

THE MILITARY SHOULD GET INVOLVED IN THE DEBATE



*The discussant for the final three papers of last November's conference was **Hugh Segal**, President of the IRPP and formerly Chief of Staff to the Prime Minister of Canada. Here is an edited transcript of his remarks.*

À la conférence de novembre dernier, Hugh Segal fut invité à commenter les trois communications qui précèdent. M. Segal, ancien chef de cabinet du premier ministre du Canada, est président de l'IRPP. Voici un résumé de ses observations.

In 1967 *Maclean's* magazine ran a contest in which Peter C. Newman asked people to finish the following sentence, "As Canadian as... ." The second runner-up was: "As Canadian as John Diefenbaker's French." The first runner-up was: "As Canadian as seasonally adjusted unemployment statistics," a concept we apparently came up with but for which no Nobel Prize for Economics was given out. But the winning entry was: "As Canadian as might be appropriate under the circumstances," which might suggest an approach to the relationship between military intervention and public consensus.

Discussions about the future of the military generally seem to centre on three challenges. First, bridging the gap between consensus at home and intervention abroad—is essentially a matter of artful, but honest, political leadership. Second, the way the Department of National Defence and the Government of Canada are organized to manage, co-ordinate and control a multi-asset military working alongside government agencies and NGOs in difficult interventions—which is vital to coherence, effectiveness and the generation of positive impressions at home. And, third, how the effectiveness of peacekeeping deployments hinges on balancing reform and enhanced staffing—both

of the peacekeeping department at the United Nations in New York, and through the genuine desire of member states to finance and facilitate the capacity, both strategic and tactical, for appropriate deployments.

These propositions presuppose a firm, three-legged stool: competent,

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frank and honest leadership for one leg; focused, integrated and realistic management and organizational structures and analytical resources as the second leg; and the capacity to sustain public support as the third.

Let me suggest, just to be a touch provocative, that we may want something more than a low-slung stool; we might even aspire to an entire table

with four legs. (I've always thought that a stool had the quality attributed to some prairie politicians—all horizon, no elevation.) We need four legs to have a table that's broad enough and long enough to hold all that is necessary and to accommodate around it the key components of a successful, publicly-supported foreign intervention.

We have several options here. The fourth leg could be the cynical media, whose views will be essentially derivative and judgmental—which is, I hasten to add, their job and their right. Or (this is my own preference) it could be a robust and intellectually engaged military leadership that understands, as only the military can, the actual weight that the table must bear, at what cost and at what risk. For this to happen, military leadership needs to shun two very strong operational biases: its instinct to avoid controversy at all cost, and its steadfast refusal since the days of integration to participate in the national debate on foreign and defence policy, a self-denial based on pervasive, and in my view perverse, self-censorship.

I do understand that every public affairs department of every large organization in the world wants to limit controversy. I know because I've run one and advised a host of others.

But the trust extended to our Forces by the average Canadian citizen is not enhanced by the studied avoidance of controversy. It is enhanced by the devotion to service and country of the women and men in uniform, by their professionalism, integrity, competence, and leadership, and, let me emphasize, by all that helps broaden public understanding of the complexity and importance of the challenges the Forces must face. There is little doubt that an honest understanding of that harsh reality will produce public debate and controversy, but military leadership should be enthusiastic about that, not reticent, and should join in the debate.

Now some in the military will say, "That's damn easy for him to say. He doesn't have to battle the bureaucracy for every penny of procurement, new material, and salary improvements for the ranks. He doesn't have to curry favour with the prime minister or finance minister of the day in order to preserve some stability in our budgets. He doesn't have to battle the denizens of the Treasury Board." And they're right: I don't. But I've had the privilege of being on the other side of the street, and frankly, I have always been stunned by the failure of the Forces' leadership to use the high ground they so often stand on to make the case that only they can.

They understand the opportunity, I think, but are afraid to use that moral high ground. They are afraid to deal, as only they can, with the pressing technical issues of capacity, complement and strategic capability. As is the case with almost every complex issue our society faces, from nuclear power to health technologies to military capability to the technical dynamics of a difficult intervention, politicians are not the first credible source to whom the public will turn. A chief of the defence staff who chose to say that we do not have the military, combat or strategic capabilities our obligations and missions require might not be universally popular, but he or she would be believed.

When I served in Ottawa, both in opposition in the 1970s and in government in the early 1990s, I was stunned by how little, if any, formal or informal lobbying activity our armed forces leadership ever engaged in on the Hill. I was stunned by what little we heard about their hard work and many successes or about the difficult circumstances they face in the theatres in which they operate.

This reticence comes, I think, from a wish to avoid controversy, usually so as not to offend the minister or prime minister of the day. I understand that sensitivity and I offer this unsolicited counsel: If we're to build a strong table, a table around which consensus can be nurtured and sustained in support of important and difficult foreign interventions, we must confront this sensitivity, drop it, shed it, manage it, set it aside. Frankness and controversy—appropriate controversy—need not be partisan or disloyal. Avoiding controversy at any cost, masking rather than revealing the hard choices, may in fact be the ultimate, if unintended disloyalty. The squeaky wheel does get the results, muffled tires rarely do. While politicians, involving both the executive and Parliament, will and should make the critical decisions on deployment, go and no-go, the process of their education and of public education about the risks and the strategic variables and calculations cannot proceed without active and public engagement by the military, both in the media and before Parliament. Honesty about risks, frankness about purposes and trust in the public's judgment are key conditions for public support and consensus. Without the engagement of the military leadership in the process of broadening the government's and the public's understanding, the process will be tragically flawed.

