Unelected, Unarmed Servants of the State: The Changing Role of Senior Civil Servants inside Canada’s National Defence

by Daniel Gosselin

Civilian control of the armed forces is not civil service control of the armed forces.  

~General Rick Hillier, Chief of the Defence Staff, 2005–2008

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Introduction

The role of senior civilians inside the Department of National Defence (DND) has evolved dramatically over the past fifty years. Unlike in the United States where most of the senior positions in the Department of Defense are filled with political appointees who change with each administration, in Canada (as in several Western democracies) it is career civil servants working in both DND and in the central agencies of government, such as the Privy Council Office and Treasury Board, who often act as the intermediary bureaucracy between the politicians and the military. In Ottawa, the senior public servant at National...
Defence is a deputy minister (DM), supported by several assistant deputy ministers (ADMs) and their senior civilian executive staff. These senior public officials are civilian leaders in their own right, who exercise significant power and influence over defence policy and military activities: they are the unelected, unarmed servants of the state.4

This article examines the evolution of the role of senior civilian public service employees inside DND, analyzing the pivotal events and phases that have shaped the expanding role of civilians since the early-1960s. The responsibilities and influence of senior civil servants at defence grew significantly over the years, in parallel with changes in the administration and machinery of government. In the early-1960s, civilian public servants were employed almost exclusively in junior trades and administrative positions in DND, and many of the senior positions were filled by former military officers. Over the years, public servants were brought in to add civilian expertise to manage and administer more complex defence programs, and to enhance the capacity of the military to deal with the central agencies and processes of the government.

Government after government has increased the authority of the Deputy Minister and moved civil servants into more and more senior positions inside DND, regularly reinforcing the concept of an integrated military–civilian strategic national defence headquarters (NDHQ). As this article highlights, successive governments have regularly conveyed, through direction, policies and statements, the importance of the role of senior defence public servants as a fundamental element of the Canadian civil-military framework for challenging, overseeing, and monitoring the military. Yet, politicians have seldom publicly expressed this need in such a clear way, justifying instead the requirement for a civilian-military headquarters with other reasons, such as efficiency and effectiveness.

This review focuses predominantly upon the dominant ideas and concepts that have shaped the expanding role of senior civilian officials within the department since the early-1960s.5 The examination is broken down into five parts, corresponding broadly to the different phases in the evolution of the role of civilian public service employees within DND. I begin with the work of the 1960 Royal Commission on Government Organization, which influenced the reorganization of the federal government and Canadian defence in the 1960s and 1970s.

The 1960 Royal Commission on Government Organization

One of the most significant events that would shape the views of future governments and ministers of defence toward greater integration of civilians within National Defence was the Royal Commission on Government Organization – known as the Glassco Commission, after its chairman J. Grant Glassco. Appointed by the Conservative government in 1960, the Commission was mandated “to inquire into and report upon the organization and methods of departments and agencies of the government of Canada.”6 Since managerial efficiency in government was the main interest of the commission, the role...
of civilians within the department was examined carefully by the commissioners.

The Department of National Defence was singled out because of its size, the range of its activities, and the magnitude of its budget. The commission further acknowledged that “…the composition of the department is unique, consisting as it does of two elements, military and civilian differing in status, rank structure, and terms of employment, although they function as an entity.” In Report 20, the study of the commission specifically focused upon defence, the commissioners commented on the basis and structure of the defence organization, on its governance (in particular the role of senior civilian officials and military officers), and on defence human resources policies and practices. All these aspects touched directly upon the role of senior civilians inside the Department.

The commission first examined the role of the deputy minister. Acknowledging that the DM of DND is different from the DMs of other departments because, “…the general oversight and direction vested in the DM … is exercised subject to the limitations set out in the National Defence Act,” the commissioners nevertheless found his functions “too narrowly circumscribed,” with the result that the defence minister did not receive the staff assistance required to discharge his responsibility for the direction of the Canadian defence establishment. It is also clear that the commissioners looked at the DM as being the senior civilian official responsible to provide independent defence advice, and as the essential person inside the machinery of government whose task it was to assist politicians with exercising oversight of the activities of the armed forces. While the “Minister may rely primarily on the Chiefs of Staff Committee for advice,” because “it is natural he should do so,” the commission cautioned that,

...the military character of this group raises doubts as to the reality of civilian control if the minister places excessive reliance upon it. There is thus a need for a strong staff group which is essentially civilian in character, outside the framework of the management of the Armed Forces.

