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How the CF View the Public

(and what to do about it)

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Introduction: How we see them

Throughout the last decade, unprecedented problems and challenges have beset the Canadian Forces. Increasing numbers of conflicts have been unleashed with the end of the Cold War, resulting in a greatly increased operational tempo. Military technology is changing rapidly, requiring massive changes in the way militaries have to organize and to fight. Canada is also changing demographically, with an aging population, resulting in a smaller pool of recruits to sustain the military.

Despite these profound changes, the Canadian Forces are finding it increasingly difficult to carry out its tasks. The public is silent about our current problems, and seems uninterested in our future needs. Without public support, the political will to address these problems and needs is lacking. As a result, major requirements like heavy lift naval helicopters remain unmet for almost a decade, and ordinary equipment like the truck fleet rusts out and has to be grounded. Our equipment is wearing out at a faster rate than it is being replaced. Satisfaction in a military career is decreasing, resulting in attrition outstripping recruiting. Lack of public interest in the Military and military careers also means the Canadian Forces is increasingly hard pressed to find the technically savvy people who are required to operate in the current environment. In the future, where will find people able to create and use the sophisticated tools required for the Revolution in Military Affairs?

When the public, through the Government, does express concern about the Canadian Forces, the results are, for service members, unexpected. Military concerns about recruiting are not met by expanding the number of qualified applicants who can enter, but by the public expressing a desire that these applicants have to come from certain age, gender and ethnic categories. Military concerns about discipline and operational effectiveness are not met by enforcing the use of the chain of command, but by the public expressing revulsion to these tools, and implementing new "parallel" tools, sometimes referred to as the 1-800 chain of command.

The public is thus seen as ignorant of our roles and duties, and uninterested in our needs. When they do get involved in military affairs, they can be seen as ignorant busybodies at best, and dangerous antagonists at worst. This erodes the bond between the military and the nation it protects, as serving members become cynical and resentful of the public they serve. This also works to our long- term disadvantage, as the service members project their negative feelings towards the public, the public will become even less inclined to be our partners and supporters.

Why our view?

Service members see the public in this jaundiced fashion because the general public, members of the media, and even members of the Government all seem so totally oblivious or ignorant of the Armed Forces. In my hometown of London, despite a continuous military presence since the 1800's, I am still greeted with surprise should I stop at a gas station or my daughter's school in uniform. The most common statement is "I didn't know we had any soldiers here", and open astonishment that there is a small Canadian Forces Base fronting on one of the major roads in the city. If people can truly be unaware of a large, open presence beside one of the most heavily traveled street in the city, how can they possibly be aware of the larger issues surrounding the Armed Forces?

The reasons for this lack of recognition are not hard to find. Few people have served in the Canadian Armed Forces. Only a small number of people react with service members outside of military communities and the bulk of the military is located away from Canada's major urban centres.

As direct experience in the military is limited, and memories of Canada's contributions in the conflicts of the 20th century fades, the public's image of the military is increasingly dominated by American images. The public's image of modern war is a CNN inspired vision of American led air armadas, rather than the day to day grind of vehicle check points, OP's and patrols of modern "peace enforcement" operations. Canadian media routinely use American terminology like "fatigues" and "foxholes" when referring to Canadian "combats" and "trenches". Given the lack of correct and current information, is it really a surprise when the members of the public are unable to recognize their own soldiers?

What drives service members is also a barrier to how we see the public. Most service members are still highly mission oriented, and choose to stay in the Armed Forces to satisfy their need for personal challenge and accomplishment. In contrast, the public seems content to seek lives of security and comfort, and to be motivated by personal gain. These opposing values lead to different interpretations of service life. Service members push for the chance to practice their various skills, while civilians look to the Armed forces as a place to get "free" marketable skills.

