great deal of sensitivity. As you would expect, it involves families and it affects soldiers in a very fundamental way.

I'm proud of the fact that I believe our Canadian Forces have significantly modernized in the way we support and embrace our soldiers when they return. You're absolutely correct to say the injuries they suffer are not always apparent; they're not always physically present when they step off a plane when they're coming back from a deployment like Afghanistan. Recognizing this, we have invested in some of the important support that has to be there for them and for their families. There was \$100 million, in fairness, set aside by the previous government, which runs until 2009. We are currently examining the necessity to increase that amount for the future. We've also added, and we continue to add, mental health professionals in the area to provide counselling, to provide the necessary support, particularly in the area of post-traumatic stress disorder, which is something that does affect, in many instances, those who have been in a combat zone.

I'm pleased to say that the great majority who do return from deployment return in good health, but for those who don't, there is an intrinsic responsibility for the Government of Canada to care for their health and well-being. So our government and the Department of National Defence are supporting the robust mental health teams that we have currently in the field. They have expertise in areas such as psychiatry, psychology, mental health counselling, addictions counselling, clinical social work, and in some instances, pastoral care. We continue to increase those numbers. They've increased by over 200 in the past few years. They currently are about 450 across the country. If and when the necessity arises, we will increase that number further. For special types of programs like post-traumatic stress, we have experts operating from Halifax to Vancouver and all bases in between. And we have, of course, officials in the field, as well, who are prepared to provide mental health support.

I don't know if you want to add anything to that, General.

The Chair: You will have to be very brief with it, sir.

Gen R.J. Hillier: I would say, in addition to all that the minister has said, there are three things.

One thing is clearly identifying post-traumatic stress disorder and the mental challenges that our soldiers face. They are not new to us, but we simply need to recognize that.

Two, leadership has a key role to play here in supporting, sustaining, and helping people recover when they have those challenges. We have a leadership that is doing this. The people I see working for me are doing that.

The last thing I would say to all of you here, and to Canadians, is that the best medicine to make robust young men and women, to sustain them during difficult times, and to help them recover when they have mental challenges is to feel valued, to feel appreciated, and to have that visibly demonstrated for them so that they know they can raise those problems confidently with the support of a country behind them. That's the best medicine for our young men and women in uniform that we can give them.

• (1305)

The Chair: That's a good note to end on. Thank you, sir.

[*Translation*]

Hon. Denis Coderre: I have a point of order, Mr. Chairman. This will also concern the minister.

As we want to do a good job and in view of the minister's responses, I would like us, through you, to ensure that the documents concerning Operation Plumbbob are tabled. I'd like the minister to commit to tabling all the nuclear tests concerning the Nevada site in 1957 and all the information concerning Operation Plumbbob,

[*English*]

all records on exposure levels that were read on film badges; all medical documents on tests done on those soldiers at Defence after the nuclear test; DND vital statistical information by death certificate and cancer registry files; and DND studies on the 40 soldiers sent to Nevada, realized between 1977 and 1982.

Then, for the sake of transparency, I would like to have all documents regarding the rationale for waiting until Christmas to pull the plug on the Auroras, and I would like to know why we can't save taxpayers' money by keeping those Auroras.

The Chair: Okay, thank you. That was not really a point of order, but it was a point of clarification. You did ask for those documents, and that has been clarified, and the minister has heard.

Mrs. Cheryl Gallant: On a point of order, I wasn't sure during the questioning whether I heard correctly that it was asked that the medical documents of former soldiers or serving soldiers be tabled, and I would ask that we respect people's privacy.

The Chair: I'm sure that the minister will follow the request from the committee, and he'll do it in a legal and proper manner.

Mr. Minister, thank you very much.

I have a couple of motions to pass after we thank the minister, the CDS, and the deputy.

General Hillier, I think your comments at the end ring true for all of us, and as we head into the Christmas period, when we think about our people halfway around the world, we'll be thinking of them. Thank you.

Committee, I need to pass a couple of motions dealing with the estimates.

NATIONAL DEFENCE

Department

Vote 1a—Operating expenditures.....\$1,191,785,131

(Vote 1a agreed to)

Vote 5a—Capital expenditures.....\$366,746,508

(Vote 5a agreed to)

The Chair: Shall the chair report the supplementary estimates to the House?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Chair: Thank you.

The meeting is adjourned.

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