



The Conference of Defence Associations

Commentary

2 May 2008

(this article originally appeared in the Ottawa Citizen on 2 May 2008)

<http://www.canada.com/components/print.aspx?id=e387ea95-1250-4b43-bc38-a63272f0b12c>

“Who Will Succeed Hillier?”

General (Retired) Paul Manson

General Manson is past president of the CDA Institute, and a former Chief of the Defence Staff (1986-1989)

Advice for the new chief of the defence staff: Don't try to out-Hillier Hillier.

It can't be done. Living up to his predecessor's legacy will be just one of the challenges facing the senior military officer soon to be chosen by Prime Minister Stephen Harper to succeed Gen. Rick Hillier as Canada's chief of the defence staff.

It will be an important political decision, not just because of the remarkable profile that Gen. Hillier has brought to the office of the CDS, but also because of the tough agenda that the new incumbent must handle from his first day in office.

The big question right now is, “Who will be chosen as Canada's next military chief?” Historically, it's not a question that was often asked outside of the Canadian Forces and the small circle of those having an interest in national defence. The Canadian public, by and large, didn't much care about the job of CDS nor the person occupying that office. But Gen. Hillier changed all of that, by sheer force of personality. With his decision to retire this summer at the conclusion of an impressive, highly visible three-year tenure, speculation is rampant about who his successor might be.

The decision is the prime minister's alone, although he will no doubt receive plenty of advice, notably from the ministers of national defence and foreign affairs, the deputy minister of national defence and other senior bureaucrats, and of course Gen. Hillier himself.

It won't be an easy decision, if only because, perhaps as never before, Mr. Harper has a truly impressive slate of candidates from which to choose. It is a solid military tradition in Canada, based on much experience, that the head of the armed forces be chosen from amongst the most senior serving officers, which means those holding lieutenant-general/vice-admiral rank (the “three-star” level, in common usage). Of the 11 officers currently holding this rank, five are viable contenders for promotion to the CDS position, the remaining officers being unlikely candidates for one reason or another, for example being on the point of retirement or having recently been appointed to an international assignment.

Of the five front-runners, three are senior army officers in key positions. They are Lt-Gen. Walter Natynczyk (vice-chief of the defence staff), Lt-Gen. Andrew Leslie (chief of the land staff), and Lt-Gen. Michel Gauthier, commander of the Canadian Expeditionary Force Command, in charge of all overseas operations). The other two prime candidates are Vice-Admiral Drew Robertson (chief of the naval staff) and Lt-Gen. Angus Watt (chief of the air staff).

The prime minister, in his review of these contenders, will be struck by some quite significant – and encouraging – qualifications common to all five. They have all had extensive operational command experience in volatile regions such as the former Yugoslavia, the Gulf, Iraq and Afghanistan. They all likewise have commanded high-level formations in Canada, as well as having served extensively in senior staff assignments in the Ottawa environment, notably at National Defence HQ.

This hands-on operational experience is balanced, in all five cases, by a notable intellectual capacity. Among them, they hold enough post-graduate degrees to form a small university. All five are comfortably bilingual. (Lt.-Gen. Gauthier, a francophone, is equally articulate in English and French.)

So, with all of this talent, how is the prime minister going to choose his next CDS? Looking at the question from his point of view, here are some important qualities that he will seek.

First and foremost, he will want the new CDS to display strong military leadership. Students of military history know that there is no single leadership style that is essential to success; consider, for example, the widely divergent approaches displayed by Eisenhower and Patton in the Second World War, each of whom in his own distinct way provided the kind of military leadership called for by the circumstances of the day. History is replete with similar examples.

Thus the new CDS needn't be a Hillier clone. In fact, given the friction that Hillier's brash style occasionally generated at the political level, Mr. Harper will likely be looking for a CDS who is somewhat less aggressive, at least in his public pronouncements. This raises an interesting point. Whatever his leadership style, the new incumbent has got to be an effective communicator, able to express himself clearly and effectively to the military, the media, the public and the government alike. At the outset, it will be the first of these where he will meet his greatest challenge. Gen. Hillier earned enormous respect from the rank and file of the military and their families, to the point of adoration. It will be a tough act to follow, but the military family is a loyal bunch, and it will give the new CDS ample opportunity to prove himself.

Communicating with the other three audiences – the media, the public and the government – will be no less important. As Canada's senior military officer, the new chief will bear the heavy responsibility of bringing to his minister, the cabinet and the prime minister himself a logical and achievable plan for the development and funding of the Forces, presented in such a way that it has the promise of public support. This is critically important at a time when the armed forces face the dual challenge of fighting a tough war in Afghanistan while simultaneously recovering from the severe rundown of personnel and equipment that has resulted from five years of conflict, on top of the sad legacy of the reductions imposed upon the military in the '90s. As if that is not enough, the domestic security tasking in connection with the 2010 Olympics will add heavily to the operational burden, as will the growing focus on the Arctic and the Asia-Pacific region, and of course defence against terrorism at home and abroad.

Here's a factor that may not be in the forefront of the Mr. Harper's mind, but one that is important: stamina. The CDS job is incredibly demanding, which is why the term of office rarely exceeds three years. The physical strain of constant globetrotting travel alone calls for physical fitness and endurance rarely faced by people in their mid-fifties. Incidentally, the frequent absence from Ottawa implies the need for another vital quality, namely the ability to delegate responsibility. Trust and teamwork behind the scenes are essential to a CDS's success.

Finally, more than ever before the incoming chief of the Defence staff must exhibit a generous measure of diplomacy and political sensitivity, on top of all of his military skills.

Mr. Harper, when he puts all of these factors and more together in making his choice, will certainly have a sense of comfort in the knowledge that he has a lot of outstanding talent to choose from. Whatever his decision, it will inevitably have an important influence on the future course of Canada's military, and of the nation itself.

*The Conference of Defence Associations
222 Somerset Street West, Suite 400B
Ottawa, Ontario, Canada K2P 2G3
Telephone: +1 (613) 236-1252*

*Fax: +1 (613) 236-8191
Email: director@cda-cdai.ca
Website: <http://www.cda-cdai.ca>*