



House of Commons
CANADA

Standing Committee on Fisheries and Oceans

FOPO • NUMBER 012 • 1st SESSION • 39th PARLIAMENT

EVIDENCE

Tuesday, October 3, 2006

Chair

Mr. Gerald Keddy

Also available on the Parliament of Canada Web Site at the following address:

<http://www.parl.gc.ca>

Standing Committee on Fisheries and Oceans

Tuesday, October 3, 2006

• (1200)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Gerald Keddy (South Shore—St. Margaret's, CPC)): Pursuant to Standing Orders 110 and 111, I call the meeting to order.

I welcome Mr. George Da Pont, who is the Commissioner of the Canadian Coast Guard. Welcome to the fisheries and oceans committee, Mr. Da Pont.

If you have an opening statement, we'd love to hear it.

Mr. George Da Pont (Commissioner, Canadian Coast Guard, As an Individual): Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman.

Good morning to you and to the committee members. It's a pleasure to be here again, albeit in a different capacity.

[Translation]

First, let me say it is both a great honour and a great responsibility to have been appointed Commissioner of the Canadian Coast Guard. I recognize that I have been asked to take on the leadership of a national institution that provides a range of critical services and has the confidence of Canadians.

[English]

The Chair: Excuse me, could you hold for a minute? We need to get some translation working here.

[Translation]

M. George Da Pont: I also know that much of that confidence is due to the professionalism and dedication of the men and women who work in the coast guard. Canadians recognize and appreciate their work. The most recent example of that recognition is Les Palmer who, later this month, will be receiving the cross of valour from the Governor General for an exceptional act of bravery in 2004. He will be only the 20th recipient of this prestigious award since it was established in 1972, and the first coast guard recipient. We are all extremely proud of his accomplishment.

While his case is truly exceptional, there are examples almost every day of men and women in the coast guard helping their fellow citizens. The same can be said for the 5,000 dedicated volunteers who are part of the Coast Guard Auxiliary. In fact, just last week I gave a commissioner's commendation to four members of the Auxiliary for their work in rescuing some of the crew from a DND helicopter that crashed during a search and rescue exercise last July. We could not do our job as effectively without the Auxiliary.

It is examples such as these that bring home to me just how exceptional the coast guard is as an organization, and my

responsibility to ensure that this record of excellence in service continues.

I do not come into the job without some background with the coast guard. I have been a public servant for 25 years. My first exposure to the coast guard was in 2000 and 2001 when I was the Associate Regional Director General of the Maritime region of Fisheries and Oceans.

As you are undoubtedly aware, at that time regional coast guard operations reported through the DFO regional offices. It was then that I began to develop an appreciation of the range of activities in the field and the challenges facing the coast guard.

• (1205)

[English]

When I returned to Ottawa as assistant deputy minister for human resources, and a bit later for corporate services as well, I continued to work closely with the coast guard. In this role I was responsible for delivering on their key human resources, financial, and real property issues. In addition, the Canadian Coast Guard College reported to me during a portion of that period.

I was part of the team that established the coast guard as a special operating agency. With respect to real property issues, I worked closely with senior coast guard management on some of the challenges of maintaining the bases and trying to divest surplus property, to give a couple of examples.

I was also part of the efforts over the last few years to secure more funding for the coast guard, as were many others, including this committee, and of course the minister. I'm especially pleased with the additional funding for the national capital spending plan three years ago, the investments in fleet renewal reflected in the last two federal budgets, and the significant addition of new money this year to address some of our chronic operating shortfalls.

I want to thank all members of this committee for their strong support for additional funding over the years.

I believe these experiences and background have prepared me for my responsibilities, though of course, like anyone else coming into a new job, I also have much to learn.

As I'm sure the committee is aware, I had the opportunity to act in the job of commissioner for a number of months prior to my appointment. During that period I met with employees, unions, and members of the auxiliary in all parts of the country, as well as with representatives of the shipping industry and some of our other clients and stakeholders. Just last week I met with the senior leadership of the United States Coast Guard, with whom we have such a close and effective working relationship.

On the basis of these sessions and working together with the senior management team, we have established clear priorities for the coast guard for the next few years, as set out in our business plan. Our first priority is continued renewal of the coast guard fleet. While we have made some significant progress—the two new offshore science vessels and the eight new midshore patrol vessels were reconfirmed in the last budget—we still have very significant challenges with an aging fleet, particularly among our 40 large vessels. We're working on a coherent multi-year plan to renew the fleet and will be seeking support and funding for the next phase. At the same time, we're taking steps to ensure that the procurement processes for the new vessels that have been approved are moving ahead as quickly as possible.

Second, we want to focus on full implementation of special operating agency status. The objective of becoming a special operating agency was to enable the coast guard to focus exclusively on the delivery of its services and to give it more autonomy and identity within DFO. While we have begun that process, we are still at the initial stages.