The Glassco Commission also criticized the weakness of the defence committee structure of decision making, and proposed a more robust departmental civilian staff group, one that would be strengthened in its role relative to the three military services. It is important to note that the department had two structures in 1962: one civilian group under the direction of the DM, concerned with administration, finance, and procurement, and another organized functionally under the control of the chiefs of staff of the three services, dealing with operations, military policy, and training. A strong unified DM group would therefore be in a better position to take a more comprehensive view of defence organization and administration, opined the royal commissioners, and it was expected that the DM would be the senior defence official able to rise above tri-service rivalry when advising the Minister on defence issues.

The lack of civilians in the higher administrative echelons of the department concerned the commission for several reasons. First, it was believed that many senior public administration tasks of the three services could be performed more efficiently by civilians. Downplaying military experience and expertise, the commission argued that civilians should be employed “even in such fundamentally
military staff functions as those dealing with plans and operations.” Increasing the number of civilians in senior defence positions would also provide more opportunities to combine the different backgrounds and expertise of civilians and military officers in the highest levels of the department, stated the commissioners, even predicting that it would “contribute to better [defence] performance.”

In short, civilians would bring fresh perspectives on defence issues, add expertise in specific public administration and management areas, and even provide a much-needed internal challenge function in areas where none existed before.

Third, the commission pointed out that the lack of civilians in several areas of the department did not provide an opportunity to develop promising public officials for the higher echelons of the organization. By having civilians working in the military sphere of work, continued the commissioners, public servants would gain greater familiarity with defence matters, and this “…would reduce the tendency – to which civilians are all too prone – to regard military affairs as professional mysteries comprehensible only to the military mind.” It would certainly prepare them better to serve in senior executive positions later in their careers, thus benefiting the DM organization as a whole.

The commissioners realized that their recommendations to increase significantly the role of civilians inside the department would be viewed with scepticism and apprehension by a military that jealously guarded its autonomy and independence. The object of their policy recommendations was clearly intended to integrate more closely the civilian and military elements of the Department. Still, conscious of how their recommendations might be perceived by the military and the three armed services, the commissioners thought it was necessary to add a reassurance:

It is important that civilians employed in senior administrative posts in the Services should not be looked upon as having a duty to control or check Service activities. Their sole function should be to assist the Services and provide continuity in administering programmes, bringing an additional viewpoint and sometimes special skills to bear, and serving as partners and co-workers with the Service officers.

Unless the government directed reforms from the highest levels, there were few expectations that the role of senior defence officials in the Department would change. The commission’s work was certainly widely quoted in the 1960s and early-1970s, but, as events proved, and for reasons discussed below, its recommendations did not lead to immediate significant changes in the administration of defence policy in Canada. Nevertheless, over time, the Glassco Commission would have a formative impact on government operations, and it would provide a degree of authority to those who wanted to advance new reforms to the organization of defence. One of those who would exploit the work of the commission to great effect was the young and ambitious Paul T. Hellyer, Minister of National Defence in the newly elected Liberal government in early-1963, who embarked upon the most radical set of reforms to affect the Canadian military since the early-1900s.

Unification of the Canadian Armed Forces

Minister Hellyer arrived at National Defence with a clear mandate to modernize and reorganize Canadian defence. A series of separate but interconnected events between 1957 and 1963 had created turmoil in Canada’s defence policy, and had strongly influenced the new Liberal government to issue a new white paper on defence, to reorganize the military, and
to strengthen the mechanisms of civil control of the Canadian military, all of which had the potential to influence the role of senior civilians at defence.16

Hellyer’s ideas first came to light with the 1964 White Paper on Defence, which contained several original concepts and set out the rationale for the unification of the armed forces. To the new Minister, the solution to the defence budget challenges was straightforward: to reduce the size of the defence organization, and to integrate the three armed forces service staffs under a single CDS and a single defence staff. In the white paper, the government frequently referenced the work and recommendations of the Glassco Commission, mainly to justify the impending reforms focused upon eliminating service duplication and upon increasing efficiency at defence.17

