

## **CDA INSTITUTE - 17th ANNUAL SEMINAR**

### **CDA Conference Speech David Pratt, M.P.**

#### *The Attitudes of the Canadian Public to the Canadian Forces*

**February 22, 2001  
The Chateau Laurier Hotel**

I would like to begin by thanking the organizers of the Conference for inviting me here today. It is an honour to have the opportunity to participate on such a distinguished panel.

As an M.P. (albeit a small fish in the parliamentary pond) and a student of history, I have found it very interesting to reflect on the sometimes strained relations between soldiers and politicians. Earlier this week, I attended a meeting of NATO parliamentarians in Brussels where Lord Robertson, among other subjects, spoke briefly about the antagonism between Churchill and Montgomery. After the war, Montgomery went to NATO to become the Deputy Strategic Allied Commander Europe. He was described by Britain's wartime prime minister as follows: "In War, Churchill said, Montgomery was indomitable, in peace, insufferable, and in NATO, thank god, invisible."

Of course, that has precious little to do with today's topic, but I thought it was a good story, and perhaps illustrative of the often subtle dynamics between the business of soldiering, that is defence; and the business of politics, which mixes offence with defence, but seeks to find the appropriate balance in the context of what is perceived as the public good. Certainly, public attitudes towards the soldier and soldiering are important to an informed national defence policy.

In preparing for this discussion, one of the first things I did was to give the Minister's Office a call and asked them to provide me with their most current information on public attitudes on the Canadian Forces. I wasn't sure what to expect, and as a result, I was pleasantly surprised by the quality, quantity and timeliness of information that I was sent. Frankly, I just had no idea that the Canadian Forces were as image conscious as they apparently are.

Should the Canadian Forces be concerned about their image? I would argue that they should. As an important Canadian institution, they should care deeply about how they are perceived. Understanding how others see us is just as important for institutions as it is for individuals. Good data can help us understand perceptions - not just whether or not we are perceived in a positive light, but what the basis of those perceptions are. Only then can we assess if current communications strategies are having the desired impact, and if they are not, then a sound understanding of public opinion can provide a foundation to further develop more effective strategies.

That is why public opinion polls are important for institutions like the Canadian Forces. In some respects they are like holding up a mirror to the organization. If what is reflected back is positive

and accurate, then clearly the organization has not only done its job but it has been able to get its message across. If you are a leader in an organization like the Canadian Forces, then clearly you want to ensure that people understand what it is you do so that you can be properly judged on your performance.

At the core of the package of information I received was a rather thorough Pollara public opinion poll of a couple of hundred pages. It was produced three months ago for the Department and is entitled "Canadians' Opinions of the Canadian Forces and Related Military Issues." Similar polls have been done in previous years.

The poll itself was conducted between September 27 and October 15 among a random sample of 1,537 adult Canadians. The sample population is generally representative of the Canadian population in terms of age, gender, region, mother tongue and income, although the respondents were slightly better educated than the general population. The results of a survey of this nature are considered accurate to within + or - 2.5% nineteen times out of twenty.

Like any public opinion poll, this one contains both good news and bad, although I would have to say there is a lot more good than bad. It also contains what could be construed as inconsistent information as well as information that, in some respects, displays a somewhat incomplete understanding of Canada's defence policy. Overall, however, I came to the conclusion that Canadians were reasonably well informed about their military as well as defence and security issues. Moreover, I would have to say that in many important areas (and this will not come as startling news) the views of the average Canadian are a considerable distance ahead of where we politicians are in terms of public policy.

So what does the poll tell us? First of all, it tells us that 81% of Canadians believe that the Canadian Forces are doing a good job. Most of that figure can be traced back to our involvement in peacekeeping and the generally positive media coverage that our troops receive. While that 81% is a darn good figure, what is less encouraging is that it has dropped 4% in one year. Interestingly, however, of the 9% who don't feel that the CF is doing a good job, many place the blame not on the CF itself, but rather on external factors beyond their control such as old or obsolete equipment and lack of funding.