We are working with both our internal and external clients to establish structured advisory bodies where we can discuss issues such as the level and cost of services. Indeed, we've recently re-established the National Marine Advisory Board with the commercial shipping industry, which had not met in over three years. A key issue for this group is addressing the longstanding issue of marine service fees: we have begun those discussions. As an SOA, we will also be seeking some new authorities, particularly for the management of our major capital.

Finally, we're planning additional measures to reinforce our identity, beginning with a memorial at the Coast Guard College to recognize all those who have lost their lives in the course of performing their duties.

Our third priority area is continued contribution to the overall government security agenda. The Canadian Coast Guard does not have a direct mandate for security; however, we do have a significant supporting role for those departments and agencies that have a direct mandate, such as the RCMP and the Canadian Border Services Agency.

We are part of a joint security program with the RCMP on the St. Lawrence and Great Lakes that has just begun: we provide the vessels and the mariners and the RCMP provides the enforcement authorities and personnel. Indeed, four of the new midshore patrol vessels I mentioned earlier will be devoted to this program. In addition, we participate in the marine security operation centres led by DND on both coasts, and we will be participating in the one the RCMP is establishing for the Great Lakes.

The information collected through our marine communications and vessel traffic network is one of several important sources for getting a comprehensive picture of marine domain awareness.

•(1210)

We will certainly continue to put a high priority on these initiatives and to participate, as appropriate, in government-wide security efforts.

Fourth is continuation of our various modernization initiatives. It always has been part of the coast guard's service delivery to take advantage of new technologies to improve the delivery of our services. This is something any efficient and effective organization should be doing. GPS and DGPS, the new automatic identification system for vessels, plastic buoys, and synthetic moorings are but a few examples of innovations that allow us to improve services, often at somewhat reduced operating costs once they are fully in place. However, implementing these innovations takes significant upfront investments, and there's a need to work closely with the recipients of our services—and sometimes our own staff, who quite frankly often have to be convinced that these new systems are worth the investment and are as reliable as those they are replacing. We are committed to moving forward with these initiatives in a sensible and collaborative fashion.

Finally, focusing on our people, I have to return to where I started, with the exceptional men and women who work in the coast guard. Like many organizations in government, ours has an aging workforce. In some of our key occupational groups the average age is getting uncomfortably close to 50. It takes four years at the Coast Guard College to develop an engineer and a navigator who is ready to join a vessel and 12 months to train an MCTS officer. I'm sure you can appreciate that this is only for beginning to take up the duties and that there's significant experience that has to be gained later.

These are only two examples. Over the next five to ten years we, like many other organizations, will see the retirement of many of our most experienced people. We need to take action now on career development and succession planning to ensure that we have the trained and experienced people we need to maintain our levels of service and keep the confidence of Canadians.

We have developed a plan to focus our efforts on these priorities while continuing to deliver our services to Canadians.

Those, Mr. Chairman, are our key priority areas, which are captured in our business plan. With them, I've concluded my opening remarks, and I'd be pleased to discuss these matters or any other issues you and the committee wish to raise.

The Chair: Merci, Monsieur Da Pont. We certainly appreciate your comments. I will say that's an excellent and very thorough discussion of some of the challenges the coast guard is facing. We appreciate it.

We will hear our first questioner, Mr. Byrne.

• (1215)

Hon. Gerry Byrne (Humber—St. Barbe—Baie Verte, Lib.): Thank you very much, Commissioner, for appearing before us. We wish you all the very best in the future.

One of the questions I'd like to raise, in terms of operational issues, is this. You've mentioned as one of your priorities an intention to continue to modernize and upgrade equipment and standards within the Canadian Coast Guard. One of the issues facing mariners.... I'll preface by saying that the Canadian Coast Guard is one of the few organizations of the Government of Canada that actually has a strong physical presence in peripheral regions, and coastal regions in particular, and it's why members of this committee particularly are engaged with the Canadian Coast Guard on a number of its initiatives and are well aware of its importance and stature in overall maritime operations.

One of the issues that have been raised concerning modernization of equipment is marine communications and traffic systems. Would you be able to comment for me as to whether, with upgrades in technology, it's the coast guard's intention to remove present facilities, to actually consolidate facilities and move to centralized locations as opposed to continuing in the regions?

Mr. George Da Pont: As you know, Mr. Chairman, at the moment we have 22 marine traffic and communication centres throughout the country. We have no plan to consolidate or reduce the number of centres. There is one centre in British Columbia, Tofino, where we have started to look at the possibility, but that has been in response to employees who are having difficulty finding affordable housing in the area and are experiencing significant travel costs. That's the only centre. We're working with employees and are looking at options, but certainly no decisions have been taken.

Hon. Gerry Byrne: Is it the coast guard's intention to remove Loran-C? There was a proposal at one point in time to vacate Loran-C in favour of GPS systems. There was an indication that the U.S. was moving to that service model. Are there any intentions to do so today?

Mr. George Da Pont: Certainly not today, but it is an issue I very much would like to focus on. In fact, it's one that I discussed just last week when I met with Admiral Allen, who heads up the U.S. Coast Guard. They have a position similar to ours in terms of Loran-C.

