

ALL IN FAVOUR, SAY AYE

The lack of debate during last November's election about matters of national security is neither puzzling nor discouraging. Perhaps there is nothing to debate about.

BY KIM RICHARD NOSSAL

WHILE MUCH EMOTIONAL heat was generated on the issue of the Canadian-American relationship during the 1988 Canadian general elections, other facets of foreign policy were virtually ignored in the long seven weeks of campaigning. This was particularly true of defence policy. To be sure, there were initial indications that national security issues would play a major role in the electoral contest. In 1987, the peace movement had chosen the 1988 election campaign to be the target of an extensive riding-by-riding public awareness effort – the so-called “Peace Pledge” campaign. The Progressive Conservative government under Brian Mulroney had brought out a White Paper on Defence in 1987 outlining a set of policy options that were both hawkish and expensive. In particular, the proposal to purchase nuclear-powered submarines promised to fuel debate. Finally, the New Democratic Party, the only political party in Canada to offer a genuinely alternative defence policy, had been surging in public opinion polls in the year prior to the elections.

In the event, however, defence policy did not become an important issue during the election; indeed it was hardly mentioned. The “Peace Pledge” campaign gained little support and collapsed. Protests by peace groups over the nuclear-powered submarines proved to be ragged and ineffectual. Neither of the opposition parties fixed their sights on the submarines in anything but a cursory fashion; the free trade agreement proved a more solid and rewarding target for criticism. Both the Liberal and Progressive

Conservative leaders did allow themselves the indulgence of a couple of snide digs at the NDP's defence platform. And for his part, the NDP leader, Ed Broadbent, made only a half-hearted effort to flog the party's 1969 promise to withdraw from the North Atlantic Treaty Organization and the North American Aerospace Defence command agreement; most of the time, one had the distinct sense that he wished that the promise, even as revised in April 1988 to make it more palatable, would just go away. In all, the political exchanges on security policy during the campaign were both vapid and superficial.

The superficiality of the discussions on defence in 1988 was by no means out of the ordinary. Not since the debate over the acceptance of nuclear weapons for the Canadian forces in 1962 and 1963 has defence been the subject of extended and spirited concern during an election. Indeed, in the last generation, election-time discussions of defence have, without exception, been lacking in depth and sophistication. Important technological developments, changes in defence doctrine, and shifts in Canada's strategic role in the Western alliance, have all emerged in the last twenty-five years without Canadians having been engaged in a discussion about these changes and their implications. Instead, what the electorate has been offered by both governors and would-be governors during election campaigns is little more than a periodic mumbling match posing as political debate.

AT FIRST BLUSH, ONE MIGHT BE both puzzled and concerned that

defence policy is not the subject of election debate. After all, defence policy – the security of the polity itself – cuts to the very heart of a political community's existence. Moreover, a great deal of treasure is invested annually in this element of public policy. Why does such a policy area, by its very importance, not foster more public discussion? There are also normative concerns raised by the absence of debate: is not the public discussion of issues of concern to the community as a whole the essence of a healthy and vibrant democratic polity? Could it not be suggested that election campaigns provide the most appropriate forum for the airing of a country's defence options, and an excellent opportunity to review and discuss aspects of national security? Indeed, could it not be argued further that politicians have a responsibility to encourage, not discourage, debate among an informed electorate on matters of such importance as a country's security policy and its general orientation to the international system? In short, is the failure of our governors to debate defence issues not an abdication of responsibility to the nation?

Let me propose another perspective: that the lack of debate on security matters in Canada is neither puzzling nor discouraging: we have no debate because there is nothing to debate. On defence policy, Canadians are in unusual agreement and that is not such a bad thing.

This argument rests on the assumption that serious political debate is not possible unless there is serious political conflict within a

community. And serious political conflict requires that at least two conditions be present. First, there must be a clash of opinion on an issue between significant numbers of individuals within the political community. Division on issues cannot be at the margins, involving but a few members of the political community. Second, clashes of opinion tend to be serious when they are deeply rooted in the concrete, rather than the symbolic, interests of the protagonists. In other words, when each side's position in a political conflict is grounded in a desire to protect its real interests against the directly harmful effects of the other side's policy preferences, that conflict tends to be more intractable. If these conditions are not present, one is unlikely to have serious political division. Instead, one has consensus, which hampers debate: for there can be no debate of any meaning when one fundamentally agrees with one's opponent.

IT CAN BE ARGUED THAT NEITHER of these conditions is present in the case of Canadian defence policy. First, there is no clash of opinion over defence priorities that involves significant numbers of Canadians. In effect, what some have called the “counter-consensus” in foreign policy is simply not there. For example, despite the proliferation of peace groups in Canada in the 1980s, the peace movement has been singularly unable to convince large numbers of Canadians that a firm attachment to NATO and NORAD – the traditional pillars of Canadian security – is sufficiently wrong-headed that they should do something concrete to change our defence posture.