Also worth noting is the fact that CF personnel are running ahead of the CF in general in terms of a positive impression. Almost 9 of 10 Canadians 88% have a strong or somewhat positive impression of CF personnel. A somewhat lower figure of just over 6 in 10 Canadians 61% believe that the CF leadership is doing a good job. Generals and Colonels take note.

In response to the statement: "The Canadian Forces are an important national institution," 93% of those polled strongly or somewhat agreed with that remark. Similarly, 86% strongly or somewhat agreed with the statement that a strong military is important to Canada's international standing and 83% agreed that the Canadian Forces is a symbol of pride for Canada. In the trust and reliance category of the poll, 94% believed that Canada needs the Canadian Forces. All in all, I think you would agree that these are pretty decent figures.

One aspect of the poll that I found quite intriguing was a comparison that was done of favourable impressions towards various institutions. In this comparison, the CF ranked well in relation to the other institutions compared. The RCMP was at the top of the heap with 94% being favourably disposed. The CF was close behind at 93% with NATO at 85%, the US Armed Forces at 81%, the United Nations Security Council at 77% and the poor old Canadian Security Intelligence Service bringing up the rear at 54%. Before anybody in this room strains their arm muscles patting their own backs, it should be noted that the core of those who viewed the RCMP very favourably as opposed to somewhat favourably was 61% compared to 48% for the CF. Perhaps the lesson in this for the Forces is that they should hire the Disney corporation to do their marketing.

The poll results on the mandate and role of the Canadian Forces are where public perception is not necessarily in accord with the reality of defence policy. For instance, 54% of respondents identified peacekeeping as the role most closely associated with the Canadian Forces. That was followed by the protection and defence of Canadian sovereignty at 24% and disaster relief at 13%. This is no doubt a result of the amount of attention the media has given our peacekeepers and to a lesser extent the instances that we have had over the past few years relating to disaster relief. Sovereignty protection for three quarters of the population is largely out of sight and thus out of mind.

One of the areas that impressed me most about the poll's results were the high levels of public support for a wide variety of potential operations. It will come as no surprise that fully 99% of respondents supported CF operations to help their fellow Canadians through a crisis. Aid to the civil power by assisting police had the support of 93% of respondents. It is perhaps quite noteworthy that assisting the United States to defend North America received 89% while defending Canadian sovereignty was two points lower at 87%. Support for preventing the spread of nuclear weapons also ranked high at 85%.

Canadians' views on the pace of operations are noteworthy. Just over six in ten of us believe the tempo of operations has increased over the past decade. And an astounding 86% believe that the CF will be asked to do more over the next decade.

Former Minister of Foreign Affairs, Lloyd Axworthy would be very interested in this poll's results. Support for what could be described as human security type operations was remarkably high – in fact, much higher than I expected. Fully 95% of respondents support delivering humanitarian aid to civilians in war torn regions, 93% support monitoring peace agreements after the fighting has stopped with the same level of support for providing safe environments for civilians in war zones. Support for protecting human rights in fragile democracies was an equally impressive 89%. When it comes to UN operations, Canadians support peacekeeping at a level of 91%. The figure slips only marginally in relation to peacemaking, which is defined as "the use of force to protect civilians and restore peace to war torn countries." Still, the fact that almost 9 of 10 Canadians (88% to be exact) are prepared to support this type of robust intervention is rather significant.

One of the most significant aspects of the poll in my view relates to the general security situation. Of those polled, 64 % believe that the world is less safe now than it was a decade ago.

Only 28% believe that the world is safer. Interestingly, women are significantly more pessimistic than men. One could perhaps have been excused for believing that the end of the Cold War and the threat of nuclear annihilation might have caused people to be a little more optimistic. But clearly this isn't the case as far as the general public is concerned.

The five most serious current threats to the well being of Canada as described by respondents are not necessarily what I expected. At the top of this list are illegal drugs, followed by biological and chemical weapons, ethnic violence and terrorism, nuclear weapons and international crime. The five most important future threats to Canadian society were listed as: 1) a major natural disaster, 2) a major ethnic war and 3) a major terrorist incident 4) a computer attack by a terrorist or rogue state and 5) a major industrial or environmental disaster. Were we to base our defence policy on the Canadian public's perception of various threats, we would probably have an anti-drug unit within the CF, perhaps have more bulldozers than tanks to deal with natural disasters, a greater capability to combat chemical and biological weapons, a larger JTF2 counter terrorism operation as well as more resources dedicated to defending against cyber-warfare.