Hellyer had also acknowledged in the white paper that his success in maintaining effective civil control over the military – echoing the words of the Glassco Commission – entailed that the DM be given greater responsibility for the resolution of defence issues, for exercising a review function over the organization and the administration of the defence establishment, and for assisting him in discharging his responsibilities.18 He quickly backed away from this commitment, stating in Parliament just two months after the white paper was released that “…there is no need to change the legislation relating to the deputy minister,” emphasizing instead the need to protect against civilian staff assuming “functions which are necessary to the military staffs in order that they can efficiently control their military forces and carry out their military responsibilities.”19 Hellyer had pointed out, on a number of occasions, the need for the Minister of National Defence to receive separate civilian and military advice before making the political decisions, and it is thus clear that he never had any intention of amalgamating the CAF with the Department; integrating and unifying the military staffs was his main objective. It is thus not surprising that two subsequent acts of Parliament, in 1964 and 1966, to implement the government’s agenda to restructure defence, made scant mention of the role of civilians in DND.20

By 1966, the issue of unification of the three military services had become highly controversial, and it had become a matter of public debate and open acrimony within parts of the armed forces, demanding the constant attention of the minister.21 Confronted with a crisis of civil-military relations over much of his tenure as minister, Hellyer therefore devoted little effort on his initial commitment to strengthen the DM staff. Except for the creation of the Canadian Forces Headquarters (CFHQ) in 1966, which saw public servants who were working in the three service headquarters now working inside one unified headquarters, Hellyer essentially ignored nearly all the recommendations of the Glassco Commission with respect to civilians at defence, concentrating his efforts instead upon restructuring the military. By December 1967, when Hellyer left the defence portfolio, the role of civilians inside defence had changed very little, despite the studies and promises of the previous seven years. The Minister certainly asserted political control over the
military, but this was achieved primarily through the creation of the position of the Chief of the Defence Staff, which simplified civil control for him, the revamping of the Defence Council, which he chaired, and by exercising a forceful and directive management style that left no doubt with respect to who was in charge of the military and the Department. 22

The Department under the DM thus remained relatively unchanged from 1953 until the early-1970s. 23 As the author of a comprehensive study on unification astutely observed in 1971, “civilians in the department … have suffered a very long period of what appears to be not merely neglect, but incomprehension of the role that [they] can play in facilitating the department’s business.” 24

This situation changed dramatically in 1971, when a civilian team from outside government, mandated by a new minister of defence, returned with determination to the findings of the Glassco Commission, and proposed fundamental changes to the management and decision-making structure at Defence, and to the role of senior defence civilians.

The Creation of National Defence Headquarters and the “Civilianization” of the Military

In 1971, the Trudeau government announced in Defence in the 70s, the white paper on defence, the creation of a Management Review Group (MRG) to examine the organization and management of the entire defence establishment. 25 The review had been triggered by several defence problems and ministerial concerns in the late-1960s, including difficulties with the management of major equipment procurement contracts, a perceived lack of responsiveness from the Department to the Minister’s and Cabinet’s direction, and a lack of transparency with what was happening inside both the Department and the CAF. 26

In their report, Management of Defence in Canada, the MRG identified a litany of major concerns in the areas of management, planning, procurement, financial services, personnel administration, and defence research. Three themes relevant to this article emerge from the report. The first was a need to increase dependence upon civilians with the requisite professional expertise in order to manage more complex defence issues. The second was a strong belief that defence outputs could be improved with sound modern management techniques. And, more critically, the group believed that it was time to break the central role of the CDS in the formulation of defence policy, for advising the defence minister on defence policy, and for managing military procurement, and to delegate these responsibilities to civilian assistant deputy ministers (ADMs). 27

The MRG was convinced that two deep-seated factors were contributing to the mismanagement of defence: a flawed departmental organizational structure, and outdated attitudes in the senior echelons of the military and the Department with respect to defence management. It concluded that some of the managerial and administrative problems were caused by a lack of political sensitivity by senior military and civilian managers, a criticism centred upon the inability of the Department to adjust to changing priorities and values in Canada, and to work effectively with central agencies. 28 The review confirmed that a number of serious defence management problems demanded action, namely greater civil servant involvement in the administrative and management construct of DND. The government’s solution was to link the two headquarters, the CFHQ and the departmental headquarters, and to change the distribution of responsibilities between civilian and military officials.