First of all, it's a system that's no longer used by navigators. It's used now primarily as a fallback system for aviators. So from the perspective of the coast guard, it no longer fits with our mandate, and I very much would like not to be running a Loran-C system.

The issue will be whether it's kept as a fallback system in North America, and we have an agreement with the United States where we are participating as part of that network. The U.S. Coast Guard also feels that it shouldn't be part of their network. So once the decision is made on whether or not to keep it as a fallback system, we obviously would look accordingly at our options.

For me, it's a very important consideration, because our Loran-C sites, both in Newfoundland and in British Columbia, are in very poor shape. If we keep them, we would have to invest, we estimate, around \$25 million to upgrade those facilities. Quite frankly, as commissioner of the coast guard, I'd have difficulty justifying that

investment from our budget for an item that is not central to our mandate.

Hon. Gerry Byrne: Mr. Da Pont, the GPS system, though, is completely U.S. controlled and administered. Canada does not have, actually, any direct operational input into the system itself.

On that particular point, given that the Canadian and U.S. Coast Guards often integrate, we have a potential conflict looming on the horizon with the Arctic Archipelago and the Northwest Passage. It's very clear the U.S. authorities have indicated that they do not respect or intend to adhere to Canadian sovereignty issues.

Would it be your intention to continue to conduct joint exercises with the U.S. in the Arctic Archipelago, given the fact that the U.S. has asserted that they do not respect Canadian sovereignty in this field? And would it be wise to continue on with the joint initiative, taking Canadian navigational capability and putting it in the hands of a friendly government—however, one that we may have a very serious conflict with in the very near future—and potentially put at risk Canadian navigational capability?

• (1220)

Mr. George Da Pont: In response to that, first of all, I'm not aware that we have conducted, certainly recently—in the last five or ten years, to the best of my knowledge—any joint exercises with the United States Coast Guard in the Arctic. We certainly conduct a great many joint exercises on the Great Lakes and in other parts of the country on issues of search and rescue and environmental response. I will certainly verify if that's the case, but I'm not aware of any joint exercises that we've done in the Arctic recently.

Hon. Gerry Byrne: But then, specifically on the question of whether you find there is any potential for risk to Canadian maritime activity, if this conflict were to potentially escalate and Canada had to assert sovereignty by means of a strong presence in the Arctic Archipelago, would it be wise under those circumstances to continue to participate in a system that is completely dependent on a country that may be at odds with our position on that particular issue?

Mr. George Da Pont: It really wouldn't be appropriate for me to speculate on that, because certainly, as everyone is well aware, the Department of Foreign Affairs has the overall lead.

This is an important issue that will be before government. It's an important policy issue. But the mandate of the coast guard, as you know, is very operational. It's limited very much to service and providing services. We certainly have benefits in terms of providing common services with the U.S. Coast Guard and some tremendous examples on the Great Lakes where we cooperate very closely on icebreaking, SAR, and on vessel traffic control, and similarly on the west coast.

I'd hate to jeopardize those things on an operational basis, but certainly we would take whatever direction was consistent with any overall Government of Canada position, whenever one is developed on those issues.

Hon. Gerry Byrne: I don't think anyone is asking you to jeopardize operational issues in other parts of the country. I think the question was, would you factor that into the inevitable decisions on investing in Loran-C or remove it in favour of the GPS system? As someone sitting at the deputy minister level, would you be advising the government—would you be advising yourself—that perhaps that has to be built in as a certain contingency or concern as you decide on the future of Loran-C and its Canada-first navigational policy? Would you want to create an additional lifetime for that Loran-C, given the fact that it is the only system we have in Canada that's independently Canadian?

Mr. George Da Pont: Mr. Chairman, when we're ready to present advice on Loran-C, depending on broader decisions that are taken, certainly we would take all relevant facts and broader government policy into account.

The Chair: Thank you.

I think there is time for a quick question here, Bill. You had your hand up. Mr. Matthews.

Mr. Bill Matthews (Random—Burin—St. George's, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Welcome, Commissioner. It's good to see you back.

I have a very quick question. There has been consideration—and maybe I'm incorrect, but I believe there was some budgetary provision, and certainly it was widely discussed—about stationing a vessel in Labrador. Is there still a plan in place for that? Could you inform the committee whether that's on or what the case might be?

Mr. George Da Pont: There had been an announcement by the previous government about an initiative in Labrador that involved some aspects of coast guard activities. That initiative is no longer going forward, but the government has replaced it with another initiative for Labrador, which is being led, I believe, by the Minister of National Defence. I am not aware of all the details of that government initiative for Labrador, but it doesn't have a coast guard component at this point.

Mr. Bill Matthews: That's my question, and that's the answer, Mr. Chairman.

The Chair: Monsieur Blais.

[Translation]

Mr. Raynald Blais (Gaspésie—Îles-de-la-Madeleine, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Good day, Mr. Da Pont. Welcome and congratulations.

