

MARC GARNEAU

By Pat Carney

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I am a card carrying Conservative. I do not plan to vote Liberal in the next election. But as a Canadian, I regret that by withdrawing from the Liberal leadership race Canada's first astronaut, MP Marc Garneau has denied Canadians the opportunity to experience the initiative and insight he demonstrated in the mid 1980's, when I was the federal minister in charge of Canada's fledging space program.

As Minister for Energy Mines and Resources in Brian Mulroney's government I was responsible for a range of innovative space programs then on the drawing boards. This was an enthralling assignment, since before I was elected to Parliament I was involved in tele-education and tele-medicine experiments on Canada's Hermes satellite, the world's first geostationary interactive communications satellite, and later on other Canadian communication satellite projects.

Canada was a world leader in the field. But when Prime Minister Mulroney accepted President Ronald Reagan's invitation for Canadian participation in the American international space station in 1985, Canada's own space programs fell under the budget cutting axe to free up the funds.

My officials and I were determined to save at least one of our own Canadian programs, But which one? Each had its own competing interests and potential customers.

In January 1986 the American space shuttle Challenger exploded seconds after take-off, killing all seven crew members. Astronaut Marc Garneau and I were assigned by the PM to represent Canada at the memorial service for the crew at Cape Canaveral.

During the flight to Florida in a government Challenger jet, bemused by the budget cuts, I asked the astronaut; 'If you could choose one Canadian satellite program, which one would be your priority?' Without hesitation Marc Garneau replied with quiet authority: "Radarsat."

Radarsat was an EMR favourite but it was one of the least voter friendly of the competing satellites, some consumer-oriented. An earth observation satellite, Radarsat's footprint was northern and rural, designed to monitor Arctic ice conditions, forest fires in the vast boreal forest, agricultural crop yields on Canada's immense prairies. Not much voter potential there.

At the memorial service we heard President Reagan quote from the famous poem "High Flight" by RCAF Spitfire pilot John Magee, killed in 1941 at the age of 19: "Oh! I have slipped the surly bonds of earth...put out my hand and touched the face of God."

Astronaut Garneau's support strengthened my political hand back in Ottawa. Our officials reallocated most of our satellite budget to the International Space Station, currently orbiting the earth under the command of Canadian Chris Hatfield.

But they kept the Radarsat project on life support until new funds could be identified.

Marc Garneau and I moved on, he as president of the Canadian Space Agency and now MP, and myself as Minister of International Trade responsible for the Canada-US Free Trade negotiations and now a retired Senator for BC.

It takes many years and hundreds of talented Canadians to successfully develop a space program. Canada's MacDonalD Detwiller and Associates (MDA) took over as prime contractors for the Radarsat projects.

Radarsat-1, Canada's first earth observation satellite was launched on Nov 4, 1995, and has outperformed its design life. I was in the audience for the televised event.

In 2007, I was invited by the Space Agency to its David Florida laboratory near Ottawa to view the Radarsat-2 satellite before it was flown to the launch site in Kazakhstan.

Entranced, I marveled at the satellite, as exquisite as a dragon fly with its shimmering panels and delicate antennae, a star in the galaxy of Canadian innovation and international collaboration, proud of the Canadians who could conceive and create such a masterpiece. Canadians, like Marc Garneau, who have the experience, vision and knowledge of Canada's needs and strengths.