The experience of service members is another barrier to mutual understanding. Service members often have specialized training and interests related to their trade. As well, members who have deployed on operations have seen the world in ways that civilians cannot imagine. As Robert Kaplan observes in "An Empire Wilderness", service members often come from poor backgrounds, and as soldiers, live in materially poor conditions. The fact that bases are removed from most urban centers further isolates service members from the sensibilities of the metropolitan elites. Where we live, what we have done and where we come from determines how we interpret information. Civilians seem eager to send the military on difficult and dangerous peace enforcement missions, while soldiers question the wisdom of expending blood and treasure on such enterprises.

Consequences:

Civilians have little understanding of the roles and duties of the CF. Those who do encounter the Canadian Forces often find a force far different than what they may have imagined. When a story

about the military arises in the media, the usual reaction is a blank look and a shrug, since there is little or no connection between the viewer and the story. The gulf between the image of a capable, combat ready force and the reality of a small force plagued by problems is probably a source of dissonance in many people's minds. Since the Armed Forces do not play a part in the day to day affairs of most Canadians, it is probably easier to deal with dissonance by ignoring the entire issue.

Because the Canadian public has little connection to the Armed Forces, they are not fully able to understand the current needs of the military, much less the future requirements. Today, many of the people who join are seeking civilian values in the military, resulting in resources being spent on people who are not always willing or able to repay this investment. The military must contend with increasing turbulence, as people have to be constantly trained, and then replaced at great expense. Highly skilled personnel in many fields are leaving and taking their skill sets with them into civilian life, starving the Armed Forces of valuable human capital at a time when it is urgently needed.

In addition to the direct consequences for the military, Canada will have great difficulty implementing and enforcing such initiatives as the "Mine treaty" or the "International War Crimes Tribunal". Without military resources to provide transport, logistics support and protection for investigators, how does anyone imagine such treaties will become more than Public Relations exercises? The Armed forces will need to maintain or increase its size, deploy to dangerous situations, and perhaps sustain casualties in support of such initiatives. Without public understanding and support, this will not be possible. The collapse of treaties for this reason will damage Canada's international standing, and hamper other diplomatic efforts that the Government might attempt to undertake.

Solutions:

In order to change our perception of the public, the Armed Forces must take action to educate the public, to turn them from indifferent and ignorant bystanders into our friends and supporters. Many steps are being taken, but a broader and more sustained effort is needed to mobilize the public to support our military role.

One way is to increase the military presence of the Armed Forces in the urban areas of Canada. Regular Force battlegroups preparing to deploy overseas should do their work up exercises, like "Storming Bear" in and around urban centres. Not only is this more realistic for the troops, but the local population can also see the soldiers in action. Reserve troops should also be encouraged to do training in their home towns, not in the Armoury classrooms, but right on the streets.

Service members are at the point of balance between the Headquarters and the public. Use them as the conduit of information to the public, and to report on the results. Soldiers should be encouraged to speak in public forums. Most service members are proud of their accomplishments, and would welcome the opportunity to present themselves to the public. Canadian publications should be encouraged to present more stories *by* service members, rather than just *about* them.

The CF Liaison council is another avenue of approach. Reserve service members should speak about the benefits of their military training through company newsletters, and if appropriate, company external communications like Web sites. Service members should be positive role members in the public eye through both word and deed, and make the profession of arms an attractive calling once again.

Conclusion:

If we continue to see the public as indifferent, or worse, as enemies, then we risk alienating the public, with adverse effects on continuing public and political support. Lack of public support will starve the Armed Forces of the new recruits, the human capital, which is needed to sustain and renew the Armed Forces as we attempt to make the transition to 21st century conditions.

We need people who have the interest in the Armed Forces to make informed contributions to public debate, and provide informed support in the political arena. We need people who have the dedication to join and, for example, use their UNIX programming skills to create new tools for our use, rather than people who see the Armed Forces as a free resource to gain these skills, taking valuable time and resources from us.

In order for the Armed Forces to see the public as partners, we must move into the public spotlight and conduct our own campaign to educate and win over the public. In order to remain viable and effective, the Armed Forces has to convert the public from ignorant bystanders to partners and supporters.