My first question concerns the Canadian Coast Guard's manpower resources' allocation. If these numbers aren't available to you as yet, I'd appreciate being informed as soon as possible. I'd like to know, for the last five years, what the allocation of personnel in Quebec has been as compared to the Maritimes and I'd like to know how these numbers have evolved over the last five years. That's my first point.

You're an expert on budgets and you sometimes have to accommodate staffing restraints or streamlining. Much has been said and done about equipment improvement and our committee has made sure that the government has taken note of a certain message. But the question of human resources is a delicate one and also constitutes a challenge.

I'd like to hear your opinion on manpower resources.

• (1225)

Mr. George Da Pont: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

As to your first question, I don't have any data pertaining to manpower allocation but we will be conducting a study of this question and the results will be forwarded to the committee.

As far as I know, there haven't been many important changes over the last five years, except for the transfer of personnel to Transport Canada when the coast guard became an SOA. Some of the responsibilities and personnel were transferred to Transport Canada.

As to your second question, as I mentioned during my presentation, I think human resources are extremely important because the coast guard greatly depends on the professionalism of its employees. I believe that the challenge, over the next few years, will be to find a sufficient number of people who have the abilities required to do the job. We have to face more and more changes worldwide in the marine industry. Everyone is looking for experienced people.

Within a few years, the professional market will become more competitive. We emphasize personnel training. Of course, we also have to take care of the consolidation problem. For example, we have put in place a great number of initiatives in Nova Scotia and Newfoundland in order to modernize certain aspects of our activities without cutting back on human resources. We want to keep our employees as long as possible.

Mr. Raynald Blais: I'd now like to discuss the matter of security.

One of the coast guard's mandates is to ensure the security of vessels that are lost or in distress. I understand that some amount of fiscal slippage has occurred within the coast guard over the last few years. We seem to want fishermen who require our services to pay fees in certain situations.

What challenges do you see and what is your opinion on this question? Do you think it is important that the coast guard offer rapid service delivery to fishing vessels lost at sea, in distress or who experience certain problems? Do you favour a more rigid approach concerning the charging of service fees to fishermen?

• (1230)

Mr. George Da Pont: Thank you Mr. Chairman.

Our Search and Rescue Program is one of the most efficient in the world. I'm sure that no other country has a better network than ours.

The growth of the network remains one of the coast guard's main tasks. We are currently conducting a study of the needs of the Search and Rescue Program and we hope that the results of the study will be available within the next few months. Until then, we will take certain decisions. We have never asked fishermen to bear the cost of the Search and Rescue Program and, if I understood your question, we have no intention of doing so.

The renewal of our fleet is the main thing to enable us to preserve our response capability and that is quite a challenge.

Mr. Raynald Blais: The situation both in the oceans that surround us and in the large territory that we need to secure and protect is constantly evolving, as are the financial needs and available funding. The coast guard will have to accommodate new realities, including the war on terrorism and drug smuggling.

Would the military aspect of the coast guard become more important?

[English]

The Chair: Please answer very quickly, Mr. Da Pont.

[Translation]

Mr. George Da Pont: Yes. The mandate with regard to security and the elements you spoke of, belongs to the Royal Canadian Mounted Police and the Canada Border Services Agency. We are working with these two agencies and I agree with the way we are helping them in their work. We will surely increase on commitment but in order to do so, our main mandate has to be changed.

[English]

The Chair: Mr. Stoffer, you have five minutes.

Mr. Peter Stoffer (Sackville—Eastern Shore, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Again, congratulations on your appointment, sir. My condolences to you on the loss of your friend, Jack Stagg, with whom I know you were good friends.

You mentioned a couple of things in your preamble, and I'd like to go over them with you. You talked about ensuring that the procurement processes for the new vessels are moving ahead as quickly as possible. Are you encouraging the government to require that the procurement process have vessels built in Canada?

Mr. George Da Pont: Mr. Chairman, the shipbuilding policy of government is that the vessels be built in Canada. They will all be built in Canada.

The one aspect I was focusing on was that since we haven't had a major number of new vessels in so long we need to actually build internal capacity to manage that procurement process effectively, which we're in the process of doing.

Mr. Peter Stoffer: Very good.

Also, you had mentioned the key issue of addressing the long-term marine service fees. You had started up that committee again. My report should be coming to me in a couple of moments, but I have a list, and of all the people who are associated in that consultative group, there is nobody from the north of 60 as part of that group.

As you know, the far north, especially Nunavut, has been arguing against these fees for quite some time. Mr. Chairman, you may or may not know that when a ship comes from say Amsterdam and goes to the north, there are no fees charged for that, but when a ship comes from Montreal and goes north, there are fees charged for that. The people in the north have been asking for quite some time to have these fees eliminated so they can encourage economic development in the far north.

I couldn't help but notice there's nobody from the north as part of this panel. Can you explain why that is?

• (1235)

Mr. George Da Pont: Mr. Chairman, that's a very good observation. In fact, about a month ago we released to northern shippers and the territorial governments the results of a study we did on Arctic fees. The minister has indicated to them that he is open to getting feedback on the results of our study, and he would like their issues addressed as part of the larger process that we put in place. I'm meeting the representatives of the shipping industry, the National Marine Advisory Board, a little later this week, and that exactly will be one of the agenda items: how to adjust the membership and process to ensure northerners are adequately represented.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Da Pont.

