

"PARLIAMENT AND THE MILITARY"

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The theme of the 16th annual seminar of the CDA Institute, "Parliament and the Military," reflects the democratic principle that national defence in Canada is tied firmly to political oversight. It follows that parliamentarians should understand defence issues and requirements of modern military forces, so as to promote national security and well being. Events occurring over the past thirty years, culminating in a series of crises in the last decade, suggest that parliamentarians, the military and the public, need to improve inter-communication. The aim of the seminar was, therefore, to study this situation, including: whether there *is* a "communications gap" between political and military players in the formation of defence policy; if so, how does it affect the content of policy; and, are there structural or other problems which adversely affect the defence policy process and, if so, how might they be corrected?

Mr. Pat O'Brien, MP, Chairman of the House of Commons Standing Committee on National Defence and Veterans' Affairs, delivered the introductory address. In it he went to the heart of the matter and stated that communication was vital and his committee provided one of the essential links between parliament, the military and the public. His committee's revelations of quality of life problems in the armed forces, resulting in allocation of additional funds to DND to resolve them, is a good example of how information given to politicians can lead to positive action. In spite of this, and including the forthright testimony of the Chief of the Defence Staff to the committee, there is still much room for improvement. Parliamentarians often perceive DND and the armed forces as a closed shop. To avoid this, DND and pro-defence groups need to be more pro-active in their dealings with Senators and MPs,

The keynote address was given by Professor Douglas Bland, Chair of Defence Management, School of Policy Studies, Queen's University. His major thrust was that the defence of Canada is the responsibility of all Canadians. They determine, by casting their votes, how Canada shall be defended, how much money will be spent on defence, and what vulnerabilities will be accepted. As well, there must be an unbroken line of accountability from officers commanding units in the field, to the Chief of the Defence Staff, to Parliament, and finally to the people. In developing this theme, he quoted the report of the Somalia Inquiry: "*the quintessential condition for civil control of the military and all aspects of national defence is a vigilant Parliament.*" Thus, Parliament is the organization accountable to Canadians for every aspect of national defence. He also quoted from the report of the Special Joint Committee on Defence of 1994, which emphasized the need to strengthen the role of Parliament in the scrutiny and development of defence policy.

Professor Bland made extensive references to a recent survey of senators and members of parliament intended to test their interests, attitudes and general knowledge of national defence. Overall, the results were discouraging. However, parliamentarians are not all negligent nor disinterested in defence. On the contrary, many wish to cultivate a better understanding and to participate in defence debates. Why then does Parliament have an uninspired record as the civil authority and overseer in matters of national defence? The answers lie in factors such as lack of concern over specific events, habit, weak parliamentary structures, partisan politics and, especially, the "distance" between politicians and the Ottawa bureaucracy.

Professor Bland noted that parliamentary committees are generally prisoners to a Minister's agenda, with little freedom to develop strong nonpartisan policy positions, and little likelihood of seeing their work transformed into effective policies. Committees also lack the resources in personnel to research deeply into the many issues they consider, and often are overly dependant on government experts. This correlates to the survey result showing "secrecy and executive control" were perceived as the biggest impediments to parliamentary surveillance of defence. In turn, this reflects lack of an ongoing and positive program of parliamentary liaison by DND (although such a program is reputed to be under development).

Professor Bland's most constructive piece of advice to parliamentarians, to improve their knowledge and control of the armed forces, would be to build a nonpartisan consensus on the fundamentals of Canada's national defence; that is to say, take the politics out of defence policy. As well, strong and well supported defence committees need to be maintained by both the House of Commons and the Senate, with the latter being especially suited as the repository of a "defence consensus." Ultimately, a permanent Standing Joint Committee of the Senate and the House would have much to offer. In this respect, the small nucleus of Senators and MPs who do in fact understand defence ought to be exploited.

There followed a discussion moderated by Mr. Jason Moskovitz, senior political correspondent for the CBC, on the topic "What Constitutes Effective Civilian-Military Relations in Canada?" Speakers included Mr Arthur Kroeger, Chancellor of Carleton University, and Professor Joel Sokolsky, Head of the Department of Politics and Economics, Royal Military College of Canada. Mr. Moskovitz reflected on the media perception of defence affairs, and noted that there is often inconsistency in the availability of information from DND -- often it is given out in abundance, but at other times obtaining it is difficult, if not impossible. There is still much room for improvement in relations between the military and the media.

