HILLIER AND THE NEW GENERATION OF GENERALS: THE CDS, THE POLICY AND THE TROOPS

Douglas Bland

General Rick Hillier, Chief of the Defence Staff (CDS) of the Canadian Forces, is to some a larger-than-life personality who dominates every aspect of Canada's commitment to the Afghan people. No previous CDS has commanded such close attention from the prime minister or played as central a role in the direction of Canada's defence and foreign policies. Is he merely an eccentric aberration or is he the first of the "new breed" of post-Cold-War senior military officers who will occupy the CDS's office? Douglas Bland considers this fundamental question as politicians in Ottawa begin to ask: "After Hillier, who commands?"

Pour certains, le général Rick Hillier, chef de l'état-major de la Défense (CEMD) des Forces canadiennes, est une personnalité hors du commun qui domine tous les aspects de l'engagement du Canada en Afghanistan. Aucun de ses prédécesseurs n'a bénéficié d'autant d'attention de la part d'un premier ministre ni joué un rôle aussi central dans la défense et la politique étrangère du pays. L'homme est-il un original inclassable ou le premier d'une « nouvelle lignée » de militaires de haut rang appelés, en cette période de l'après-guerre froide, à occuper les fonctions de CEMD ? Douglas Bland soulève cette question fondamentale à l'heure où, à Ottawa on commence à se demander qui commandera après son départ.

Brooke Claxton, arguably Canada's most effective minister of national defence, managed the transformation of Canada's armed forces from 1946 to 1954 thorough the turbulent post-Second-World-War demobilization and into the dangerous early years of NATO. His fundamental objective, at the direction of Prime Minister Mackenzie King, was to bring Canada's armed forces, the control of which had been more or less usurped by the Allies, once again under Ottawa's control.

Claxton's first challenge was to rein in the cohort of young, veteran wartime generals, air marshals and admirals, who enjoyed wide public support — especially from the thousands of veterans they had recently commanded — and who expected Canadian governments to follow uncritically their professional advice in peacetime as they had, however unwillingly, in wartime. Few of these officers, moreover, were shy about expressing their concerns openly to members of Parliament and the public.

So serious was the contest between these postwar officers and the government that Claxton was forced to warn the officers that henceforth there would be "one department and one boss...if an officer cannot be loyal [to the government] and silent he should get out [of the service]. A government that wishes to stay a government," he continued, "would have no choice but to replace [any officer] who was not content to express his opinions in private and to conform to public policy. I am," he declared more than once, "all for silent soldiers and sailors too."

Through the next few years trouble between the government and military leaders continued. Some, like Lieutenant General Guy Simons, left noisily and accused the government of neglect. Others, more or less on their own, continued to make what they considered prudent arrangements with traditional allies as the Cold War evolved. In the late 1950s, these continuing strains and confusions infected every defence policy question — Canada/United States defence cooperation, nuclear weapons acquisitions and deployment, and the Avro Arrow project — and they climaxed during the October 1962 Cuban Missile crisis, when the Diefenbaker government almost lost control of the armed forces completely.

Although many observers believe that defence policy and civil-military relations have no influence on Canadian federal

elections, that notion is certainly challenged by the defeat of John Diefenbaker in 1963. No matter what scholars might suggest, Mike Pearson concluded that the Diefenbaker "government's mishandling of the defence issue was the main reason for [Diefenbaker's] downfall." Pearson was not about to let the same thing happen to his government, and he sent the young, self-confident Paul Hellyer, who was defence minister from 1963 to 1967, to defence headquarters to bring the defence establishment to heel.

"Paul the Reformer," as one scholar dubbed him, had a touch of Claxton in his outlook. He identified the "defence problem" as caused by the unwieldy command structure headed by navy, army and air force chiefs of staff, each of whom had equal authority under the *National Defence Act,* and who were determined to advance their own service over the others. As Hellyer noted immediately, the real defence policy process was for each service chief "to try to get you alone so they can force their own views on you without any coordination with anyone else."

