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Our navy needs more

Equipment is wearing out and replacements are not due for years, -if ever

Last week, the Canadian navy celebrated its 100th birthday. On both coasts, parades marked the occasion, but it was also a solemn time — just the day before, a Canadian sailor had been killed in Afghanistan. Petty Officer Second Class Craig Blake, a sailor trained to defuse explosive devices, lost his life to a roadside bomb blast near Kandahar. He was the 143rd Canadian service member to fall in that conflict and the first sailor.

Blake now joins forever the proud but painful history of the Canadian navy. Canadian sailors faced danger and suffered severe losses while escorting convoys during both World Wars, kept up a constant watch for Soviet nuclear submarines during the Cold War and have served in the Persian Gulf for two decades, most especially since the 9/11 attacks. A Canadian warship is a formidable demonstration of our national resolve and determination to bring order and stability to chaotic parts of the world and to ensure that our own coastal waters remain safe and sovereign. For all their hard work, our sailors richly deserve the attention and credit they have recently received.

As a way of marking the occasion of the centennial, Defence Minister Peter MacKay announced that Canadian naval officer uniforms would soon bring back “the loop,” a twist on the uppermost stripe of an officer’s rank braid that is common amongst European and Commonwealth navies. Canadian naval officer uniforms have not included the loop since the disastrous forced unification of the Canadian Forces in 1968. Its return is a nod to the

navy's proud heritage and will no doubt be well received by the officer corps. The government should be congratulated for making the gesture. But a gesture is all it is.

Canada's navy is still in desperate need of modernization. The Harper government has made much of its support of the Armed Forces but must now live up to its own boasts. Clearly, given the fiscal constraints the government faces, there will be little appetite for large outlays on expensive equipment (and warships are particularly expensive). Nonetheless, if the government wishes to even preserve the navy's current capabilities, investments must be made immediately as equipment is wearing out and replacements are not due for years, if ever.

The navy's destroyers are almost 40 years old. Of the four originally built, one has already been retired. The remaining three don't have much further service left in them. Replacements must be decided on now — warships take years to go from the design stage to completion. Alternatively, the navy could purchase foreign-built warships (both the British and Americans are currently building advanced designs that, while pricey, would provide Canada with excellent vessels). Such an option would save time until delivery and has the advantage of providing us with proven hardware, but would be less attractive to federal politicians eager to parcel out work to Canadian firms. Ultimately, whether or not the ships are Canadianmade is immaterial. The key is fast action.

Sadly, other parts of the fleet are little better off. Our two remaining supply and support ships are even older than our destroyers. Plans to replace them with larger, multi-purpose vessels have been repeatedly delayed. Our 12 frigates are approaching 20 years of age and while capable of serving for much longer will require technological upgrades and refits to remain at their current high calibre. The government has announced such a plan. But when will it begin?

There are other such questions. The government has said they would procure as many as eight Arctic patrol vessels. How far along

is this process? There had been talk of upgrading our Kingston-class patrol ships. Will this happen? When will the replacements for our decrepit Sea King helicopters go into service? How long until all four of our submarines are operational once again?

The Conservatives have done a lot to restore pride and capability to the Canadian Forces, including giving the army the tools it has needed to wage war so competently in Afghanistan. For this, they should be lauded. But the job is not yet done. And there is no better time to begin the process of equipping our navy for another generation of proud service than on the occasion of its 100th birthday.