I'd also suggest that the lead-up to any deployment, while powerfully shaped by the media and its coverage of the area that is deteriorating, cannot in and of itself carry the weight unless parliamentarians, the media and

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Canadians have a broad and realistic understanding of the country's real military capacity and strategic ability. This means that our strategic capacity should be part of the national public policy debate on an ongoing basis, not a sometime breakout when a crisis or an unconstructive controversy hits. Constructive controversy, in which the Forces themselves engender public debate on important issues of procurement, complement, organization and strategic capacity would, in my view, help build a well-informed and supportive public when difficult deployments come along. Avoiding controversy means avoiding both relevance and inclusion in the national debate.

Think of health care for a moment. There is no matter more important to Canadians or more open to searing, divisive and uncivil controversy. But Canadians remain massively in support of significant investment, growth and public involvement in that sector.

Let me offer you a lesson I learned the hard way in government and opposition, business and other activities. The question is not whether controversy comes to large organizations with complex missions; it's about why it is generated and what benefit is derived from it. Does controversy come because the organization itself has creatively generated important debate, which will have value at the end of the day? Or does it come because a discussion has been generated by others who may have a much less constructive purpose in mind?

I do not for one minute doubt

that, in private sessions with deputies and ministers and the Treasury Board, our military leadership lobbies furiously for what they believe they need to do the job, or that they even, on occasion, point out that we face tactical and strategic limitations that prevent us from doing every job the politicians might want to tax the military with. Pay increases, submarine procurement and other recent successes, for which much credit is deserved, indicate that some progress has been made. But take it to the bank that if the price of those successes ultimately comes to be seen as the further shrinking of our complement of men and women in uniform able to do the tasks required, or the serious erosion of combat capability to below appropriate or desirable levels, it will be regarded as having been an abdication by the military. The government of the day at any particular time may or may not care. The only way the Canadian people can be expected to care, and so encourage their government and Parliament to care, is if our military leadership is prepared to be frank, honest and open about the broad implications of any such diminution of capacity. This engagement must be carried on beyond the precincts of official public service Ottawa, the think tanks, and university and academic circles. It must take place in community forums, chambers of commerce and on Parliament Hill.

No one is suggesting that the military should decide Canada's foreign or defence policy. But the military should be part of the process by which Canadians and their Parliament and government do decide. For Canadians to be expected to produce a well-informed, salient and reasonably sized constituency favouring and able to support foreign interventions when appropriate and necessary, a constituency has to be built. Constituencies are built when people identify with organizations, and when organizational leadership is truly engaged. Then people can identify with overriding purposes and values even when they do not always agree with every-

thing that may be going on. Frankness, the ability to admit mistakes in public—these are good things, not weaknesses or admissions of failure. A constituency is built through acts of will, acts that confound conventional wisdom, that seek to inform the public debate, that speak from the heart about success and failure.

We do not now have in place in Ottawa a policy structure likely to produce a co-ordinated, analytical and executive framework to plan and execute a broadly-based military and civilian NGO deployment in a way most likely to be effective and sustain public support. This is not about DFAIT, PCO, PMO, DND or the CDS or CIDA not doing their jobs. It is about a lack of linkage between the players and of a sufficiently supple and modern structure at DND to facilitate an appropriately broad reach.

We also lack a modern frame of reference that sees military interaction with parliamentarians and participation in public debate as a regular and normal part of the marketplace of ideas and public policy and a way to lay the groundwork for foreign intervention and difficult deployments.

Finally, it is not clear that there is a political commitment to maximize the UN's effectiveness in these deployments, at least among our allies. UN political leadership and civilian transition, backed perhaps by traditional alliance military support, may be models more likely to take advantage of the strengths of each side.

We have a budgetary surplus; we have a public and media awareness of a troubled world; and we have high polling numbers in support of Canadian roles. I cannot think of a better description of a window of opportunity. That window cannot simply be walked through, however. A scaffold must be built, a scaffold built on frank talk, realistic assessment of strategic capacity, and a clear vision of why we need that capacity and what we should expect it to cost. If we are to

make a rational choice, we also need to be frank about the cost of not having that strategic capacity, a case that is all too rarely made. The costs come in various forms: to sovereignty, to our trade and economic interests, to national security and to our ability to project our own values and interests on a global base.

And let's not forget poll results showing that 15 per cent of Canadians favour capital renewal of the Forces over all other options—which is actually quite an impressive number.

The challenge we have to embrace is the challenge our political party friends have to face in elections around the world, which is shaping the ballot question. If the question is health care or education vs. new equipment for the military, guess what? The military is going to lose. But if the question is, "Do we want our men and women in uniform to have the best equipment to do the job responsibly and safely and have a fighting chance of getting home alive?", I think the numbers would change pretty dramatically. Or if the question posed were "Should Canada have the capacity to assist in international security, peacekeeping and humanitarian efforts?" or "Should Canada have the military capacity to aid and support peacekeeping, security and humanitarian missions, and would you be prepared to support that with your own tax dollars?" I think the number would be pretty high.

But you can't create the question overnight; you've got to build it over a period of time. You've got to make the case in a rational and focused fashion, and that involves public education. I would argue that it should involve our military leadership more intensely than it has in the past.

So the challenge is clear. There are no easy paths, but of one thing we can be certain: The cost of complacency, the cost of doing nothing, of hoping the system will somehow come around on its own, will be too high for any of us—or more importantly, our kids, our grandchildren—to have to bear.