On his first day in office Hellyer was convinced of the urgent need to break this logjam, and in May 1964 he tabled in the House of Commons "an Act to amend the *National Defence Act";* that is, an act to transfer all the authority of the three service chiefs to a new position, "the chief of the defence staff." The bill passed quickly and without amendment, and in late 1964 Air Chief Marshal Miller was appointed the first chief of the defence staff. Although the formal unification of the armed services into a single service did not occur until 1968, the deed had been done once the chain-of-command ended in the office of one officer who held complete authority for the direction of Canada's armed forces. Hellyer may have solved one problem, but only by creating another.

The chief of the defence staff (CDS) of the Canadian Forces is appointed by order-in-council and serves "at pleasure." He or she has specific authority based in law, specifically in the *National Defence Act*, but also in custom. Neither the CDS nor any member of the Canadian Forces is a "public servant." The CDS is not a delegate of the minister of national defence and does not draw his authority from the minister's authority. Neither the minister nor the prime minister can legally act in the place of the CDS by, for instance, issuing orders directly to any member or unit of the Canadian Forces. In all cases orders from the government to the Canadian Forces must be passed through the CDS to subordinate officers.

> So serious was the contest between these postwar officers and the government that Claxton was forced to warn them that henceforth there would be "one department and one boss... if an officer cannot be loyal [to the government] and silent he should get out [of the service]. A government that wishes to stay a government" he continued, "would have no choice but to replace [any officer] who was not content to express his opinions in private and to conform to public policy. I am," he declared more than once, "all for silent soldiers and sailors too."

Paradoxically, though the civil authority — civilians elected to Parliament — is responsible and accountable to Canadians for the civil control of the Canadian Forces, governments cannot effect such control without the cooperation of the CDS. For example, the CDS protects the government from improper military interference in political affairs, by disciplining members of the Canadian Forces who step into this arena, something that in law politicians cannot do. The CDS also maintains "good order and discipline" in the Canadian Forces by controlling the behaviour of members and units of the armed forces living in our midst. The CDS alone can change — or not — the government's defence policy intentions into practical outcomes. While the government can dismiss a CDS who might resist its directions, it must eventually appoint another officer as CDS if it is to give orders and directions to the Canadian Forces. Thus, the CDS shares with the civil authority a degree of responsibility and accountability for the civil control of the armed forces.

The CDS is the government's official and formal policy advisor *inter alia* on matters of national defence policy as they may involve the armed forces; the organization and development of military capabilities; and especially in the command and operations of the Canadian Forces at home and abroad. The government, unless the prime minister wishes to act as his or her own military advisor, is effectively obliged to consult the CDS in these and other matters or risk an open conflict with the CDS and possibly the entire senior cadre of the officer corps, as Paul Hellyer did throughout his term in office. The prime minister, of course, is not obliged to follow the CDS's counsel, but if the government were to act contrary to it, the prime minister and not the CDS would be accountable for the consequences.

"Shared responsibility" and "rightful authority in law" placed in the hands of one officer create a degree of instability in Canadian civil-military relations, a fact recognized by some experts when the office was created in 1964. Richard Malone, publisher of the *Winnipeg Free Press* and an influential militia officer, for instance, warned Hellyer that the proposed chief of the defence staff "would become a 'supremo' who would overpower the minister." Better, he suggested, an inef-

fective, divided command system than a unified system that would unite all the implicit political power of the military under one officer.

Yet over the 40-year history of the office Malone's warning seems overstated. Chiefs of the defence staff have exercised their rightful and implicit authority in a very nuanced and responsible way, mainly because they wholeheartedly support the principle that the civil authority must ultimately control and direct the Canadian Forces and Canada's national defence. Nevertheless, policy disagreements between chiefs of the defence staff and governments, especially during defence emergencies, have from time-to-time exposed a fault-line in Canadian civil-military relations. Sometimes the break has been dramatic, as during the 1970s FLQ crisis and the Somalia scandal in the 1990s. Some observers believe that Canada is in another such situation today, as the government and the Canadian Forces and the CDS struggle with the consequences of Canada's commitments in Afghanistan.