The new NDHQ included the establishment of an additional assistant deputy minister, ADM (Policy), a civilian public servant who would be designated as the most senior of the ADMs, and who should be “…a politically sensitive civilian, with extensive experience in planning and coordination in the context of the activities of the Federal Government as a whole.” 29 This move was clearly aimed at wresting the development of defence policy away from the military, and at providing a focal point for liaising with other departments and the central management agencies of government. In the formulation of defence policy and the provision of advice to the Minister and government, the MRG thought it was important to make a distinction between military and defence advice, and the creation of a defence policy group under the DM, it was argued, was the most direct way to bring about this change.

The merging of the two headquarters – two separate bureaucracies with two different cultures – was a radical step. The intent was to significantly
alter, through an enduring organizational solution, the way Canadian defence was managed, and to realign the responsibilities and accountabilities of civilian officials and military officers, placing public servants in positions of influence and power in defence that they had never occupied before. The impact of this decision, unforeseen at the time of the amalgamation, remains significant for the CAF and DND 40 years downstream.

The integration of CFHQ and the departmental headquarters in 1972, which resulted in military and civilian staff working side-by-side, immediately brought into greater focus the role of senior defence civilians. Then-Colonel Paul Manson (who would become CDS in 1986) penned an article in 1973 portraying the early days of the restructuring in as positive a light as possible. He came to the conclusion that the closer integration of civilians – experts in defence management – with the military had become “inevitable,” and that the separation of military and civilian functions in parallel structures that existed until then was no longer suitable. He foresaw the closer civilian-military working relationship in the headquarters streamlining decision making, improving coordination, and facilitating the advancement of defence issues with central agencies.

Prescient in his analysis, the future CDS could see several potential problems looming. Manson anticipated difficulties arising with the “introduction of civilians into the military command structure at NDHQ,” with the division of responsibilities between the military deputy chiefs and the ADMs, and with “a tendency towards bipolarity, that is, for elements of the organization to polarize around the CDS and the DM along military and civilian lines.” Echoing a statement that the Glassco Commission had made a decade earlier with respect to the potential growing influence of civilians, Manson cautioned those who were concerned that it “would be wrong to suppose that this [closer civilian-military relationship] reflected a need to impose tighter civilian control of the military in Canada, because that control is already absolute.”

Without the benefit of the MRG report (which was not released publicly until 1984 because of its sensitivity), Manson was perhaps unaware that, on the contrary, the decisions made by the government in 1971 to create NDHQ, to strengthen the role of the DM, and to shift important responsibilities away from the military (such as in defence policy, materiel, and procurement) was driven largely by a need for the government and the minister to exercise, in a more effective and active way, day-to-day oversight, monitoring, and control of the military.

The rearranging of the military and departmental headquarters chairs had not even been completed in early-1973, when another restructuring took place, and the criticism of the new organization started immediately. Concerns with respect to the “overly centralized, overly staff-ridden” and excessively civilianized organization would grow in the 1970s and 1980s, and would continue for more than 25 years. Critics complained frequently about the 1972 reforms, blaming Hellyer and his unification project as the event that set the conditions for the creation of NDHQ, forgetting, as years went by, that several defence mismanagement issues that had occurred in the late-1960s and early-1970s had pushed the government to the NDHQ solution. Admiral Robert Falls, the CDS between 1977 and 1980, commented that with the creation of NDHQ in 1972, the CDS and his senior commanders at NDHQ began losing their control over the CAF. Falls lamented that the strengthening of the DM’s staff as a means of enhancing civil control by the political executive provided public servants “a degree of authority over military affairs without responsibility for military accountability or performance.”

