

Angry MPs oppose missile defence: Backbenchers slam Pratt over planned talks with US

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Ottawa Citizen: Backbench Liberals are rebelling against their government's plan to begin missile-defence talks with the United States, saying Defence Minister David Pratt is "sticking his neck out" by forging ahead without caucus support. The MPs reacted angrily to Mr. Pratt's move to seek more information on the plan after CanWest News Service disclosed yesterday that a Canadian defence department document last year warned the missile-defence shield risks paving the way for the placement of weapons into space.

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By Tim Naumetz

Backbench Liberals are rebelling against their government's plan to begin missile-defence talks with the United States, saying Defence Minister David Pratt is "sticking his neck out" by forging ahead without caucus support.

The MPs reacted angrily to Mr. Pratt's move to seek more information on the plan after CanWest News Service disclosed yesterday that a Canadian defence department document last year warned the missile-defence shield risks paving the way for the placement of weapons into space.

Three Liberal backbenchers said Canada should have nothing to do with the "weaponization" of space and warned that once Canada becomes involved, even in just information-gathering discussions, it might be impossible to withdraw from the scheme.

Liberal MP Bonnie Brown slammed Mr. Pratt for planning to write U.S. Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld to begin the process and questioned whether Canada could trust any information it gets from the White House, considering the U.S failure to back up claims Iraq was concealing weapons of mass destruction.

"When they tell you something, will it be true?" said Ms. Brown. "There is the whole question of what they told us about Iraq, which has proven to be untrue."

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Ms. Brown, Toronto Liberal MP Charles Caccia and Montreal Liberal MP Marlene Jennings said the government should drop its plan to begin an information exchange with the U.S., arguing Mr. Pratt failed to consult widely with caucus members.

"I don't know any numbers (of MPs opposed), but I think that this minister is sticking his neck out pretty far without checking with us," said Ms. Brown. "He has been the chair of the defence committee and as such has developed, in his few years in public life, a very military-influence view of the world."

Ms. Brown was also worried the defence system will restart a new arms race and said the government should wait to see if President George W. Bush survives the upcoming U.S. elections in November before beginning any talks with the Americans.

A Department of National Defence Department report last spring said a "significant risk" associated with the missile-defence plan is "its reinforcement of trends toward the weaponization of space."

The system, to cost an estimated \$100 billion, will use ground-based interceptor rockets to form a defence shield against missile attacks launched against the U.S. The interceptors would be based in California and Alaska.

Another Canadian military analysis of the missile shield, produced last year, determined that putting weapons into orbit would greatly increase the ability of the U.S. system to destroy incoming warheads.

Ms. Jennings said she is against any proposal that would lead to the deployment of weapons in space.

"I do not want space to be weaponized," she said, noting that Canada has held a longstanding position opposing the deployment of weapons in space.

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"As far as I'm concerned, any discussions that should be taking place is: There are no weapons testing -- there is no weapons testing whatsoever that happens in space. I'm opposed to any kind of increase in weapons, weaponry, in the world."

Mr. Caccia, a former cabinet minister, said Prime Minister Paul Martin's cabinet must prove there is a threat of attack against Canada before it begins any discussions that could lead to Canadian participation in the system. He said the U.S. must also first prove the system will not lead to weapons in space.

"For the life of me, I can't see see anyone in the world who would want to attack Canada," Mr. Caccia said.