General Hillier is at the centre of this controversy. Almost accidentally he is the architect of Canada's defence policy, a situation forced on him by the absence of any coherent indication from Prime Minister Paul Martin on which way to move Canada's defence and foreign policy. The country in 2008 is at war. That fact propels defence policy, the armed forces and the CDS into the media spotlight and Hillier's decisions onto the floor of the House of Commons. Hillier is a strong advocate for his views on war and peace and the Canadian Forces, and he is unusually popular — for a Canadian general — with many Canadians. These circumstances, and the General Hiller's skill at presenting them, appear to critics to give the CDS an inappropriate and disproportionate influence over Canada's foreign and defence policies, and even over who might be appointed minister of national defence.

Critics of the CDS's place in public life suggest, therefore, that civil control over the armed forces and policy and a change in Canadian military strategy in Afghanistan will occur only after General Hillier is replaced or decides to retire. Those who hold this view, however, have missed the fundamental shift, the renaissance, if you will, of the professional spirit in the officer corps of the Canadian Forces.

The Liberal government of Jean Chrétien was particularly neglectful. Reports at the time — never refuted by officials or officers in Ottawa then or since — suggest that the facts about casualties and dead and severely wounded soldiers incurred in the Balkans wars were hidden from Canadians, for fear that the information would prompt a public outcry to properly equip the Canadian Forces for the battles the government had sent them to fight. Spending money on the Canadian Forces, even in these circumstances, was anathema to Chrétien, and so the soldiers suffered, mostly in silence.

The change is now so deeply embedded in the officer corps that in all likelihood General Hillier will be replaced by another officer who holds very much to Hillier's views of the role of the CDS in Canadian public policy.

Three indelible and intertwined experiences at the close of the twentieth century engulfed the Canadian Forces and shaped General Hillier and every other senior officer who might replace him as CDS. First, he and they were all junior commanders — majors, colonels and naval captains — at the end of the Cold War. Without much pause to reflect on the changes in international relations at that time, they were flung willy-nilly into the insanity of the Balkans War. Little other than discipline and order prepared them for what they experienced there. The best officers made sensible adjustments to the circumstances of this and other "wars among the people" into which their government had thrust them. Armies learn by doing, but it's always the hard way to learn.

While they learned about the so-called new wars, they learned something else as well. And that was that the Canadian governments and most Canadians cared little about what they were doing or the effects the wars were having on them or their soldiers. The Liberal government of Jean Chrétien was particularly neglectful. Reports at the time — never refuted by officials or officers in Ottawa then or since — suggest that the facts about casualties and dead and severely wounded soldiers incurred in the Balkans wars were hidden from Canadians, for fear that the information would prompt a public outcry to properly equip the Canadian Forces for the battles the government had sent them to fight. Spending money on the Canadian Forces, even in these circumstances, was anathema to Chrétien, and so the soldiers suffered, mostly in silence.

But young Hillier and his comrades experienced the slight and the damage first hand, and the experience soured their attitudes toward Canadian politicians and most of their senior military leaders in Ottawa.

The Somali debacle was the second formative event for most young officers in the 1990s, whether they were in the theatre or not. Indeed, for almost everyone at the time "the theatre" was the small hearing room

National Defence

General Rick Hillier, the chief of defence staff, visits Canadian troops on the frontline in Afghanistan. His popularity, writes Douglas Bland, is largely due to "Canadians' willingness to trust what he says."

on Slater Street in Ottawa, where the television cameras revealed to officers and soldiers across the country a senior cadre of the Canadian Forces that had so obviously lost its way. They watched officers on the witness stand trying to shirk the consequences of their careless decisions; trying to "pass the buck" for their failures to their subordinates; and trying to hide their errors by confessing ignorance of the most basic military norms for deploying and commanding military units on active operations.

The most shocking revelation for officers who had not served in the upper ranks of National Defence Headquarters were the confessions by their leaders that they had surrendered easily and routinely to mere public servants matters requiring professional competence and judgement — matters, these junior officers had been taught, fundamental to their raison-d'être as officers. In the aftermath of the inquiry, many junior and middle-ranking officers far from civilian ears admitted to a deep sense of professional shame at what they had witnessed during the inquiry into the Somalia operation.