Professor Sokolsky explained that the nature of the present international environment places greater responsibilities on parliamentarians to provide oversight of Canadian military forces and their missions. This is because it may not be clear what is at stake, or how the situation may develop. These are difficult matters that call for expert interpretation and advice. Values have come to dominate the equation, as opposed to the simple calculus of ideology and military power evident during the Cold War. International affairs and security issues today are both fragmented and complex. Somalia demonstrated the serious consequences of proceeding without proper knowledge and accountable authority in place. It showed the need for vigorous parliamentary oversight. The fact 90 percent of the public supports an operation is of no consequence, if the government does not understand the details and implications of the situation. Sending forces

abroad is generally a discretionary decision on the part of government and thus must be examined, explained and approved by Parliament. Overall, there is a generational problem. Few parliamentarians have the experience necessary to provide leadership in defence matters.

Mr. Kroeger provided a masterful review of Canadian foreign and defence policy from World War II onwards. He noted that circumstances of the Cold War did not place emphasis on debating defence policy. The requirements for Canadian military contributions were in general obvious and accepted by parliamentarians and the public. Over the past decade this has changed. There is no longer certainty over Canada's security interests, and what military resources ought to be assigned to them. This places onus on professionals in the military and elsewhere to explain the details of defence policy to the government. As well, Canada's armed forces have not engaged in combat operations for close to fifty years. Politics has a short horizon. The essentially non-combat missions of today make it difficult for people to understand why it is necessary to invest in submarines, fighter planes and similar expensive systems. There is a need to explain the interconnection of foreign policy and defence policy, especially with the former now focused on human security. One must also understand the dilemmas faced by Canadian politicians today when confronted with questions of defence policy.

A panel, chaired by the Honorable John Fraser, PC, MP, former Speaker of the House of Commons, and Chairman of the Minister's Monitoring Committee on Change in DND and the CF, added further comments from both the political and military points of view. Members of the panel included Honorable Senator William Rompkey, PC, former co-chairman of the Special Joint Committee on Defence, Mr. David Pratt, MP, member of the Standing Committee on National Defence and Veterans' Affairs, Lieutenant-General Charles Belzile (Retd), and Major-General Lewis MacKenzie (Retd).

It was noted that the communications gap between the military and parliamentarians was real. The question was, "where do we go from here?" One answer would be to improve public information of defence issues, since the public elects MPs. The severe and arbitrary cuts to defence have made this difficult. The public profile of the armed forces is low due to fewer people on fewer bases. The public is fed information by an equally poorly informed media. In these circumstances, the role of the reserves in local communities can be very important and should be exploited. Uninformed political intervention can be doubly counter-productive as it may focus solely on political ends, such as regional benefits. Only some 2 percent of parliamentarians have military experience. Therefore, the military does nobody any favors by remaining silent. As well, pro-defence groups such as CDA must improve their capability for public and governmental education. The CDA recommendation for government to create a National Security Advisory Agency is especially valid.

The 1994 Joint Senate/House of Commons Committee on Defence was a particularly good example of how to improve parliamentary knowledge of defence by communicating with a diverse group of expert sources, both in and out of the military. Many of its recommendations were incorporated in the subsequent defence white paper of 1994; but many were not (including making the joint committee a permanent feature). Appointment of serving officers as researchers was of great value to the committee, as were its visits to military bases. It is also important to develop a competent defence lobby on Parliament Hill.

Once again, the recent history of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Defence is instructive. The morale in the armed forces was until then very low, and some even questioned their continued existence. Committee hearings held on bases, where individual service people were allowed to speak without restrictions, were vital to the process that led to an increase in the DND budget to improve quality of life. The committee has continued to profit from the knowledge it gained, and to take positive action to assist the armed forces. This includes forwarding a strong resolution to the government to rehabilitate the Canadian Forces by making significant additions to the DND budget. Members also propagate their message in party caucuses, especially within the Liberal party. This pays immense dividends.

On the other hand, it was disappointing to note that very few parliamentarians were in attendance at the seminar, although many had been invited. This was contrasted to other nations, especially the United States, where members of Congress are knowledgeable of defence and speak out on defence issues, and perform valuable work in congressional committees.

The Chief of the Defence Staff, General Maurice Baril, then commented on the role of the CDS in relations with Parliament and the Cabinet. He presented his views under three headings: the role and responsibilities of the CDS; the context in which the CDS gives his advice and recommendations to Cabinet; and, relations between the CDS and Parliament. Overall, the pace of change in the world, including a broader focus for national security, has produced a more complex environment. This puts a premium on consultation and discussion with the Canadian public and its elected representatives.

