

Changing the Guard at NDHQ

By Nic Boisvert

In anticipation of the “hundred days of action” expected to characterize the Paul Martin ministry beginning December 12th, his transition team must be getting their fill of free advice. One hesitates to add to the throng. But with the fate of the Canadian Forces so important to restoring our relationship with the Americans, there is much that needs doing to get National Defence Headquarters functioning – and it can be a quagmire to the un-initiated.

To begin, Prime Minister Martin now has a choice of Ministers. By his own admission, John McCallum should have resigned when his Advisory Committee on Administrative Efficiency (“anyone who cannot find \$200M savings in a \$13B budget...”) came up with somewhat less than \$150M. But ministerial responsibility hasn’t been what it used to be for some time now, and McCallum has learned a valuable lesson that defence doesn’t necessarily make economic sense (especially in Canada). Alternatively, with John Manley leaving politics, the way is open for the elevation of David Pratt to the ministerial post (no longer any concerns Ottawa would be over-represented in Cabinet). Pratt has undertaken exemplary work as Chair of the Commons Committee on National Defence and Veterans Affairs, and has at least as good a handle on many departmental files. Either way – stay with McCallum or go with Pratt – Prime Minister Martin avoids having a rookie overseeing National Defence, with so much to be done in so short a time.

Top of the list has to be getting a grip on Army Transformation. For fear of stating the obvious, transformation involves more than getting spiffy high-tech gear; it is about remodeling an entire way of doing business. Otherwise, this thinly veiled attempt at an Army-Get-Well Program (desperately needed to be sure after a decade of neglect) will be throwing good money after bad. Real savings are waiting to be realized by reducing the Canadian Army’s “tail-heavy” approach to getting fighting “teeth” into the field. Gutting our world-class Navy and leaving our airspace unguarded are not cost-effective alternatives. If our use of armed force overseas is entirely discretionary, we must insist on getting the very best bang for our buck. Here’s a skill-testing question: of the 2000-plus Canadians now in Kabul (that’s military and civilian – don’t forget those Alternate Service Delivery cooks and storesmen), how many fighting “teeth” are out there doing foot patrols? Or worse, still driving an Iltis jeep?

In looking for efficiencies, the common complaint is that the Canadian Forces are top-heavy with generals. For the range of functions expected of any national headquarters, however, ours if anything is a little too lean – the “stars to troops” ratio is skewed because the CF have too few soldiers, sailors and airmen. But if 70 generals are too many for a 60,000-person military force, how can DND justify nearly 120 executive-level civilian general-equivalents to oversee a bureaucracy of 20,000? And bureaucrats who measure their tenure in decades hold a distinct systemic advantage over generals who shift every two or three years. Want to shake out the cobwebs in NDHQ? Poke a stick at some of those senior sinecures.

This points to perhaps the fundamental issue that should occupy Mr Martin's transition team. If there is any single reason why NDHQ doesn't work it is because each side of the civil-military split is too busy doing the other's job. The civilian policy shop has successfully deferred a long-promised defence review by micro-managing instead the political sensitivities of Deputy Chief of Defence Staff operations (think the Kabul deployment), or interfering with equipment acquisitions that are more properly the purview of the Vice Chief (think Stryker and strategic airlift). So policy has been found wanting, and the Service Chiefs, left to divine a context to steer the replacement of rusting hulls and airframes, have wallowed through a meaningless sequence of strategic retreats (the latest resulted – yet again – in a failure to achieve a satisfactory concept of operations for the Canadian Forces). Rationalizing the division of labour in NDHQ would go a long way to restore a somewhat poisoned relationship.

Another outlet would be to institute true Parliamentary oversight of national defence. Between them, David Pratt's Commons Committee and Colin Kenny's Senate Committee have developed a deep knowledge of defence issues. They also enjoy the necessary political distance from ministerial responsibility to ponder them independently. They have offered quite appropriate advice, too much of it initially dismissed by the Department only to be implemented later. For example we have Senator Kenny's report last year that the CF needs an immediate and sustained \$4B infusion and two years at home to reconstitute. It was met with derision, but the Chief of Defence Staff's own recent comments demonstrate that this is exactly what is needed.

The list is by no means exhaustive, but it's ambitious enough for one hundred days. And December 12th clears the way to get on with the Sea King helicopter replacement. It's been a long ten years.

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