Finally, this cadre of middle-ranking officers and some of their rising leaders came to resent politicians' expectations that loyalty to Canada and obedience to government policy should be taken by officers to mean loyalty at all costs to the partisan interests of ministers and their

political party. Time and again, they had listened to explanations from senior officers and ministers about why they and their units would have to undertake dangerous missions without the proper equipment — to lead the UN Zaire operation, "the bungle in the jungle," for instance. They were told that "loyalty" meant covering up mistakes and untruths uttered by ministers. The reasoning was sometimes that "the government has control of the armed forces and so we have to obey." At other times, senior officers suggested that "by helping the government out of a difficult political jam, the prime minister would be generous and fund this or that new project." In every case, no rewards followed. Senior officers discovered that they had compromised their integrity and that of the officer corps in the eyes of the public service, sometimes the public, and certainly their subordinate officers.

At the time when General Hillier was rising into the general officer ranks, his immediate superiors — all post-Somalia appointments — began a slow but deliberate re-evaluation of themselves and their professional responsibilities to Canada. In several very frank "general officers' seminars" led by incumbent CDSs, a new allegiance grew within the officer corps. "Never again!" became the unofficial pledge. Never again the compromising of professional standards, the surrendering of professional responsibilities to the public service, and the offering of tainted advice meant only to protect partisan political interests.

Commanding officers at Canadian Forces staff colleges initiated new curricula emphasizing "truth, duty and valour." The CDS ordered that war dead returning from Afghanistan be provided full, open, and traditional military honours, no matter how this might embarrass the government and its political agenda. Officers were instructed that as witnesses before senate and parliamentary committees and in public discussions elsewhere they were to be "frank unto the Kaiser."

The most astonishing example of this rebirth of pride and place occurred unexpectedly when then minister of national defence, Art Eggleton, declared he had not been told that members of the Canadian Forces task force in Afghanistan had captured Taliban fighters. His apparent expectation was that the CDS, at the time General Ray Henault, would confirm what was in fact not true. When subsequently General Henault and Deputy Chief of Staff Vice Admiral Greg Madison were questioned about the matter in a public, televised meeting of the House of Commons Committee on National Defence, members of Parliament and everyone in the room were astonished to hear both officers flatly (and, it appeared to some, enthusiastically) contradict the minister. After that event, which brought much praise as a "breath of fresh air in Ottawa," Canadian politicians were put on notice that they could no longer expect senior officers to cover politicians' failures or indiscretions.

General Hillier is a product of that recovered military ethic. He and other officers are, as well, the messengers of the new ethic. He and the officers who promoted him and his subordinate officers learned in the glare of the Somalia inquiry that the Canadian Forces need the respect and trust of Canadians if they are to have the support of the people in war and in peace. Officers have learned again that respect and trust can only be sustained if it stands on a platform of truth and sacrifice. Certainly, Hillier's ability to engage the public effectively in matters important to the Canadian Forces and to Canada's national defence helps explain his public popularity. But his popularity is more likely due to Canadians' willingness to trust what he says.

Certainly, Hillier's ability to engage the public effectively in matters important to the Canadian Forces and to Canada's national defence helps explain his public popularity. But his popularity is more likely due to Canadians' willingness to trust what he says.

Who will replace General Rick Hiller as chief of the defence staff of the Canadian Forces? No one can say today. No matter who is promoted to this singular office, it is a safe bet that person will seem to many Canadians very much like General Ray Henault and General Rick Hillier, the first leaders in the new generation of Canadian Forces officers.

Brooke Claxton in 1946 merely reiterated Prime Minister Mackenzie King's rule for civil-military relations at the time: "If an officer cannot be loyal [to the government] and silent he should get out [of the service]." And he repeated also every Canadian politician's preference, then and now, "for silent soldiers and sailors too" — for officers who are "content to express [their] opinions in private and to conform to public policy."

Canadians today, however, seem to see things differently. They understand that Canada has military secrets, but citizens clearly are not "all for silent soldiers and sailors too." Rather, they look to Canadian military leaders to tell them the plain truth so they can judge for themselves what is to be done to defend the nation and to find for Canada "a place of pride and influence in the world."

Douglas Bland is professor in and chair of the Defence Management Studies Program at the School of Policy Studies at Queen's University. He is the author of Chiefs of Defence: Government and the Unified Command of the Canadian Armed Forces.