The most commonly heard argument criticizing NDHQ was that the changing role of civilians and military officers had, over time, led to a blurring of the responsibilities of civilian officials and military officers, to increased civilianization and bureaucratization at defence, and to an excessive reliance upon management and business methods. Many decried that those factors contributed to a progressive loss of operational focus in the CAF, and a corresponding erosion of military ethos. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, concerns were raised that officers were acquiring skills and an orientation characteristic of civilian administrators or even political leaders, contributing to a decline in military professionalism. At NDHQ,
civilianization was used to denote the change of culture taking place, in particular that military policies, regulations, and decisions were becoming generally based upon civilian and public service concepts, values, and interests. 38

As expected, the civilianization of the CAF was one of the central issues that emerged from the report of the Task Force on Review of Unification of the Canadian Forces in 1980, and its subsequent review by the next government. Mandated with examining the merits and disadvantages of the unification of the CAF, together with an analysis of the command structure, the task force interviewed nearly one thousand serving members, and was told that the CAF had adopted civilian norms and standards to an unacceptable degree. 39 Upon careful consideration, however, the task force concluded that the perception that existed in the CAF may have been based upon an incomplete understanding of the nature and functioning of NDHQ, “attributable to the composition of the Defence Management Committee [the senior departmental committee] which is perceived to be dominated by civilians.”40 In the subsequent review of the findings of the task force, completed in early-1980, the government confirmed that there was no intent to “de-unify” the Canadian Armed Forces, and it completely evaded the issue of civilianization. In doing so, it validated the concept of an integrated military-civilian headquarters structure. 41

Throughout the 1980s, NDHQ remained a house divided, and the criticism of the headquarters, and of the role of senior public servants in it, did not abate. The perception, as one author characterized the feeling at the time, was that the CAF “had lost control of their own headquarters,” and that public servants were exercising undue influence over matters that were exclusively military in nature. 42 With the creation of NDHQ, it was often claimed that the government had consciously inserted senior public servants between the military and politicians, even though the imposed NDHQ organizational solution, and the increased role of senior civilians, never got reflected in the National Defence Act. However, on a day-to-day basis, and more importantly, in law, the CDS continued to report directly to the Minister of National Defence. Defence analyst (and retired military officer) Douglas Bland, who remained for over twenty years the harshest detractor of the concept of an integrated headquarters, contends that the idea “to send out public servants to watch over the military…[provided politicians with] …an illusion of civil control over the military.” In the end, continued Bland, instead of resolving disagreements between senior military officers, ministers now had to adjudicate between the military and public servants. 43

Critics of the national headquarters have not only been historians, defence commentators, and former senior military officers. Civilians complained equally about military officers and their management incompetence. Deputy Minister C.R. “Buzz” Nixon declared in 1982 that NDHQ was staffed inappropriately by military officers who were incapable of managing well in the Ottawa environment, and that “military parochialism,” or friction between the services within the military, was contributing to several projects and ideas being unsuccessful in Ottawa. 44

The failure by many over the years to fully appreciate the reasons for the apparent heightened influence of civilians at NDHQ, which persisted both inside and outside the CAF, meant the controversy would not fade over time. In fact, it would culminate in the mid-1990s, when the NDHQ integration would be critically re-examined as part of several reviews conducted for the preparation of a new white paper on defence, and as part of the Somalia Inquiry.

The 1994 Defence White Paper and the Somalia Affair

In the early 1990s, with the end of the Cold War and expectations of a peace dividend, successive governments aggressively targeted defence in its efforts to eliminate the federal deficit. 45 The end result was deep budget cuts, a significant reduction of the civilian (and military) establishment at defence, and the introduction of new approaches to providing defence services. At the same time, the beating death of a Somali teenager by Canadian soldiers during a United Nations peacekeeping mission in 1992 set off several investigations, inquiries, and studies specifically into the incident, and the Canadian military...
in general, and triggered a series of important reforms that impacted not only the military, but the Department as well.

Testifying in September 1994 to a Special Joint Committee of the Senate and House of Commons (SJC), which was looking into a new defence policy, Deputy Minister Robert Fowler tabled a document entitled “The Organization of Canadian Defence,” outlining the responsibilities of the DM and the CDS and the role of NDHQ. It also specifically addressed the criticism of the current headquarters, and, in particular, the contribution of senior civilians:

A number of observers have called for the separation of the civilian and military branches of the Department…. In the main, however, they argue that the present arrangement encourages civilian “interference” and “politicalizes” the military.

In fact, the integrated headquarters exists precisely because, at the strategic level, political imperatives, economic considerations, and operational issues are inseparable. Operations, capital equipment programs, and other Departmental activities have political and economic context [sic] that must be addressed. Beyond matters that one might call “departmental”, the inescapable reality is that DND and the CF must also carry out government-wide policies and programs with respect to social change, bilingualism, and open government.