Mr. Stoffer, I'm coming back to you in a second.

Is it possible to get that study for the committee, Mr. Da Pont?

Mr. George Da Pont: Absolutely. We can send it.

Mr. Peter Stoffer: I have several other questions, but I'll get back to them in the second round.

We've been hearing through the media that the U.S. Coast Guard is exercising some sort of might on the Great Lakes in terms of live-fire ammunition practices and all of that. Can you please advise me on what your role or the coast guard's role is in all of that in regard to the treaty that was signed many years ago? What effect does that have on the environment of the lakes? And what role does the Canadian Coast Guard play in cooperation with the U.S. Coast Guard on that issue?

Mr. George Da Pont: Mr. Chairman, within government the overall responsibility for the file rests with the Department of Foreign Affairs, for obvious reasons.

The coast guard role is more limited. If those exercises go ahead, and even though they are taking place in U.S. waters, our role would be to ensure safety by providing appropriate notices of shipping to commercial and recreational boaters, obviously in cooperation with the U.S. Coast Guard.

Mr. Peter Stoffer: Thank you.

The Chair: There is at least time for one more question.

Mr. Peter Stoffer: Thank you, sir.

Mr. Da Pont, you rightly pointed out that you're going to have a huge manpower issue in a few years. I can't help but notice that the current government does a lot of advertising quite strongly for our military, and rightly so. Are you advising the government in any way that they should take the same approach when it comes to recruitment for our coast guard? I know you can't answer the statement I'm making—that I believe the coast guard should be playing a more important role in the north, and not necessarily our military. I think the coast guard should play a more visible role in all parts of the country, but obviously there are staffing shortages, and you're under financial constraints.

Are you advising the government to move as quickly as possible on recruitment for the coast guard in the very near future?

Mr. George Da Pont: Mr. Chairman, first of all I do want to reiterate—and I think it's very important to understand this—that there have been significant investments in the coast guard over the last few years, including this particular year, when we have received some very significant funding to address what have been our chronic operating shortfalls.

While I certainly don't pretend that it deals with all our funding issues, I actually feel confident that we have really begun to turn a corner and that we're not operating in as tight a situation as we have been for the last few years. I think those investments are starting to show in a variety of areas with our assets and vessels.

In terms of the larger recruitment issue, our issue so far has not been recruitment. People are very attracted to the coast guard. They have a high interest in the coast guard. They want a career in the coast guard.

Our problem is matching up recruiting and training people before people leave, so that they can be ready. That is the one thing we are looking at concerning our options and flexibilities, because as I mentioned, it takes us quite a while to get people ready, and if we have to wait until people leave, it will be more difficult to manage.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Da Pont.

Mr. Cummins and Mr. Manning will split their ten minutes.

Mr. John Cummins (Delta—Richmond East, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. Da Pont, you acknowledge that the U.S. Coast Guard operates in a somewhat different fashion from the Canadian Coast Guard, but to a degree I think their responsibilities are similar to those of the Canadian Coast Guard.

A few years ago this committee attended the coast guard station at Seattle. We were very impressed with the officer in charge there. He's probably one of the most impressive figures I've met in my career here as a politician.

I see that recently a new head of the U.S. Coast Guard was appointed, Vice-Admiral Thad Allen, and you've mentioned his name. When I look at his résumé, I see that he was a graduate of the U.S. Coast Guard Academy, that he's a specialist in operations in both the coastal and offshore environments, and that he served aboard three coast guard cutters, one of which he commanded. He's got coastal command experience, and it goes on and on.

My question to you is this: what are your qualifications to provide the leadership the coast guard needs at this time?

• (1240)

Mr. George Da Pont: Thank you.

Mr. Chairman, first of all, I would say there's a significant difference between the U.S. Coast Guard and the Canadian Coast Guard, which I think is relevant to answering the question.

As you know, the Canadian Coast Guard is a civilian organization. The U.S. Coast Guard is a military organization. The honourable member is quite right that the U.S. Coast Guard is responsible for all the same things that the Canadian Coast Guard is responsible for. However, in addition to that, they're responsible for a lot of front-line enforcement activities that in our country rest with the RCMP.

They're responsible for a significant number of border activities that in our country belong with the Canada Border Services Agency. They're responsible for a great number of regulatory functions, in addition to their military functions, which in our country are with Transport Canada.

While we are certainly very similar in terms of our programs and what they call their legacy programs, they have a much broader range of responsibilities, in a lot of different areas, that the Canadian Coast Guard doesn't have.

In terms of my qualifications, I tried to address them in my opening statement. I've been a public servant for 25 years. I've worked very closely with the senior management of the coast guard in various capacities for the last seven years. I'm very familiar with a number of their key issues. I've been part of many of their key initiatives over the past years. I have had some operational experience in delivering the small craft harbour program and the aquaculture program, in a previous part of my career.

