

# The Protection of Canadian Sovereignty

## A Footnote to Murray Thomson's "Militarism"

**Don Page**

Murray Thomson's article (*HP*, Autumn 2008) draws attention to the ambivalence of Canadians concerning their military affairs, and to the apparent rise of militarism in this country. While not disagreeing with Thomson's general thesis, I wish to highlight an aspect of Canada's military role which he largely ignores: that is, the protection of Canadian sovereignty, a role that puts the objectives of our military at potential odds with those of some of our allies, most importantly, the United States. It is my purpose here to illustrate how it has been clear for a long time that Canadians have reason to be concerned about foreign intentions regarding territory that Canada claims to be its own. I will do this with particular reference to the Radarsat satellites to which Mr Thomson refers.

In the summer of 1969, the American ice-breaking tanker "USS Manhattan" traversed the "northwest passage" to the consternation of all Canadians and their Canadian government which claims sovereignty over these waters. Canada had only been "informed" of this American exercise for which official permission had not been requested. At that time I had just been appointed to head a new Canadian Radar Research program at the Communications Research Centre in Ottawa, with a mandate to replace the recently terminated radar studies program at the National Research Council, and to support Canadian military and civilian radar needs.

One of my early decisions was to establish a program to study the application to Canadian needs of the new Synthetic Aperture Radar

(SAR) technology. Our research was supported by funding from the Department of National Defence (DND) who were interested in the potential use of SAR technology on aircraft being planned for surveillance of Canada's arctic and coastal waters. In due course, our study also became of interest to Dr Lawrence Morley, head of the Canada Centre for Remote Sensing (CCRS). At that time, CCRS earth imaging capability relied on NASA's Landsat program which used satellite-borne optical imaging that was limited by cloud-cover and which could only be used in daylight. Thus, both CCRS and DND had reason to want access to SAR imaging technology using both aircraft and satellites.

*Too bad all the people  
who know how to run  
the country are busy  
driving  
cabs and cutting hair.*

George Burns

Through the early and mid-1970s, a co-operative program developed between CCRS and our DND-funded program at CRC, based initially on our common interest in using SAR imaging from aircraft. A milestone was reached when Dr Morley, through his relationship with NASA, was able to involve our CRC group in the Seasat project at

NASA's Jet Propulsion Laboratories. Seasat was to be the first-ever satellite to carry a SAR imaging sensor and, with DND funding, we at CRC undertook to build an experimental SAR image processor to be ready for the launch of Seasat in 1978.

For a period of about a month after Seasat's launch, the CRC processor produced several dozen very good Seasat radar images over Canadian territory and coastal waters – when suddenly the US government clamped a security classification on this program, so denying

Canada further access to Seasat data. It was this decision, reflecting US military sensitivities, that led to a concerted effort by CCRS and DND to develop a centre of excellence in Canadian industry where we could produce our own SAR systems on aircraft and satellites. As a result, we at CRC transferred our expertise to MacDonald Dettwiler & Associates (MDA) who then began to receive Canadian government funding to develop this expertise, resulting in their construction of Radarsat I, a satellite that Murray Thomson correctly states was launched by NASA in exchange for their privileged access to its imagery. However, what follows in his argument is misleading.

The Canadian government went on to fund the development of a second generation radar surveillance satellite; thus Radarsat-2 was launched in December 2007, dubbed by the press as Canada's "jewel in space", and described on MDA's website as follows (in part): "*Radarsat-2 is Canada's second-generation commercial Synthetic Aperture Radar (SAR) satellite and is designed with powerful technical advancements that will provide enhanced information for applications such as environmental monitoring, ice mapping, resource mapping, disaster management, and marine surveillance... offers new imaging capabilities... a finer resolution (3m)... flexibility, polarization, and left- and right-looking imaging.*"

Mr Thomson does not mention that the United States, being concerned about the greater capabilities of Radarsat-2, especially its higher resolution, responded negatively to our request to launch it, with the result that Canada had to ask Russia to do this for us. Tellingly, within a few weeks of the launch of Radarsat-2 in Kazakhstan, the shareholders of MDA were presented with a very lucrative takeover offer from a major US military hardware contractor, Alliant Techsystems, to buy MDA and its assets including Radarsat-2. News of this potential US takeover sparked a storm of public concern, with demands that federal industry minister Jim Prentice block this US threat to Canada's ability to independently monitor its territory. As the

government scientist who brought SAR technology to Canada, I participated in this effort by writing an open letter to Minister Prentice in April 2008, detailing our history of difficulties with the US on this matter. I concluded with the following points:

*... as early as 1978, it became evident that the US government was opposed to Canada having this capability. This US sensitivity was also shown in their refusal to launch Radarsat-2. ... Considering the US refusal to accept Canada's sovereignty claims, and in view of the history of Canada-US relations around this surveillance technology, can there be any doubt that the sale of MDA to US industry will put an end to our ability to obtain the information we need to support our sovereignty objectives?... On the table is a lucrative US offer that MDA shareholders can't refuse. If this sale is not stopped the beneficiaries will be not only these shareholders but also, ... the US government and its aspirations in the Arctic. The losers will be Canada and our national interest, now and in the future, as well as Canadian taxpayers to the tune of billions of dollars when measured over the decades.*

Readers who followed this issue in the news media will know that Minister Prentice blocked the US purchase of this unique and valuable Canadian industry, for which he was congratulated by all parties in Parliament. Indeed, it was the only time such a takeover of any Canadian industry has been stopped. My concern with Murray Thomson's discussion of Canada's military is that he seems to overlook the issue of Canadian sovereignty, and his reference to Radarsat-2 wrongly implies that the US has similar access to it as it had to its less capable forerunner.

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