

Keynote Address

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"The Canadian Forces and the Public"

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It is one of the more serious self-indulgences of Canadian society that we lose the capacity in good times to reflect on the contingent exigencies of bad times. The October 2000 mini budget announced no provisions, for example, for what might happen in more difficult economic times. The recent Speech from the Throne was similarly disengaged from the notion of any downside planning. The election campaign that divided the two events chronologically was devoid of any debate on what might happen if the longest economic boom in post-war history actually came to an end.

This same attitude describes all too accurately the attitude of the Canadian people towards our Armed Forces. I use the term "Armed" here not without some courage. I understand some versions of official speak in some areas now prefer the more benign "Canadian Forces" leaving out the reference to "Armed". I hope this is more semantic than prophetic – but that is a debate for another conference.

Don't get me wrong on attitude. Canadians respect and care about our forces. Approval of the work done by our forces is always high. The response to the recent call by CBC's *This Hour Has 22 Minutes* to send messages through their Website to our troops serving abroad was overwhelming, and heartening.

I also think Minister Eggleton, Deputy Minister Judd and CDS Baril have all made progress on salaries, wages, benefits and kit procurement for our Armed Forces. They deserve credit for that, which as a citizen, I offer without hesitation.

But the broad issue in civil-military relations is greater than respect, affection or love. People, most people of good will and balance, love puppies – but do not depend on them in times of war, national emergency or natural disaster. The last election campaign saw no discussion of defence policy. Not one serious speech or debate took place on the subject. Not one question was posed from any journalist on the televised debates. No theme days on defence were organized by any of the leaders or parties.

There are several theories about this. The warm maple syrup theory encompasses notions like "there is a national consensus on defence, no serious partisan differences on the large questions, no imminent cause for concern or controversy".

To those bromides let me add: "the economic boom will continue forever," "nuclear proliferation among rogue states is not a problem," "things look evermore peaceful in places like the Middle East, the Straights of Taiwan, Africa, Columbia and the Caucasus.

And there are others: "the Chinese, the Iraqis and the Iranians have probably made little progress towards weapons of mass destruction and their delivery systems," "natural disasters that need genuine and rapid response capacity are diminishing in number," "the need for peacekeeping or NATO intervention will likely diminish," and "the European Defence Force will come together and be deployable quickly, thereby diminishing the need for any Canadian role."

None of the above is either true in any way, or accurately presages the strategic challenge we face in a multinational country buffeted by a multi-polar, evermore disorderly world. Nor does it

accurately reflect the duties we will have in the defence of alliance interests, our own national security or international legal jurisdiction on issues like crimes against humanity.

And while the usual mix of think tanks, officers' associations and proponents of the left wing and more centrist view of defence and spending priorities will be heard from, one key group will be silent in the coming debate over the broad policy choices ahead. That group will be the leadership of the Canadian Armed Forces.

Yes, they will appear when summoned before parliamentary committees, they will make careful, non-controversial speeches about how well the forces manage with existing resources and they will lobby quietly within government for more resources. And, somehow, they will manage with less exceedingly well. But in a sense, much of these are beside the point.

I can think of no definition of civil-military relations or any doctrine of democratic supremacy that can justify muzzling Forces Leadership on what tools we need to do the job, what the overall service complement needs to be, or what an expanded reserve force – especially in the Air and Land elements – could mean. We need to know from Forces Leadership what the real costs are of shortfalls in recruiting, in terms of the integrity and capacity of the forces. These are issues on which the country, the media, and Parliament have the right to hear from military leadership – and not through think pieces, not through safe articles in policy or military journals, not through the helpful but essentially “can do” text of CDS’s report to Parliament. These are all helpful and should be commended as far as they go. But they are, in comparison to the red beef of real policy debate and controversy, a bit of a “cuisine minceur” that leaves the plate a little empty.

It is not that the Public Affairs Directorate at DND is not doing a good job...because that is neither true nor fair. They are doing an excellent job. But they are there to describe and inform about the forces, present defence policy and armed forces activities. They are not there to debate what policy should be in the future.

Our military leadership on the other hand have a duty to the men and women under their command, to the families of the men and women who venture into harms way in support of the national interest, to speak clearly and without fear or prejudice on what defence and strategic exigencies require in terms of public policy, financial investment and parliamentary debate and support.

Let me deal with the US’s proposal for a National Missile Defence as a case in point. While many scoffed at President Reagan’s Star Wars missile shield program, the mere fact that America was prepared to invest serious money in this pursuit sent a message to Secretary Gorbachev about the west’s resolve to outspend that was, in and of itself, constructive and positive.

Similarly, the notion of North America and our European allies sending a message to Rogue states, fundamentalists seeking power in non Rogue states and criminal/terrorist elements eager to destabilize the world, to the effect that we remain committed to national and international security is essentially constructive and utterly non-hostile.

With all due respect to both our Russian and Chinese friends, the latter have been less than circumspect with regard to the client nations to whom they have shipped advanced missiles, and

the former have not been fully able to police their own arsenal. The fact that the Russians would choose within the last few days to do a multi-origin, land, sea, and air test of its strategic missiles, as reported on February 16 – a test planned long before the present controversy – only serves to underline the strategic issues on which NATO must engage.

As will become clear as this policy engagement emerges, there is little to back up the proposition that innovative North America missile defence violates the ABM agreement signed by President Nixon and Secretary Brezhnev. That treaty provided for constraint on the ABM systems that can be deployed and for a notice period in the event of one side needing to change. We are, surely, at the early stages both in the debate and the development of the necessary technology.

As well, 1972 was a bipolar world in which the allies and client states of the USA and USSR were largely constrained and linked by the broad system of deterrents on each side. Today's world is very different. Risks are more diffused. Terrors and weapons of mass destruction have proliferated. Denying that reality is itself a contribution to the weakening of national security. Be that as it may, we should view this debate now before the Canadian public as an opportunity of significant importance.