I feel that given the key issues facing the coast guard, which are issues in terms of replacing its workforce and issues in terms of replacing its assets, my background and skills set is certainly suited to the key challenges facing that organization right now.

The Chair: Thank you.

Very quickly, Mr. Cummins.

Mr. John Cummins: The fundamental business of the coast guard, Mr. Da Pont, beside these other issues, is search and rescue and providing security to mariners on the coast.

We had the tragic sinking of the *Cap Rouge II* in British Columbia a few years ago, which all the members here are familiar with. During that particular rescue effort, there was interference by the commissioner's office here with the people who were on site. The folks in the commissioner's office here were not experienced mariners, and there was a problem in leadership.

Again, how can you provide leadership in the field to the people who are required to provide the search and rescue capabilities that the coast guard offers and Canadians expect when that is not your area of expertise?

Mr. George Da Pont: Again, Mr. Chairman, I don't see the job of Commissioner of the Canadian Coast Guard as planning SAR operations in the field or planning individual environmental cleanups. I am very confident that we have strong professional people in the field to do those jobs. We have strong assistant commissioners in each region and their primary job is operations.

As commissioner, one of my key jobs is to focus on making sure the people in the field who are delivering these services have the tools, the training, and the resources to do their jobs. It is the big contribution that the commissioner of the coast guard makes.

I would certainly agree with your observation, although I am not making any comment on the *Cap Rouge II*. I'm not familiar with the details.

I certainly don't see myself micromanaging or trying to run individual operations from Ottawa. I think that would be a big mistake, and I don't think it's the job of the commissioner of the coast guard.

● (1245)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Da Pont.

Mr. Manning.

Mr. Fabian Manning (Avalon, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Welcome, Commissioner.

With regard to icebreaking fees for the coast guard, it's my understanding that in Newfoundland and Labrador they sometimes turn to operations. Is the review process ongoing in the coast guard now to address some of the concerns with regard to the cost of icebreaking fees and some type of reduced operating cost? That's my first question.

I'll ask both questions now so that we can save time.

On the status of the procurement process with regard to cost analysis, you mentioned the coherent multi-year plan. Could you give us some thoughts on that, please, with regard to the cost analysis of what you're looking at for the next five years?

Mr. George Da Pont: In terms of your first question, on icebreaking fees, yes, they are one component of the overall issue of marine service fee, which I mentioned and Minister Hearn indicated. He has begun a process with the shipping industry to review marine service fees in general, which include icebreaking fees.

In terms of the status of our multi-year planning, I'm not in a position to give you any figures today, because we're still working on the best mix of options. What I would say is that one of my objectives is to try to see if we can get a commitment to study ongoing investment in the coast guard and particularly in the fleet.

If memory serves me well, the coast guard received something like 45 or 46 vessels in the 1980s. Since then, it has not received any large vessels, and in the intervening 25 years has received around 40 new small vessels. It's very difficult, as anyone can appreciate, if you're making investments in fits and starts. This creates considerable downstream pressures, which are what we're facing now with the aging of our large fleet. I'd like to have a plan where we make steady, ongoing investments in a paced way over time, so we don't find ourselves with a lot of vessels toward the end of their life span, which is what we have now in the large fleet.

Mr. Fabian Manning: Okay.

The Chair: Please be very brief, Mr. Lunney, if you have a question.

Mr. James Lunney (Nanaimo—Alberni, CPC): First I'd like to echo the comments of Mr. Blais and Mr. Cummins about the fact that there's no enforcement or border security component. I hope we'll be thinking about expanding in that realm of operation.

Where I have a coast guard presence in Bamfield, for example, we know there's a lot of drug dealing in the area, and the RCMP are not really in a position.... It's a nasty situation there. I'm hoping we'll be moving in that direction.

My question comes out of your comment about the one MCTS centre, which was mentioned, Tofino, which happens to be Ucluelet, not Tofino. I know this base went through an era of least-cost analysis, and they really felt they were going to be eliminated. The department made the decision to sell off the six or seven government-owned houses—I'm not sure it was DFO—that the officers were living in, and they're gone. I know the strategic location of that base; we have fought for that for years. We hope it will be maintained in that location and that a creative way to deal with the housing will be found. I know the current officer in charge has to drive in from Port Alberni, which is an hour and a half drive each way.

Mr. George Da Pont: If I left any impression that we were looking to get out of the station, that certainly wasn't what I intended to say. All I'm saying is that we've been approached, and we have these issues with employees. I understand they've suggested that one option might be to relocate. We certainly haven't taken any decisions, and obviously we would be looking at the range of possible options.

Mr. James Lunney: I hope relocating would be the last option; there has to be a way to deal with the housing. As we know, when Victoria had to shut down and Seattle shut down during the last earthquake, that particular base monitored all the vessel traffic coming into the Strait of Juan de Fuca. I would hate to see us concentrate on just one location for MCTS in an earthquake zone.

I leave that for advisement.

Thank you.

● (1250)

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Cuzner.

