

THE CHRÉTIEN LEGACY

The Chrétien decade was one of the most tumultuous in the history of Canadian defence. The beneficiary of a spectacular Tory meltdown in 1993, the Chrétien government was confronted by the decidedly messy geo-strategic realities of the post-Cold War era (e.g., Kosovo) and, late in its tenure, by the horrors of 9/11, the rigours of the campaign against international terrorism, and the awkward American invitation to participate in the war against Iraq. Particularly after 9/11, as Chrétien biographer Lawrence Martin notes in *Iron Man: The Defiant Reign of Jean Chrétien*, he was also pummeled — albeit with relatively little effect — with accusations that his government had “left the nation’s defences in deficient condition” at “a time of international peril.”

For the Canadian Forces, the Chrétien years brought an extraordinarily high operational tempo (punctuated by an eclectic array of peace support, humanitarian intervention and combat operations abroad and by unusually frequent, and large-scale, disaster relief operations at home), a witch’s brew of personnel burnout and equipment rust out, the myriad embarrassments of the Somalia inquiry, the disbanding of the Canadian Airborne Regiment, a cascade of quality of life issues, controversial (and at times dubious) doses of Alternative Service Delivery, and the tragicomedy of the GTS *Katie* affair. Media attention on defence reached, arguably, a new high (or low, depending on one’s perspective), with seemingly every journalist in the country having filed at least one story on “the aging Sea King” or some similarly vintage hardware.

Rounding out the Chrétien era were the 1994 White Paper on Defence, the military ramifications of assorted foreign policy initiatives associated, most notably, with former Foreign Affairs Minister Lloyd Axworthy (e.g., soft power, human security), increasingly pointed American calls for increased Canadian defence spending (eminently understandable but, in the Chrétien universe, arguably counter-productive). There were also sufficient reports and studies on defence policy and the state of the Canadian Forces — from non-governmental organizations, the Office of the Auditor General, the university Security and Defence Forum centres, Parliamentary committees and DND — to overwhelm even the most expansive home library. Nor, for one moment, should the sad and galling “friendly fire” incident in Afghanistan — and, indeed, other Canadian losses — be forgotten.

For many observers, the Chrétien government’s approach to defence, and defence procurement in particular, was typified by its politically expedient cancellation of the EH101 helicopter in 1993, by its dithering over a successor to the Labrador, and by its abject failure to secure a replacement for the Sea King. Honouring a campaign promise at one’s first cabinet meeting is, these days, nothing short of remarkable, but a more sensible and cost-effective compromise would have retained the original search and rescue (SAR) variant of the EH101 while cancelling the maritime variant. This would have reduced the cancellation

costs, expedited the phase-out of the Labrador, and provided a somewhat better equipped SAR helicopter than the Cormorant.

When the Liberals ultimately returned to a member of the EH101 family for the SAR requirement — a development which clearly annoyed Prime Minister Chrétien — they were exceptionally fortunate that divine intervention diverted media and public attention from their EH101 *volte face*. On the same day that Art Eggleton announced the purchase of 15 Cormorants, the ‘Ice Storm of the Century’ so completely dominated the media that he probably could have announced the acquisition of a nuclear-powered aircraft carrier without anyone taking notice. The Sea King file, adds Lawrence Martin, was an even “bigger fiasco”, featuring “a decade-long marathon of indecision, unconscionable delays, and political meddling in helicopter procurement requirements so the government would not be embarrassed.”

Infinitely more palatable, at least at the time of its debut, was the December 1994 White Paper on Defence. It was a sobering document that prescribed a continuing, and painful, regimen of downsizing and retrenchment, its rejection of so-called ‘niche’ roles and its endorsement of a “multi-purpose, combat-capable” military able to fight “alongside the best, against the best”. Nevertheless, its introduction produced a palpable sense of relief amongst those who feared something akin to the defence policy and force structure advocated by the contentious 1994 report of the Canada 21 Council.

“Over the past 80 years,” argued the White Paper with an eloquence not typically found in such documents, “more than 100,000 Canadians have died, fighting alongside our allies for common values. For us now to leave combat roles to others would mean abandoning this commitment to help defend commonly accepted principles of state behaviour. In short, by opting for a constabulary force — that is, one not designed to make a genuine contribution in combat — we would be sending a very clear message about the depth of our commitment to our allies and our values, one that would betray our history and diminish our future. Beyond this, because we cannot expect our political influence in global and regional security arrangements to be significantly out of proportion to our military contributions, we must make the required investment in our armed forces if we are to play any kind of role in shaping our common future.”

