On July 16, Defence Minister Peter MacKay announced that Canada was going on a shopping spree. If he had asked Canadians for a shopping list, with the added information that we could now spend $16 billion, I think the list might have looked more like the one put together by the Alternative Budget Coalition:

- $2 billion for affordable housing;
- $500 million for a guaranteed farm income program;
- $89 million to further the ‘creative economy’;
- $551 million for renewable energy;
- $1.7 billion to transfer to provinces for affordable daycare;
- $615 to the Official Development Assistance program for international aid (Canada would spend only 0.7% of our GNI);
- $1 billion to extend EI benefits to 60% of the worker’s best 12 weeks of income;
- $1.5 billion to extend EI benefits to those who have worked 360 hours;
- $2.73 billion to give new income-tested grants to post secondary students;
- $2 billion to give to provinces to reduce poverty;
- $500 million for a green manufacturing fund;
- $847 million to increase single pensioners’ GIS benefits by 15%.

Using Green Party budget priorities, we could tweak the list to invest a lot in renewable energy and energy efficiency, and modern transportation, including high-speed rail.

Instead, the Defence Minister announced the purchase of 65 new fighter jets. Peter MacKay enthused about the jets. Lockheed Martin’s F-35 jets are exciting new toys. They can take off and land on aircraft carriers. They have stealth coating. They can engage in air-to-air combat and rely on mid-air re-fueling.

Many have argued, including Salt Spring Island resident Michael Byers in the Toronto Star, that none of those attributes are priorities in Canada. We don’t have aircraft carriers. We have no plausible security scenario in which air-to-air combat is anticipated. (The Battle of Britain was a long time ago.) And stealth coating? Are we planning a surprise invasion?

True, our aging CF-18s need to be replaced. Our large geography has always led to a priority choice for two-engine planes, so if a plane is in a remote spot and loses an engine, the pilot can get to a safe place to land. The F-35s are single engine planes. Asked what will happen if the engine fails, Peter MacKay replied ‘it won’t.’ We need planes for search and rescue. The F-35 is not appropriate for search and rescue.

But why are we spending so much now, within months of when the Harper government announced a freeze on defence spending as part of deficit fighting? Where is the money coming from in that frozen budget, or has the thaw begun?

The answer has much more to do with our early entanglement in the development of this fighter jet. This purchase is not a case of walking into a showroom and picking the design that works best. In fact, these planes are not in any show room. They are still in the testing phase. Canada, under previous Liberal governments, signed-on as a junior partner in the development of this plane. This purchase is not a case of walking into a showroom and picking the design that works best. In fact, these planes are not in any show room. They are still in the testing phase. Canada, under previous Liberal governments, signed-on as a junior partner in the development of this plane. While the US took the largest share of the costs of developing this new fighter, other governments signed-on as well, since 2001 when Lockheed Martin won the bid to develop the plane. Canada’s involvement started with a $10 million
‘donation’ to be considered an ‘informed partner.’ In 2002, we threw another $150 million into the pot to qualify our industries to bid for contracts for plane components.

Like many military contracts in the US, the costs of the F-35 have spiralled and are way over budget. In March 2010, US Defence Secretary Robert Gates told the Congress that it was ‘unacceptable’ that the F-35 is 50% over-budget. Costs of developing the new fighter jets are approaching $300 billion. With bureaucratic baffle-gab that takes your breath away, the Pentagon critique of the fighter jet programme concluded: ‘affordability is no longer embraced as a core pillar.’

So, it seems Canada is spending money we don’t have for planes we don’t need. And it seems we are doing this to hold our place in some macho military solidarity with the Pentagon.

The opportunity costs of $16 billion for fighter jets are enormous—in lost opportunities to reduce poverty, create jobs, protect health care and fight climate change.

None of this has been debated or discussed in the House. And it was not in the 2010 budget. I will work with other parties to reverse this sale and direct priorities to those Canadians value.

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