I had an unofficial sense, for example, of a clear difference in the views of Canadian military leadership and the present government on the National Missile Defence project – specifically with regard to our potential support of it, at least before the Prime Minister's visit to Washington. This had the potential of becoming a soft whisper campaign that would prevent Canadians from getting to hear how our military leadership actually feels about this issue and why.

No one disputes for a nanosecond that our duly elected government will and should decide on this as on other critical issues. But surely, on a matter as broad and important as this, Canadians should be heard through consultations, consultative referenda and through parliamentary debate before the government decides. And surely, in this context, the leadership of our Armed Forces should not be artificially silenced. I know of no provision in the National Defence Act, no definition of democracy, no view of insubordination that would support suppressing the views, expertise and strategic insights of our military leadership on this issue.

This is not a matter without controversy in the United States administration or Congress. Our European allies have strong views, as do our Russian neighbours and Chinese trading partners. So the notion that there would be no debate in Canada seems almost unnatural; imagine how much more unnatural it would be if we had a debate in Canada and everyone but the military were free to participate. And if a Prime Minister or Defence Minister chose to suppress this kind of participation, (which I do not believe they will do) this would, in a sense, be a separate issue and a more serious matter.

The challenge before us is therefore to change the civil-military discourse so that the facts and choices – as understood and expressed by Armed Forces Leadership – are an integral part of the national debate. How do we do this? Well, the culture of private obedience and public silence cannot change overnight. No Defence Minister, no CDS, no Deputy Minister of National Defence can achieve that change by themselves. Even if they all wished to, it would be hard if not impossible to do. In a sense, the way in which we can use the present context would be by changing fundamentally the operational context for the debate.

Clearly, we have a defence policy that anticipates that any serious military threat to Canada's security would, in the context of American strategic integrity, and with the myriad of mutual defence commitments, bring support from our American neighbour. Any American decision that NMD is a vital part of national security has a direct impact on our national security whether we sign up or decline. While I genuinely believe we should sign up – for the same reason we tested cruise missiles and facilitated allied flight and armoured training on Canadian soil – this is a rare and important opportunity for a broad national debate.

For example, we could hold a debate that posed the larger question of national security, and addressed the strategic role of combat capability, long lift capacity and the joint intelligence effort necessary to sustain and strengthen Canada's security.

That debate should not only be full and in Parliament, but could also involve an open and broad national plebiscite. Why not open the debate to the Canadian people? Parliament can debate and government will decide. But why can't the people have a say? Why would we not have town hall meetings across the Country and in the media; on campuses, in union halls, in church basements, in corporate boardrooms and around the family table. Those who oppose all defence spending will certainly engage – as will the anti-American lobby, which is large and powerful.

Reasoned opposition from those who question the technology, who worry about older treaties, will also be part of the debate – as it should be. But the opportunity to advance the case both for a new look at national security, a new approach to Continental Missile defence and the modernization of our Armed Forces would be compelling and real. Citizens who, like me, want a larger and more modern Armed Forces, a stronger reserve, more modern kit, and a budget closer to 15 billion a real terms as opposed to the 9 billion in real terms we now have, would have to marshal our case and our arguments. And, in this context, military leadership would have a key role relative to actual on-the-ground, at-sea and in-the-air consequences of the choices being contemplated.

The risk of this issue being resolved by quiet government fiat or, worse, perceived flip-flop is real. And strategically, in terms of making the decision cohesively as a nation, leaving this risk unattended is not good. Not good for Foreign and Defence Policy and its integrity; not good for national security; not good for the Canadian armed forces or their fellow taxpayers nation-wide.

I often hear from my friends in the forces that those who want no meaningful expenditure on defence represent a cloistered academic elite uneducated in the realities of international threats, international terrorism or aid contingent to the civil power.

Well, let me suggest that, while some of that is true, those who care about defence and who want to see an expanded role and budget might also be viewed as a small elite often eagerly preaching to each other or to the converted. Often, proponents of enhanced attention to national security are prevented for national security reasons from disclosing what they know about real threats. Often, much of what people feel they cannot disclose can be found on a thousand websites across the world through open intelligence research. But the truth of the matter is that, in a democracy, the case for more funding, the case for NMD must be made in public. President Bush was clear on

NMD during his election campaign. Republicans in the Congress and Senate were clear and are clear on the issue.

The Prime Minister does not have a blank cheque mandate on this issue, as it did not come up in the campaign – which means we have an opportunity to develop a national consensus through debate and discussion. The technology is not yet at the point of delivery. We have a reasonable time frame to engage.

My hope this morning is that we embrace a change in the dynamics of civil-military relations that will enhance democracy, strengthen the chain of command, better inform the Canadian public and engage Parliament fully.

The present context is one in which defence takes on public and service challenges, with constrained and diminished resources, while lobbying for more resources. When there are problems or incidents, they happen right in the media spotlight and achieve massive public notice. The day-to-day struggle to do more with less, the strategic issues at risk, the reality of choices we have to make are not part of the public mix. No wonder, we often see more facile debates that compare MRIs to CF-18s, or new armoured vehicles to computers for classrooms.

The role general strategic capacity plays in national security, enhanced trade and global mobility for Canadians, including safety at home and abroad is never argued. Well, if during relatively good times no real increase in defence spending emerges, where will we be when we face a serious economic setback?

We can, in the typical Canadians way, put off the debate and try to muddle through. We can easily liberate military leadership from taking a major role in the public debate. But let me be clear: Canada, indeed Canadians, will pay a high price. The cost of delay and of the leadership of our military opting out of the public debate would, in my view, be very steep indeed.