An integrated military-civilian headquarters does this more effectively and efficiently, drawing as it does on the different but complementary skills of the military and civilian staffs. Uniformed personnel are able to provide their unique expertise on military questions, but they are not as experienced as civilians in dealing with political considerations, governmental compromise, and public finances. Beyond this, while actions at the strategic level impact on the operational level (and vice versa), civilian involvement does not compromise the chain of military command in operations.46

Having heard “conflicting testimony of whether this [integrated headquarters] arrangement is appropriate for the needs of the Canadian Forces,” the SJC could not come up with a recommendation for the government, and instead suggested a more detailed study.47 The 1994 White Paper on Defence, released a few months later by the Liberal government, directed the military and the Department to reduce all headquarters dramatically (the reduction target was set at 50 percent), and to put in place a new command structure. However, the government ignored the advice of the SJC for a follow-on study, and instead, strongly validated in the white paper the need for a civilian-military NDHQ before anyone had serious thoughts about dismantling it and “reversing the civilian-military integration of National Defence Headquarters.”48

While downsizing and re-engineering was taking place across defence, the Somalia Commission of Inquiry of 1995–1997 was unfolding, and it was making national headlines. The commission did not examine the role of senior civilians in any detail, although it laid blame upon both the military and public servants for the events that took place in Somalia. The Inquiry, focusing primarily upon examining matters related to the deployment and employment of the Canadian military in Somalia, strongly implied in its report that senior civilian public servants had intruded in military affairs, operational issues, and the military chain of command, and this interference had contributed to a series of ill-advised decisions regarding the deployment of the Canadian Airborne Regiment. The commission critically observed that the “influence of the DM in all areas of defence policy, including ‘direction of the CF,’ has increased significantly over the years, especially since 1972,” when NDHQ was created, and cautioned that the “notion of civil control of the military should not be confused with control exercised by public servants,” as it undermines the responsibilities of Parliament.49

General John De Chastelain, CDS when the Somalia deployment decision was made in the fall of 1992, was questioned quite extensively in 1996 by the Somalia Commission with respect to the division of responsibilities between the CDS and the DM, and, in particular, the “danger” that the integrated headquarters had contributed to a blurring of the functions and authorities between the two individuals. De Chastelain was unequivocal in his answer on this matter, stating that the CDS and the DM worked well, arguing instead that “the danger is greater by the separation of the two functions, particularly at the strategic level and at National Defence Headquarters” where the integrated military-civilian mix facilitates a “strategic understanding and the strategic provision of advice to the ministers and to Cabinet of defence issues.”50 In essence, De Chastelain repeated the same words that Deputy Minister Fowler had offered to the SJC two years earlier.51

It was tempting for outsiders not understanding the workings of the DM-CDS joint governance, and for those who wanted to break apart NDHQ, to blame interference and undue influence in policy and operations decisions by senior public servants, in particular the DM, for some aspects of the Somalia decisions. “Over the years,” wrote military historian David Bercuson in 1996 at the height of the Somalia Inquiry, “the power and influence of the DM have increased while those of the CDS have declined,” leading him to conclude that the “merging of military and civilian advisors at NDHQ has been disastrous.”52 Notwithstanding the constant criticism against NDHQ and the CDS-DM diarchy, we know today that the Somalia fiasco was primarily a command, leadership, and professionalism failure of the Canadian military on many levels.

In the end, the Somalia Commission did not go as far as recommending a separation of the military and civilian structures at NDHQ, as some were strongly advocating, or for any fundamental change to the role of senior civilians. It recommended, however, that the National Defence Act be amended to “expressly prohibit the deputy minister from assuming the powers or prerogatives of the minister as regards the authority to direct the CDS in any matter concerning the ‘command and administration of the CF.’”53 Significant amendments to the NDA were made in 1998, but without any change to the role and responsibilities of the CDS and the DM.54

“For all intents and purposes, the new CDS was creating an operations-focused military headquarters inside NDHQ.”
Minister of National Defence Doug Young observed in his 1997 Report to the Prime Minister on the Leadership and Management of the Canadian Forces, released as the Somalia Inquiry report was being tabled, that there is “…a great deal of misunderstanding and misinformation about how our national headquarters works.” However, Young strongly defended the importance and legitimacy of having senior public servants involved in Canadian defence management, and summarily dismissed any notion of returning to a pre-1972 construct for NDHQ:

Civilians must have a significant role in the national structures of every democracy. There are, of course, many ways of structuring complementary civilian and military work relationships. No one model is perfect. Everywhere, however, the effectiveness of the system rests on cooperation and consultation at all levels – not on totally separate structures working on the same things at the same time often at cross purposes and in ignorance of one another...