Again, on the issue of threats, one issue that has been getting lots of news coverage lately is National Missile Defence. I could not help but notice that the threat of a missile being launched at North America was well down the list in terms its relative importance to Canadians. It ranked as number 7 out of ten or 36%. While it is interesting that the vast majority of our countrymen don't see the threat that NMD is intended to counter, over three quarters (76% to be more accurate) believe that Canada should assist the U.S. in developing an anti-missile defence system for North America. In terms of NORAD operations, 88% support Canada's continued participation with the Americans with 50% strongly supporting and 38% somewhat supporting. Overall, 82% agreed that defence is critical to the Canada-U.S. relationship.

The level of support for NATO is not nearly as impressive. It stands at 75% with those strongly supporting at 22% and those somewhat supporting at 53%. The strong core support of 22% is down 3 points from last year. Nevertheless, Canadians seem cognizant of our NATO obligations since fully 84% agreed that Canada should send forces if one of our NATO allies was attacked.

One of the poll results that I sure will please those of you in this room is that 91% of respondents believe it is important for Canada to maintain a modern combat ready military. While the vast majority view peacekeeping as a critical role, 89% also believe that peacekeeping requires combat ready forces. When asked the question "Do you agree that the Canadian Forces has the necessary equipment/sufficient personnel to carry out operations at home and abroad?" the answers were unequivocal. Only 25% agreed there are sufficient personnel while 67% disagreed. Only 33% agreed there is enough equipment, while 55% disagreed.

With respect to resources, almost three-quarters of those surveyed 72% believe that over the next decade, the defence budget should increase. Only 15% feel it should remain the same. A bare 5% believe it should decrease somewhat, and a meager 2% believe it should decrease a lot. While that may be the good news, the bad news is that less than 4 in 10 Canadians (37%) believe DND is managing its budget well.

So what do we conclude from all this. Well very generally, we can say that the Forces are perceived in quite a good light. Indeed, many other institutions would envy the approval ratings enjoyed by Canada's military. Still, according to the poll, officers and budget managers have a ways to go in terms of improving their standing with the people of Canada. The poll will, I hope, send a strong signal to our friends at Finance that the DND budget needs to be bolstered. It is interesting that even as Canadians feel that the Forces are under-funded, they are also convinced that the Forces will be called upon to do even more in the future. This is clearly an instance where public policy needs to catch up to public opinion.

While I take comfort in the fact that the key messages in the Pollara poll are strongly supportive of defence and our Canadian Forces, the public's priorities continue to lie elsewhere. When defence is stacked up against other issues and concerns, it continues to take a back seat. This is perhaps the most significant challenge for the future. It is a challenge for those of you in this room, for the Department, for myself and for my Parliamentary colleagues. Again, there is comfort to be taken from the data before us. It is apparent to me that the more informed Canadians are about defence issues, the more supportive they are about the needs of the Canadian Forces. I do think however that this challenge must move beyond merely informing, to proactively advocating change within the current system of priorities.

Given the range of general public policy issues that Canadians describe as important to them, defence and foreign affairs seldom crack the top ten. How do you mobilize public opinion on defence and security issues in a country like Canada where the vast majority of people live within 250 kms of the greatest superpower in the world's history and feel very secure as a result? How do you convince people that MacKenzie King was wrong when he said before the Second World War that Canada is like a fireproof house, far from the area of conflagration? For that job, it needs the help not only of organizations like the CDA, but politicians, bureaucrats, the media and other opinion makers.

The time to engage this public debate in Canada has never been better. Those of us in the defence community, particularly those of us that recall our history, all have a responsibility to ensure that this debate takes place, and that the debate is informed, direct and, I hope, enlightened. I am looking forward to working with all of you on this important matter.