Canadian defence procurement still looks like massive case of Charlie Foxtrot

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Early in April 2016, Justin Trudeau's government announced a major review of Canadian defence policy. The public consultations phase of the review closed August 1, 2016 and since then next to nothing has been heard of it. It was originally supposed to have been released toward the end of 2016 but that has come and gone, and rumour now has it that something might emerge in the spring of 2017.

There were always questions about the process, including how one could have a defence policy review in isolation from a comprehensive foreign policy review. However, the whole exercise now risks being made irrelevant by events.

It wouldn't be alone if that's so. Foreign policies everywhere have been thrown into stasis by the Donald Trump's election victory. But the defence review is also being overrun by events within the Trudeau government, most notably the discovery of that "capability gap" in our fighter air power that requires the purchase of a small number of Super Hornets to bridge the alleged gap between our existing CF-18 Hornets and whatever eventually gets chosen as the permanent replacement. Suspicions are out there that the "capability gap" is a manifestation of Defence Deliverology meant to square the circle of unsquarable election promises.

Throughout Canadian history, the story of defence procurement has more often than not been characterized by massive inefficiency and waste. Exactly why this should be so is rarely looked at outside specialist circles, which makes a brief (180 pages) and very readable book by Queen's University political scientist Kim Richard Nossal worth noting. It was released by Dundurn Press of Toronto in early December, and is called Charlie Foxtrot, a play on words, since that's the call sign that can mean either Canadian Forces or the well-known military epithet usually spelled "clusterf@#k" in a family publication.

Nossal has studied the Canadian political/policy interface intensely throughout his career (I first ran into him in 1986 when he published The Politics of Canadian Foreign Policy, now into its 4th edition). He is one of the few Canadian specialists who can claim almost complete noninvolvement in the policy process itself, an important point in a country where — at a wild guess — one third of the people regularly engaged and active in the defence conversation can fit into the ballroom of the Chateau Laurier (and do just that every February). In the book, Nossal refers to "tribes" of Canadian defence interests. That's a good enough word for it, but so small a tribal community makes for a neighbourhood. Everyone has to live there, which doesn't do a lot for uninhibited debate.

By way of background, Nossal takes us through several historic messes in Canadian procurement history (including the Ross Rifle, the Avro Arrow, and the greatest fiascos of them all: the Sea King helicopter replacement and the

replacement for the CF-18 fighter aircraft). His major contention is that, although many analysts place blame on an overly complex process environment, the main problem is not one of process but of politics — each of the messes he describes were politically inspired.

He notes the distorting effect of “Industrial Regional Benefits” and “Canadianization.” Major defence procurements in Canada become primarily a tool for the redistribution of wealth, rather than for buying (as retired Assistant Deputy Minister at National Defence Alan Williams put it) “the right equipment, at the right time, in the right place, with the right support, and at the right price.”

The right price becomes the tier-three problem. The demand for offsets and Canadianization on big projects inflates an already massive price. That leads to the tier-two problem in Nossal’s analysis — that ministers have “big eyes and empty pockets” — they want the best of everything, including broad-spectrum military capability as presented by a very skilled and united defence policy lobby, but they won’t pay for it. In Nossal’s view that stinginess is a simple extension of Canadians’ complete indifference to military affairs — until a catastrophe occurs.

He also cites cases where off-the-shelf procurements worked apolitically and well. But three of the four cases he cites — the M777 howitzer, the C-17 heavy transport aircraft and the CH-147F Chinook helicopter, and he could have added a fifth, the Leopard II main battle tank — were acquired in what could easily have passed for a catastrophe, when Canadians unexpectedly became involved in serious combat in Kandahar in 2006.

Nossal’s final point is that the greatest fiascos have occurred when politicians on both sides have made procurement into a hyper-partisan issue. In an exchange of e-mails, he notes that he’s not sure whether this is related to the general decline in political civility that has been going on since at least the mid-1990s. But his conclusion is that the tendency to play politics with defence spending has mainly come to pass because politicians have realized that there is no price to pay but money — that in the end, Canadians just don’t care. We live in what Senator Raoul Dandurand once called a “fireproof house” and as long as we believe that, any nuances are lost in the short-term shuffle.

Thanks to publisher’s deadlines, Charlie Foxtrot emerged just as the policy review fell into stasis along with just about everything else in international politics. Nossal is going to have to write a sequel. What kind of sequel it is may have to wait until we see what Donald Trump does with his allies — or to us.