An integrated military-civilian headquarters makes it likely that Canada’s national agenda will be addressed effectively and efficiently, drawing on the different, but complementary skills of military and civilian staffs.

Having confirmed the criticality of the role of senior public servants at NDHQ, Young chastised the military for not preparing adequately its officers, especially general and flag officers, for not having “a solid and in-depth understanding of the role and functions of the Department, government in general and the central agencies in particular.” He stressed that senior officers must also have a solid appreciation of the roles of civilians at NDHQ to be able to perform effectively in an integrated civil-military headquarters. The Minister acknowledged, however, the concerns expressed with respect to a blurring of the military and civilian accountabilities at NDHQ, and directed that the authority, responsibility, and accountability of the CDS, DM, and senior civilian and military staff be clarified.

General Hillier’s Transformation and the Afghanistan War

In early-2005, the government announced the appointment of General Rick Hillier as the new CDS. Hillier’s strong leadership, unbounded confidence, and strategic focus changed the balance of the relationship between senior civilians and the military.

The 2005 Defence Policy Statement (DPS) highlighted a new vision for the Canadian military, including a commitment to increase the defence budget, to expand the forces, and to transform...
their capabilities. Uncharacteristically for a Canadian defence policy paper, the DPS provided much detail with respect to the transformation of the operational capabilities and the command and control structure of the CAF. Nonetheless, the document was mute with respect to the Department and the role of civilians. This silence, combined with a Minister and a DM who were supportive of the changes proposed by Hillier, gave the strong-willed CDS the latitude he needed to assert his authority, and to quickly pursue important changes to NDHQ to better position the headquarters to support Canadian military operations in general, and the impending war effort in Afghanistan in particular. Hillier’s transformation targeted both the functions of NDHQ and the CAF-DND strategic governance, and, by extension, the role of senior civilians inside the national headquarters.

Scarred by the legacy of the 1990s, especially the aftermath of the Somalia Affair, and the multiple verdicts that suggested the Canadian military had lost its operational focus and military ethos, Hillier moved quickly to transform NDHQ and to strengthen the decision-making role of the military for matters affecting operational issues. It is clear that in pushing for an operational focus and a ‘command-centric’ approach to decision making, he wanted to restore to the military some responsibilities for operational issues that he believed should be decided by military officers, and not by senior public servants. As such, the increased focus upon actual combat operations in Afghanistan provided him the opportunity to reinforce the importance of military professional expertise in Canada. Hillier had been frustrated by the tendency of civilian politicians and senior bureaucrats to discount military advice and expertise, and the Afghanistan operations were increasing the status, power, and influence of military advisors, especially those like him who had present-day operational experience to back up their rhetoric.

Hillier established a new unified command structure with four operational commands, and formed a new Strategic Joint Staff (SJS) to assist him with the strategic command of the armed forces. With the creation of Military Personnel Command in 2007, he also strengthened the separation of military personnel from civilian human resource administration, returning to an organizational model pre-dating the creation of NDHQ. For all intents and purposes, the new CDS was creating an operations-focused military headquarters inside NDHQ. In all this, the DM, Ward Elcock, facilitated Hillier’s efforts to develop and implement his transformation policies and initiatives.

Despite the significant publicity surrounding Hillier’s efforts, which was at times negative, the fundamental role of civilians in DND during this period changed little, except that their efforts were now focused upon supporting the Canadian military in several demanding operations, at home and away, including a combat mission in Afghanistan. The high operational tempo, unprecedented in recent memory, gave everyone an opportunity to exercise their wartime role, and the responsiveness of NDHQ validated the view that the restructured military-civilian integrated headquarters could function very effectively in both peace and war.

