

Ottawa's naval gazing

The news yesterday that Canada would acquire 30-50 helicopters for its warships at a cost of \$2 billion will not, one suspects, make an entry into Great Moments in Naval History. Still, any news about defence in nearly-disarmed Canada commands interest and, yes, even hope.

Canada's new defence minister, Perrin Beatty, a landlubber more familiar with spreadsheets than canvas, was making his first important plunge into military affairs, a topic rarely mentioned at all in Ottawa these days. Speaking from Vancouver, Beatty announced that Canada's aging fleet of Sea King anti-submarine helicopters would finally be replaced by a new "aircraft."

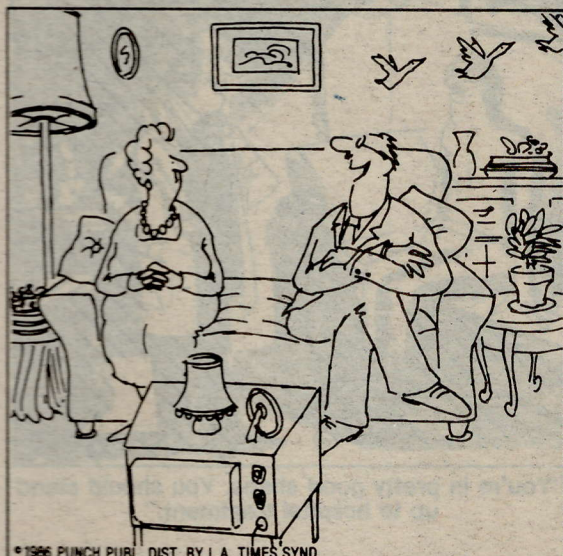
Not a moment too soon. The Sea Kings, excellent and robust machines, were deployed 23 years ago and threaten to fall apart from old age. They are a danger to both pilots and the ships that carry them.

The new "aircraft" — and this word was used to leave room for the unlikely development of a tilting plane light enough to operate from frigates — will embody state-of-the-art anti-sub and anti-surface warfare technology, including dipping sonar and targeting radar. Fine, so far.

Unfortunately, the lights will not be burning late tonight at Soviet naval headquarters. As usual, Brian Mulroney's latest defence initiative has more to do with politics than concern for the nation's shamefully inadequate defences. Canada's security and the safety of its military personnel are once again sacrificed to political smoke and mirrors.

There are many helicopters that would fill Canada's requirements; most are available, off-the-shelf, within a short lead time. Our NATO partners have a variety of such projects well advanced. But

Punch



"I still say this country is not all bad if we can produce reruns like this one."

ERIC MARGOLIS



this is too simple for Ottawa. Instead, seven potential Canadian manufacturers of helicopters will each been given around \$10 million to "study" the project.

It's no coincidence that these firms are located in regions considered vital in the next elections.

Studying the obvious and reinventing the wheel will take, according to Ottawa's estimate, at least three years. Then a manufacturer will be selected and the \$2 billion project begun. The helicopters are scheduled to enter into squadron service sometime "in the mid-1990s."

Anyone who believes such rosy predictions should be keelhauled. Canada's infamous frigate replacement program is years behind schedule and millions over estimates. The new "Trump" program to upgrade Tribal class frigates will also likely run into long delays from politicking, bureaucratic inertia and lack of technological know-how. We can thus expect the "New Shipborne Aircraft" project to suffer similar problems.

Nor is it likely that our long-suffering Navy will ever see the proposed 30-50 aircraft promised yesterday. Budget cuts and fiscal reality will ensure that the buy will be reduced by half.

Ten years hence, when the helicopters finally go into squadron service, they will be technologically out of date and probably unable to deal with new Soviet advances in submarine quieting and acoustic countermeasures.

Long delays ensure that military equipment will be obsolescent by the time it is deployed. The only question is which will be more out of date by the time they are deployed: The helicopters or the ships that are to carry them? Another certainty: Their cost, already estimated at \$40-50 million per unit in 1986 dollars, could well increase by 50% thanks to delays and dithering.

So, full steam ahead for politics and damn the torpedos of military necessity. People from Halifax to Winnipeg will think for the next three years that they will be getting the big contract — coincidentally, right up to election time. Once that's over, the project can be cancelled, cut back or delayed. Or the Liberals will be stuck with finding the money to pay for Mulroney's honey-voiced promises. Promises, one should note, that have never been kept.

All those Tory pledges to rebuild Canada's defences have proven to be so much hot air. Mulroney and his predecessor and political think-alike, Pierre Trudeau, have assured that come 1995 Canada will have no more than 10 warships with which to guard the world's second-longest coastline.

(Claire Hoy is on vacation)