Conventional wisdom maintains that the 1994 White Paper remains essentially sound in its fundamentals and key principles. It is argued, too, that the 1994 White Paper has aged far more gracefully than its 1971 and 1987 forebears. The former was quickly on shaky intellectual ground, and was utterly demolished, in 1974-1975, by the demise of detente and other factors. The fall of the 1987 White Paper was even more spectacular. Arguably an anachronism on the day of its release, it was mortally wounded by the budget of April 1989 and rendered an historical curiosity by the end of the Cold

War shortly thereafter. Conventional wisdom maintains, too, that the core problem of the post-Cold War Canadian Forces was the Chrétien government's congenital indifference to defence and, concomitantly, its failure to provide adequate financial resources.

The notion that the fundamentals of the 1994 White Paper remain sound has been challenged in a number of venues, including Parliamentary reports, but has been most forcefully condemned in *Canada without Armed Forces?*, a blunt and bleak report from the School of Policy Studies at Queen's University. Edited by Douglas Bland, the report argues that the fundamentals "underpinning today's policy and decisions are not sound" and asserts that "almost every 1994 assumption, assessment, and conclusion about the world we live in, the breadth and demands of Canada's explicit and implicit commitments to the international community, the military capabilities Canada needs to meet them, and the funds required to sustain them are seriously weakened or compromised by the facts of international security and defence relations in the world of 2003. Ten-year-old estimates of 'how much is enough' for national defence have been proven false. Indeed, the relevance and prudence of every important element of defence policy are open to challenge, if only because too much time has passed since they were last scrutinized critically and comprehensively. The only responsible conclusion one can draw from an assessment of the most critical fundamentals of current policy and the decisions built on them is that they are not sound and that Canada's defence policy as a whole is, therefore, suspect."

The hypothesis that the Chrétien government "underfunded" defence is sometimes challenged on the grounds that it oversimplifies the situation. The argument is put forth that more resources for the sharp end could have been freed up if available funds had been better focused and more wisely spent and if DND had been relieved of certain non-military costs (such as keeping bases open for socio-economic and/or political reasons). There is more than a modicum of truth to these assertions but, unless one wishes to 'constabularize' large chunks of the CF or jettison entire services, it is equally difficult to escape the conclusion that the Chrétien government was unduly parsimonious in its approach to defence budgeting. "By most estimates," argues the Queen's study, "if Canada is to sustain the current Canadian Forces set of core capabilities for national command, support, maritime, land, and air force operations while maintaining a Reserve element, then the defence portfolio will require an annual defence allocation of \$18.5 billion (or 1.6 percent of GDP) — an annual increase of \$5 billion in defence expenditures, beginning in 2004."

The Queen's study acknowledges that some of the shortfall might be found from within the current defence budget by, for example, reducing managerial overheads. But its most sobering conclusion is that "the rate of erosion of some capabilities is now so steep and accelerating so quickly that even if the government were to act immediately and aggressively to halt the decline, many defence capabilities cannot be recovered before they become militarily ineffective."

Such warnings are reminiscent of those that characterized much of the Trudeau era, particularly the 1973-1975 period, and underscore some of the defence similarities between Trudeau and Chrétien. The latter's often expressed lament that military establishments invariably and unfailingly seek more money would have found a ready audience in the almost equally parsimonious Pierre Trudeau. "Almost equally" is a vital qualifier, however, since Trudeau, unlike Chrétien, substantially modified his initial defence stance in the face of a worsening geo-strategic environment and entreaties from Canada's allies (which carried substantial weight because of the European perception of linkage between Canada's defence preparedness and its Third Option-related quest for trade diversification).

The additional funding released by Trudeau's Defence Structure Review by no means solved all of the problems of the Canadian Forces (and certainly didn't turn Trudeau into a 'hawk'), but it did rescue the CF from the type of military meltdown feared by the Queen's study. In the Chrétien era, there was no parallel, not even in the wake of 9/11, to Trudeau's Defence Structure Review.

How should one assess Chrétien and defence? In fairness, criticism of his frugal approach to defence must be tempered by the magnitude of the inherited deficit and debt problems, and by the scope of some of the structural military problems handed down from earlier prime ministers. To his credit, he did not pull back from Canada's global obligations (albeit at the cost of overextending the Canadian Forces) and authorized a military contribution to the war on international terrorism which, in comparative and even absolute terms, was quite substantial. The White Paper, at least in 1994, was a solid document. The decision to decline participation in the war with Iraq remains contentious, but may well have avoided a serious public backlash against the Canadian Forces.

Conversely, and most importantly, he failed to fundamentally reassess defence requirements in response to changing international circumstances. He also offered public utterances on defence that were unfortunate or unworthy (e.g., references to peacekeepers as "Boy Scouts", and the infamous year-end interviews which implied that supporters of increased defence spending were mere shills for the arms industry).

In *Iron Man*, Lawrence Martin concludes that "while Jean Chrétien had many of his successes handed to him, it would be churlish to deny him his due. Compared with the country he'd inherited in 1993, the Canada he was leaving behind a decade later was in measurably better condition." True enough, but what a pity that the same cannot be said of the country's armed forces.

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