



Editorial: Generally Speaking

The recent mini-tempest in a teacup over the propriety of General Rick Hillier's latest-in-a-series of forthright public comments has raised an age-old issue of democratic civil-military relations: how and under what circumstances may the military 'speak out' about public policy matters?

A recurring theme in the *Canadian Naval Review* has concerned the need for straight talk from navy personnel about the state of the navy today. Sharon Hobson ("A Missed Opportunity," *CNR*, Spring 2007) laments the trend among serving officers to speak vaguely about 'challenges' to military readiness in public, while confining their informed assessments of truly worrying shortcomings to 'insider' audiences. Similarly, Rear-Admiral (Retired) David Morse in the same issue of *CNR* ("Why is No One Making Waves?") also stresses the need for the navy to express its views openly, but notes the "mixed signals" emanating from senior departmental and military leaders on this score. In this *CNR* volume, Mark Tunnicliffe notes the often corrosive effect of internal naval debates spilling over into the public domain.

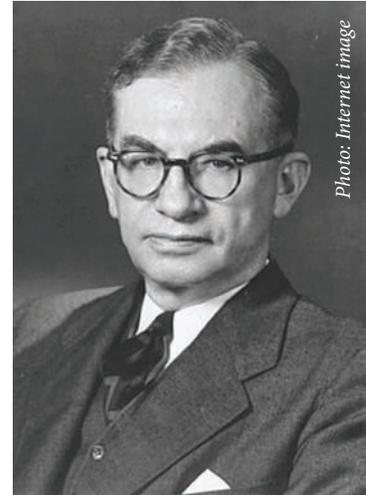
Conventional wisdom holds that military personnel at all levels should confine themselves to their own sphere of activities, namely promptly and effectively carrying out lawful orders from the civilian authorities, generally only talking publicly about specific aspects of their own immediate jobs, and providing sound, professional advice when appropriate. The Chief of the Defence Staff, additionally, by law acts as the main military advisor to the government that appoints him or her. Above all, the stricture is that the military must not engage in policy advocacy or debate.

So, when is it appropriate for the military to speak out, and at what point does its professional advice become dissent with its civilian overseers? And, most importantly, should certain forms of dissent be permitted? At one extreme, there is the view held by the then Minister of National Defence (MND), Brooke Claxton, who in 1948 privately opined that, in reference to the qualifications he was seeking in his Chief of the General Staff "There is one proviso: he must not go about making speeches. I am all for silent soldiers as well as sailors."¹

Certainly, General Hillier, as well as many of his predecessors, would fall very short against this high standard of military deference to the civil authority. In this modern age of all-pervasive communications technology, 24/7 media coverage and the demand for public service accountability, it would be difficult, and probably impossible, for the military or any other organ of government to simply remain silent on the many pressing issues of the day. Indeed, some might argue that the requirement for public disclosure demands that the most senior of our military leaders speak out regularly and candidly about the many details of effectively managing a multi-billion dollar organization.

Moreover, when our country is at war or is in a major military engagement abroad such as Afghanistan, then the pressures to communicate to Canadians about the nature of the mission, the dangers it entails, and the demands it places upon our troops are even more insistent. Lives, and maybe much more, after all, are at stake.

In the United States, controversy has recently galvanized around the so-called "Generals' Revolt" concerning the preparations for and conduct of the war in Iraq. But Canada has been no stranger to outspoken military leaders, and certainly our sailors have occasionally forsworn the mantle of the 'Silent Service.' In 1946, Vice-Admiral Howard Reid attacked Ottawa's miserly funding of the navy in comparison to the American case. In 1966, Rear-Admiral William Landymore led the 'revolt of the admirals' against Minister Paul Hellyer's unification



The Honourable Brooke Claxton.



Rear-Admiral William Landymore:
his actions remain controversial.

Photo: Internet image

Photo: Joint Task Force Atlantic
Public Relations Office

efforts. In the mid-1970s, Vice-Admiral Douglas Boyle carped about MARCOM's commitment-capability gap. Finally, in 1991 Vice-Admiral Charles Thomas resigned in protest against DND policies that he believed would undermine the navy's future capability. Notably, each case of public disagreement eventually led to the departure of the high-ranked naval officer.

So why fuss about this now, and how is it a concern for the navy? Of late, there have been rumblings behind the scenes about the navy's mortgaging of its future on the altar of current operations. To listen to navy insiders tell it, before long, and in the absence of serious infusions of new funds, the numbers of both ships and personnel are going to decrease dramatically, and this will adversely affect the navy's ability to carry out its roles at home and abroad.

This is the line that Senator Colin Kenny has been advancing for some time, but the problem for outsiders, including the Canadian taxpayer, is this: where is the solid evidence for the interested public to test the veracity of these claims? Without some solid proof, claims of this sort tend to be dismissed as just the disgruntled complaints of the losers in the ongoing game of budgetary politics in Ottawa. In other words, more of the same. But what if these assertions prove to be well-founded? Would our politicians, as well as ordinary Canadians, be prepared to accept the consequences of a navy that was so stretched in hulls and people that it could not properly safeguard Canada's domestic interests, nor effectively advance our interests abroad? Do such matters properly belong in the public realm, and if so, how should our senior officers convey this message to our politicians and citizens? Should our top military leaders have to risk public censure and even disgrace, or else be compelled to resign in order to get the message out?

Should there be a simpler way for senior military commanders to 'tell it like it is' without transgressing the fine line between legitimate professional advice and opinion on the one hand, and overt public disagreement with our elected leaders on the other? How else can Canadians be expected to learn the true state of Canada's readiness for military action?

Some argue that General Hillier may be trying to set a precedent for a more active and forthright role of the government's chief military advisor; others say he has gone too far, and must be reined in. For his part, Hillier is neither contrite nor apologetic about his occasional sallies into the political sphere. And why should he be?



Photo: DND Combat Camera

General Rick Hillier: also often controversial.

There should be no cause for real concern about the perceived breakdown of proper civil-military relations in Canada so long as both sides continue to acknowledge, as they have so far, that the elusive 'line' can and must be drawn by our elected civilian leaders. After all, any Prime Minister could with the stroke of a pen remove a balky CDS from his appointment – the topmost military officer always serves "at the pleasure of" the Crown.

Moreover, surely Canadians deserve to be told, at least once a year, before a formal session of a committee of Parliament, each service's professional assessment of its ability to carry out the operational roles it has been assigned by our government. This should not be seen as an attack on government policy, nor should it have to be unearthed via the slow and painful Canadian Access to Information process.

So, in the interests of a better informed public, is it not time for us not only to permit, but also to welcome, greater latitude for our senior military commanders to explain clearly and very openly their side of the military story? Can we afford to risk the consequences of doing otherwise? 🇨🇦

Dan Middlemiss

Notes

1. Quoted in James Eayrs, *In Defence of Canada: Peacemaking and Deterrence* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1972), p. 64.