Mr. Rodger Cuzner (Cape Breton—Canso, Lib.): I guess I can just take off the back of James's question about the MCTS in Tofino. We have a station as well at the Coast Guard College in Cape Breton. Do you see—and you've been involved in that file—any change in the requirement to provide service, other than at the station in Sydney?

Mr. George Da Pont: At this point, I don't see any change in requirement. In fact the only issue I'm aware of with that station is they'd like a little more space.

Mr. Rodger Cuzner: Yes.

In line with that, perhaps I could solicit a comment on the Canadian Coast Guard College. In your response to a question earlier from Mr. Stoffer, that you're going to find yourself in a bit of a spot in coming years, do you see a potential expansion at the Coast Guard College in Sydney?

Mr. George Da Pont: I don't see a physical expansion of the college, but we certainly have already expanded significantly the number of cadets we're taking in. This year, I think we've recruited around 45 new cadets, which I think is significantly more than in the past number of years, and we're projecting having to intake close to 50 in each of the next three, four, or five years to keep up with our needs. So that's a very significant increase in the number of Canadian cadets.

Mr. Rodger Cuzner: That is. The classes had tapered to 12 to 15 very recently.

I apologize to the committee if it's common knowledge among committee members, and with the fact that Mr. Cummins has already had an opportunity to question and he didn't pose the question of a backup vessel off Vancouver Airport, I would imagine that the issue has been addressed already.

What's the situation with the hovercraft?

Mr. George Da Pont: Two or three years ago we did put in an interim measure, the refurbished hovercraft that is a backup there. Now, as part of the fleet renewal plan that I was discussing, we're looking at the options and the timing for a permanent solution, which ultimately will be a new ACV.

Mr. Rodger Cuzner: What time period would you anticipate for that to unfold?

Mr. George Da Pont: That's exactly what we're looking at now in assessing how long it's feasible to keep the interim arrangement in place, how feasible and dependable the backup one is. That's part of the analysis we're doing to determine when we need to replace it.

Mr. Rodger Cuzner: Okay.

The Chair: Monsieur Asselin.

[Translation]

Mr. Gérard Asselin (Manicouagan, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

As I understand it, the coast guard is the first to intervene in the case of a disaster or of an emergency. When we talk about an emergency, we're talking about security.

The coast guard has a home port in Sept-Îles and in Havre-Saint-Pierre that are part of my riding. In Havre-Saint-Pierre, the port is seasonal. Fishermen prepare their boats before the fishing season and they're out to sea around the 1st April. Coast guard personnel arrive three weeks later. The situation is similar to that of a town that would open its swimming pool and the lifeguards would arrive three weeks later.

Last year, I had to intervene; offshore activities were going on. The response time between Sept-Îles and Havre-Saint-Pierre is far too long. Some even go fishing towards Anticosti and Blanc-Sablon. That's why the port is seasonal.

We ask that coast guard vessels and personnel be ready when the fishing boats go out at the beginning of April each year.

• (1255)

Mr. George Da Pont: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

I fully understood your question. We are under a certain amount of pressure concerning our level of service in various regions. We are studying these pressures. There are certain things at stake, particularly on the North shore. These are also part of the study on search and rescue that I mentioned previously.

It is difficult to give an answer when it comes to the question of level of service. I'll attempt to do so while insisting that the advantage of an SOA is to be able to emphasize service delivery and

create forums to discuss the level and cost of services with the industry and with the fishermen. This is what we are doing.

I know that there are many things at stake. We are studying the situation to see what can be done.

Mr. Gérard Asselin: Thank you.

Mr. Raynald Blais: What is the deadline for the study?

Mr. George Da Pont: I hope to obtain the search and rescue study report in January.

[English]

The Chair: You have time for another question.

[Translation]

Mr. Raynald Blais: Do you plan, one way or another, to arm coast guard vessels and personnel?

Mr. George Da Pont: I have no such plans.

Mr. Raynald Blais: Has anyone asked why not?

Mr. George Da Pont: No. I have never discussed this question until today because of its political nature. We now have 50 employees who have had the necessary training and who have been helping fishery officers in certain situations for 20 years now. The coast guard has some experience in this matter but it has neither plans nor discussions concerning the arming of coast guard vessels and personnel.

[English]

The Chair: Mr. Stoffer.

Mr. Peter Stoffer: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Along that line of questioning, along with Mr. Lunney's concerns about the drug issues in Bamfield and illegal immigration coming across our borders, and all kinds of issues, would you not see it—at least I've been saying it, and you may not be able to answer this because it is a political question.... You have an SOA now, a special operating agency. I would prefer, and I'm sure some of us would prefer, to see it be a stand-alone agency, completely out of the clutches of DFO, where you would answer to the Minister of Public Safety. I know Anne McLellan, the previous minister for that department, was looking at that. I'm not sure where the discussions went, but have there been any discussions at your level regarding making the coast guard a special operating agency?

Mr. George Da Pont: Well, the coast guard is a special operating agency.

Mr. Peter Stoffer: No, I meant to say stand-alone.

Mr. George Da Pont: No, I haven't been part of any discussions of that nature.

