

Canadian Department of Peace ?

Hamilton Spectator, January 2007, page A15

Early last December an assortment of concerned Hamilton citizens gathered to discuss the world situation. Many had deep misgivings about the war in Afghanistan. During the evening all agreed that bringing peace to a war-torn country was a worthwhile enterprise, but they questioned whether tanks and bullets were the right tools to make the Canadian mission a success. There was also some concern about motive. Many felt unsure whether our troops were there to better the lives of the people or whether the goal had more to do with a Trans Afghanistan Pipeline.

Feeling confused and unable to discern how to be helpful, the group turned their attention to the controversial notion that Canada should establish a Department of Peace. This daring suggestion, championed by Senator Douglas Roche and former Foreign Minister Lloyd Axworthy, has sparked considerable support in Vancouver, Victoria, and among some bureaucrats in Ottawa. Revolutionary as it may sound, such an idea is already being discussed in some eleven countries including the U.S. and Japan. One government-watcher recalled there were cries of disbelief and ridicule years ago when it was first suggested that Canada should establish a Department of the Environment. Yet today nearly everyone understands the need for such a body.

“What might a Department of Peace look like?” someone asked.

Since the topic had been presented a few weeks earlier, at the Fifth Annual Peace Education Conference at McMaster, the reply came quickly. “As a start, a Department with a Minister could help pick up and coordinate the various human security mandates presently spread between Foreign Affairs, National Defence, the Canadian International Development Agency and the Department of Justice, many of whose interests occasionally conflict. At the same time it could provide government with better access to civil society.”

Everyone wanted to know who would pay for such a department. They were told that a very small percentage of the military budget could be used to make each branch more efficient, at the same time boosting Canada’s efforts in the field of human rights. Apparently the government presently spends some \$20 billion a year (up from \$16.3 billion) on what it calls peace and security, yet very little is directed towards peace. Most of the money goes into the armed forces. Whether this money is wisely spent or not is an open question. While soldiers generally win battles, it is civil society which largely determines the political outcome. Since wars today are watched by television around the globe, decisions affecting the military are vastly different from colonial days when most of our defence institutions were established. Government actions of every kind are now routinely exposed to public scrutiny; hence the use of military force to achieve political ends has profound limits, especially when an exit strategy is far from clear.

To bring Canada’s peacekeeping efforts more in line with bold new initiatives being taken around the world, a Canadian Department of Peace would gradually address five major areas of concern. It would work with the United Nations to strengthen human and economic rights. It would press for the abolition of nuclear weapons and control of small arms. It would support the role of women and children internationally, aiming to reduce domestic violence and inter-religious conflict. It would promote peace education at every level. Like Germany and some other European countries it would start to train a civilian peace service for use as an alternative force available to send to trouble spots. The evening meeting ended with a formal proposal that a Hamilton Chapter of the Working Group for a Federal Department of Peace be founded. Since that time the United Nations Association in Canada (Hamilton Branch) has endorsed the proposal and the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) has offered to help coordinate the actions of others who wish to join. Anyone interested in exploring the matter further is invited to attend the next meeting to be held on February 22nd at the Meeting House, 7 Butty Place, Hamilton.

The Canadian Department of Peace website is: www.departmentofpeace.ca