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New book pleads for fix to Canada's dysfunctional military procurement system

By Matthew Fisher

Nossal calls for a bipartisan solution but there is zero chance that even an exceptionally brave Canadian politician would dare embrace such an...

The new book *Charlie Foxtrot: Fixing Defence Procurement in Canada* is a "cri de coeur" for political leaders to forge a bipartisan approach when deciding what to buy for the Canadian Armed Forces.

The author, Kim Nossal, is not delusional. The Queen's University professor recognizes that for this to happen "involves a considerable leap of faith." However, given how procurement blunders have "degraded the Canadian military," he argues a better way must be found to replace them than the largely dysfunctional procurement system that exists at present.

Charlie Foxtrot - military shorthand for "clusterf-" - is particularly relevant today because the Liberal government is seemingly intent on equaling if not surpassing the their Conservative predecessors' brutal mishandling of the multi-billion dollar programme to finally buy new fighter jets.

It begins with a fascinating account of several of Canada's worst procurement cock-ups, starting with the production of the Ross rifle, the standard weapon used by Canadian troops during the First World War. Canada's path to buying the Ross can be traced back to the Boer War, when Ottawa was unable to buy Lee-Enfields because Britain was unable to make enough for its own troops. This angered militia minister Sir Frederick Borden, whose son, Harold, was killed in South Africa in 1900. Borden set about correcting the problem by having Canada make a rifle of its own.

The Ross rifle worked beautifully in pristine conditions, but in the mud of northern France and Belgium, the weapon proved impossible to operate. It was too long to carry easily in the trenches and its bayonet would often fall off. Worst of all, it would jam when dirty.

Nossal recaps other fiascos: the ill-starred Avro Arrow, the army's thin-skinned Iltis jeep, the Royal Canadian Navy's purchase of used British submarines and the tawdry politicization of the EH101 helicopter-buy in the 1990s (which appears to be the template for the current government's approach on fighter jets).

Jean Chretien promised that, if elected, he would kill the EH101 project - and he did. Aides to the former PM have boasted the cancellation was worth it, since the promise helped his election in '93. The move cost taxpayers more than half a billion dollars in penalties and delayed by decades our badly-needed purchase of new helicopters.

As the book notes, it was Chretien's Liberals who got Canada involved in the consortium to build Lockheed Martin's F-35, a file that has been trouble for each subsequent government. Nossal takes no formal position on whether Canada should buy the F-35, Boeing's Super Hornet or some other fighter jet, but the professor concludes it is "a virtual certainty" that Canada will be excluded from the F-35's multi-billion-dollar global value-chain if it does not buy the jet,

and argues any other selection would create "serious questions about a future Canadian role in North American air defence."

Procurement mistakes are not uniquely Canadian, of course. The Australians have been bedevilled with costly fixes for their submarines, built at home rather than bought for less off-the-shelf. The British have been buying nuclear submarines and aircraft carriers that they cannot afford. The Americans have squandered billions of dollars developing platforms and weapons the Pentagon then never actually purchased.

It has not only been the politicians who are to blame for Canada's politicized procurement process. The media treat procurement as political theatre. There is little dispassionate analysis of the choices and the dilemmas involved in buying equipment that must last for decades in an environment where technological advances can render many acquisitions quickly obsolete.

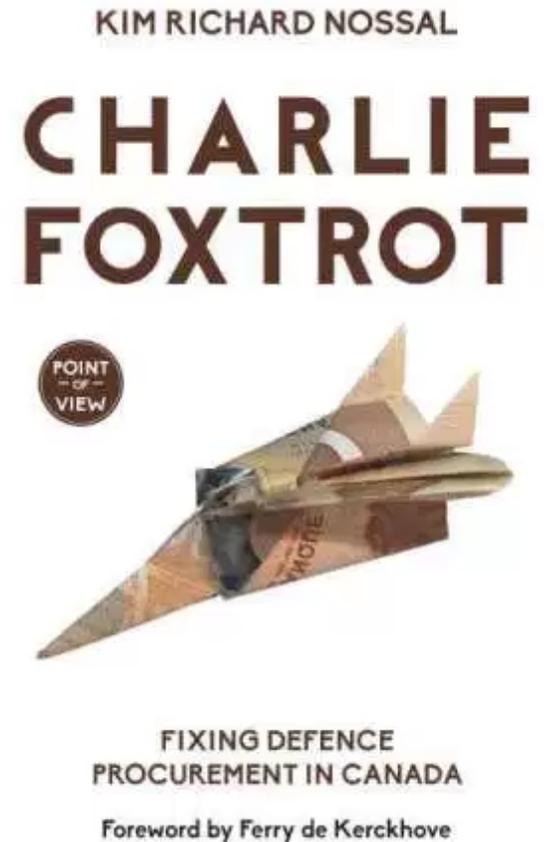
The government, for its part, has never hired enough procurement specialists, a problems that bogs down every purchasing process. Nossal argues that if Canada matched what its allies spend on a GNP basis, a lot of these problems would disappear. As it is, he writes, too many programs are always chasing too few dollars.

Nossal's inevitable conclusion is that the "root cause" of Canada's procurement failures has been an absence of political leadership. Governments have been able to get away with botching procurement for years because "the consequences of decisions made by one Parliament will not be felt until much later, usually well past the next general election."

The only practical solution, Nossal says, is for Canada's two leading political parties to create a bipartisan approach to defence procurement similar to the consensus that Australia's parliamentarians have had for years, and to the relatively non-partisan American approach to buying big-ticket military items. There is zero chance that even an exceptionally brave Canadian politician would dare embrace such an obvious and honourable idea. Still, Charlie Foxtrot is worth reading to understand how much Canada would benefit if its leaders confounded voters and actually took the high road.

Correction: The production of the Ross rifle was instigated by militia minister Sir Frederick Borden. This column has been updated.

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