But let me add that we do support strongly the RCMP and the border agency in some of those activities. Right now about 70% of what we do is on coast guard mandated programs, about 25% of what we do is in support of fisheries science and fisheries enforcement, and about 5% of what we do is primarily supporting security and other related activities. That gives you a general sense of the existing mandate of the coast guard and the degree to which we're involved in various things.

•(1300)

Mr. Peter Stoffer: This committee made a recommendation in the previous coast guard report to have a 50-millimetre gun on board some of the coast guard vessels. Have you ever had a chance to look at that recommendation, and if you did, can you tell us what your view would be of it? It's similar to what Iceland has on their coast guard vessels.

Mr. George Da Pont: Yes. That is actually a significant policy issue that I don't think is appropriate for me to comment on in this forum. But I will say I have read all of the committee's reports on the coast guard. It seemed judicious to do that.

Mr. Peter Stoffer: My last question for you is this. We've seen border officials and customs agencies ask to be armed. Have your employees, especially those with the coast guard unit, come to either you or anyone else asking for the same consideration customs officers are asking for?

Mr. George Da Pont: No, in the period I've been in this position on an acting basis and since my appointment, no one has raised that with me—although as I mentioned in my previous response, for about 20 years we've had about 50 coast guard people trained to support armed boardings in very selected situations, so there is a little bit of experience with it.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Da Pont. I appreciate your coming to committee today. On behalf of the committee, I would like to say that your discussion has been extremely straightforward and thorough, and we don't always receive that at committee. So it's much appreciated, I think, by all the members.

I have one final question about some of the challenges the coast guard is facing, especially with the fleet renewal—the new midshore patrol vessels that you desperately need in your department—and the whole issue of staffing.

It's been my understanding for some time that a lot of crewmen aboard the coast guard vessels are temporary. They're actually not full-time. I know that a number of those temporary crewmen have tried to get full-time positions on the coast guard vessels. Is it your intention to change that policy if you need well-trained, well-qualified individuals and there are a number of them already working for the coast guard?

Mr. George Da Pont: Yes, Mr. Chairman, it's actually an issue I have some concern about.

As you correctly point out, we employ an awful lot of casual and term people, many of whom have been employed with us in that capacity for many years.

The Chair: Ten years.

Mr. George Da Pont: Exactly. And they have developed considerable experience and expertise.

I have spoken to some of our key union representatives to try to work with them to look at the possibility of setting up some sort of permanent relief pool to replace, over time, our use of a lot of casual and term positions. I hope to engage in those discussions on the mechanics, which would at least, I think, give people more security in terms of the job.

The Chair: To follow up on that, am I correct in saying that if you have a temporary position, that employee has to work short of six months? If they work more than six months, it's automatically carried to a full-time position, or at least there is the option of full time.

Mr. George Da Pont: No. I think that would only kick in after three years of continuous employment.

The Chair: Okay. I certainly know a number of employees who have worked for half a decade or a decade for the coast guard, and they're still in temporary positions. And we have a shortage of qualified personnel here.

Once again, I very much appreciate your straightforward answers. Thank you.

•(1305)

Mr. George Da Pont: Thank you very much.

Hon. Gerry Byrne: At a previous meeting on small craft harbours, we had witnesses from the Fisheries and Oceans Canada small craft harbours program, and I had asked a series of—

The Chair: We still haven't adjourned. Gerry has one other question on another matter.

Hon. Gerry Byrne: I had asked witnesses appearing before the committee to provide further clarification on three issues. They agreed, and the committee agreed that we would accept the answers to those questions in writing from departmental officials. I don't believe the clerk of the committee has yet received those three answers. I'd ask the committee that if I don't receive them in the next seven days, we call those witnesses before this committee and ask them why they have breached the trust of this committee.

The Chair: I have no difficulty with that. But first of all, let's check back in the records and find that and then call the individuals. We can also prepare a letter ASAP and fax it to them under the chair's signature. If that doesn't work, we'll bring them back to committee, guaranteed.

Hon. Gerry Byrne: Good. Thank you.

The Chair: We're adjourned.

Published under the authority of the Speaker of the House of Commons

Publié en conformité de l'autorité du Président de la Chambre des communes

**Also available on the Parliament of Canada Web Site at the following address:
Aussi disponible sur le site Web du Parlement du Canada à l'adresse suivante :
<http://www.parl.gc.ca>**

The Speaker of the House hereby grants permission to reproduce this document, in whole or in part, for use in schools and for other purposes such as private study, research, criticism, review or newspaper summary. Any commercial or other use or reproduction of this publication requires the express prior written authorization of the Speaker of the House of Commons.

Le Président de la Chambre des communes accorde, par la présente, l'autorisation de reproduire la totalité ou une partie de ce document à des fins éducatives et à des fins d'étude privée, de recherche, de critique, de compte rendu ou en vue d'en préparer un résumé de journal. Toute reproduction de ce document à des fins commerciales ou autres nécessite l'obtention au préalable d'une autorisation écrite du Président.