

Branch-plant mentality in defence too

I went to Halifax last weekend and got cold and depressed. The cold came from the weather and the depression from the navy, or, more accurately, the lack of it.

The reason for my trip was a naval seminar at the Maritime Warfare School put on by Canada's Institute for Strategic Studies. We sat for two days and heard talks on Soviet and U.S. naval policy, nuclear weapons at sea and such arcana as sonar, mine warfare, computer mumbo-jumbo and the like.

We listened to U.S., British and Canadian naval officers; we saw slides of hi-tech systems. It all seemed like a real naval conference. Yet behind this facade was a deeply disturbing current of unreality. Here we were discussing Canada's maritime strategy, we a nation with the world's second-longest coastline and one that had the world's third-largest navy in 1945.

Canada would defend the North Atlantic sea lanes in wartime, we were told; police the high Arctic; sweep the way for our CAST brigade going to Norway; guard our fisheries; keep our ports open against mining and generally aid NATO. Finally, shockingly to me, a retired admiral stood up and almost shouted, "Canadians don't care about defence."

He was painfully right and his outburst brought us to reality. To perform all of the above missions, Canada has only four 1970s-technology destroyers; our remaining 16 destroyers and three subs are dangerous antiquities unfit for wartime duty. Even these four relatively modern warships have no defence against anti-ship missiles. Four destroyers and not a single minesweeper to keep our ports open.



ERIC MARGOLIS

Another officer was dead right when he told me: "It's another example of our branch-plant mentality. Let the Americans defend us." And he went on to emphasize that Canada has not only the lowest defence spending in NATO, in terms of GNP, but also the lowest investment in research and development. What this means is we lack not only the national will to defend ourselves but the vital drive to explore and innovate.

Seeing our rich land naked and vulnerable was not the only depressing vista in Halifax. Equally distressing, at least on a human level, was being surrounded by Canadian military men from the three services.

Here I saw the finest of Canadians — quiet, modest professionals with patriotism in their hearts and steel in their backs. These were the "old" Canadians, French and English; big, tough men; the kind who would buy you a beer — or punch you out if you insulted their country. Men with guts and loyalty to one another and the nation. Not Perrier-sipping peacekeepers but warriors, the kind of men who, in World War II, made Canada respected everywhere.

We did not, at the seminar, see any "new Canadian-

ans," those wonderfully Armani-suited bureaucrats from Ottawa with little flowers on their oh-so-narrow lapels, brows furrowed with deep concern for Ethiopia and equal compensation. Thank God. The rest of the world may see us as neutered, feminized quiche eaters; jellyfish on every issue. Not in Halifax.

Give me any day the company of fighting men. The majority of Canadians, who have unfortunately never experienced military service, will never understand the camaraderie, the sense of family, the honesty and goodness that exist in a military unit. Trite or not, our warriors do have virtue not usually found among civilians.

These fine men, and women, have been told to defend the nation with their blood. And yet, as in the shameful case of the navy, we have denied them the arms, equipment and numbers to do so. They are expected to risk their lives, and their prime years, performing missions that they know to be largely a charade. What a waste of some of our best citizens.

I asked one naval officer how he would feel putting to sea in a 30-year-old rustbucket in wartime. "It would be suicide," he replied, "but it's my duty — someone has to do it." No branch-plant mentality for this sailor.

The whole sad business reminded me of a famous description made of the British Army after the battle of the Inkerman during the Crimean War. All of its senior officers became lost in fog; the battle was fought and won by subalterns. "An army of lions, led by asses," said the *Times*. So we might add, of our own armed forces, "An army of lions armed by asses."