The role and responsibilities of the CDS are entrenched in statutes, in particular the National Defence Act, and amplified elsewhere. The CDS is also the principal advisor to the Minister of National Defence on military matters in relation to defence policy. He also advises the Prime Minister and the rest of Cabinet within a fairly formal framework. Professional insight and operational details of potential military operations, or on the military impact of significant policy changes, are often essential for a full understanding of the issues at stake. As well as the advice of the CDS, the Minister and his colleagues must hear the views of the Deputy Minister on aspects outside the realm of purely military considerations.

Most importantly in relation to the seminar topic, the existing relationship of the CDS with Parliament and the government as a whole is less formal and less institutionalized. However, it is important that Parliament and Canadians take part in debates on defence matters. The CDS must ensure that in this context, the Canadian Forces, their capabilities and shortfalls, are presented in the most transparent fashion. To ensure this, new guidelines for public affairs and public communication have been issued in DND. As well, testimony by the CDS and other senior officers and officials before parliamentary committees is very important, especially in addressing subjects such as readiness, risk levels, and issues of sustainability of operations. The CDS annual report to Parliament fulfils a similar function. In general, the interaction between Parliament and the military has grown positively, but much more needs to be done. This needs to be a continuous process because of the complexity of modern operations and the rapid pace of change. Often, however, the approach today is sporadic and reactive to crises as they arise. It needs to be more pro-active.

The seminar topic was then expanded by Mr. Simon Lunn, Secretary General of the NATO Parliamentary Assembly, as he presented "The NATO View." In his remarks he reinforced many of the points made in earlier presentations. Difficulties with the political/military interface are not unique to Canada. As well, the situation is becoming more difficult because the roles of the military are changing. Soldiers must be more aware of the new environments in which they serve, and the politicians must understand this as well. The question boils down to how far Parliament should go in the implementation of defence policy, especially the degree to which it can or should intrude into armed forces' conduct of operations. There must be transparency, but in NATO the amount varies between nations. As well, there is the added problem of converting former Warsaw Pact members to the general tenets of democracy, particularly the accountability of armed forces to the civil authority.

In the United States there is much oversight, but it is costly in terms of expert staff. The military does not like it, but it is a fact of life and they conform. The United Kingdom would be at the other end of the spectrum, where the armed forces are often perceived as a closed shop. Nations such as Germany are in the middle. Parliamentary committees, in his view, have a vital role to play in keeping the public and parliamentarians informed of military affairs. In the end, there should be no areas that are out of bounds to political scrutiny. There must be a division of power and responsibility and, above all, cooperation and respect demonstrated by all parties.

The NATO Parliamentary Assembly is in the forefront of educating parliamentarians on security issues and military affairs. The Assembly conducts a program of briefings and tours, with emphasis on the new security environment.

The seminar proceedings were closed with a summary presented by the Honorable Jean-Jaques Blais, PC, former Minister of National Defence. He opened by stating that the seminar had been excellent, had achieved its aim, and was probably one of the best conducted by the CDA Institute. There had been emphasis on Parliament, and this was appropriate. Progress has been made in the last few years to improve the knowledge of parliamentarians on defence issues and the military, but many shortcomings still exist.

He then commented on how shortcomings could be addressed. He warned that when dealing with politicians there could be unanticipated consequences. This was not a negative comment, but merely reality. As well, politicians are highly sensitive to the media and to polls. He also advised spending as much time working on the process as on the message. Ultimately, MPs must face the public for re-election and therefore a well informed public can be an important factor.

He reiterated the comments of the panel regarding the functions of Parliament and especially how the caucus system works. In caucus all MPs and ministers engage in unrestricted debate. Caucus proceedings are secret, so there is an open exchange of ideas on significant issues such as defence. The profiles of issues can be raised, and political support can be both gauged and generated. When he was Minister, he went further and organized briefing sessions on defence for his Cabinet colleagues. Today, there is emerging interest on the part of many parliamentarians regarding international relations and Canada's role. There is a realization that, because of its size and resources, Canada has an obligation to perform on the international stage. As well, emerging foreign policy, which stresses human security, is attractive to most parliamentarians. These

factors could be utilized as points of departure for CDA and other members of the pro-defence community when devising ways and means to educate parliamentarians on national defence and the military.

The President of the CDA Institute, Colonel Samuel Blakely (Retd), closed the proceedings and paid homage to the late Commander Robin Corneil (Retd), to whom the seminar was dedicated. His wise counsel and hard work organizing the event had produced a major success.

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