In his change of command speech as CDS in July 2008, Hillier warned the audience with respect to attempts by senior civil servants (“field marshal wannabes” as he labelled them) to assume a bigger role in directing the day-to-day operations of Canadian military forces in the field. “Civilian control of the armed forces is not..."
civil service control of the armed forces,” stated Hillier loudly.64 Although he did not make the distinction at the time, it is clear that Hillier’s criticism was not directed at defence civilian officials, but rather at bureaucrats of the central agencies of government and other departments who wanted more influence and control over the Canadian military in Afghanistan.65 Inside defence, there was no doubt in anyone’s mind that Hillier strategically commanded the CAF with a firm grip.

In his 2009 memoirs, A Soldier First, Hillier asserted that Conservative Defence Minister Gordon O’Connor had offered to separate the CAF from DND (i.e., to break apart NDHQ) to bring clarity to the military and civilian roles inside defence. Hillier had dismissed the offer at the time, since the relationship that he had established with Deputy Minister Elcock allowed him to continue his transformation of the Canadian military. In hindsight, however, Hillier changed his mind, coming to the conclusion that “separating the Canadian Forces completely from the government bureaucracy in Ottawa may be the best way to ensure it remains effective.”66 Hillier was no doubt passionate in his view and had the best interest of the nation in mind, but it is very difficult to envisage how the Canadian military could work effectively in Ottawa, and in domestic and overseas multinational operations, if it were functionally separated from DND. He was definitely right to protect the sanctity of the military chain of command, such that orders and direction to the military come from senior military commanders, but he was ‘off the mark’ in not recognizing the role of civil servants in assisting elected officials with managing defence issues and in exercising civil control of the military.

Since 1972, governments have continuously reinforced the notion that defence policies and advice will be better coming from a balance of military leaders and civil servants working together inside defence. As University of Ottawa political scientist Philippe Lagassé observed correctly in 2010 in his comprehensive study Accountability for National Defence, “…senior bureaucrats play a legitimate and necessary role in helping to keep the military accountable to cabinet, and vice versa.”67 While the legitimacy of civil control of the military in Canada has never been in doubt, the extent and the manner to which this oversight and control are exercised, especially by senior bureaucrats inside defence or in the central agencies of government on behalf of politicians, has often been contentious.

Conclusion – Enhancing Civil Control with Unarmed Civil Servants

During the 1950s and 1960s, the large majority of civilian public servants in Canadian defence were employed in junior trades, clerical, and administrative positions. Following the recommendations of the 1960 Royal Commission on Government Organization, and, in particular, the merging of the CAF and DND headquarters into NDHQ in 1972, defence civilian employees gradually expanded their roles, bringing administration and managerial expertise to specialized functions...
in middle management and senior executive positions. Still, the large majority of civil servants in Canadian defence today continue to work diligently inside units and formations of the CAF, providing key and essential support to ensure that the CAF can carry out its missions daily.\textsuperscript{48}

The major shifts in the roles and responsibilities of senior public servants in DND occurred over fifty years to achieve three main objectives. The first was to create a stronger DM group, including civilian staff who could take a comprehensive view of defence policy and issues in order to better assist ministers of national defence in performing their functions. The creation of the policy group in 1972 represented the most visible statement of this requirement. Along with the modernization of public administration and the growth of the federal government, the second was to bring needed civilian expertise to manage and administer more complex defence programs and to enhance the capacity of the military to deal vertically and horizontally with the central agencies and processes of the government. The third purpose was to assist the government and politicians in exercising oversight of the CAF, and in strengthening civil control of the military.

The creation of NDHQ in 1972 definitely changed the respective roles of civilians and military officers in the senior levels of the Department, and this is precisely what the government and successive defence ministers intended the reforms to achieve. Recommendations of independent commissions and study groups, and many initiatives of the government over the years, were all intended to increase the responsibilities, authority, power, and influence of senior civilians, in particular, those of the Deputy Minister. As the Somalia Inquiry underscored in its report, the changes progressively – and deliberately – brought civilian defence bureaucrats into the process of military policy and decision making.

Over the years, there has been much criticism of NDHQ and of the alleged heightened power and influence of senior civil servants within DND. But, as General de Chastelain and Deputy Minister Fowler pointed out almost two decades ago, it is difficult to envisage how the Canadian military could work effectively in Ottawa these days if it were functionally separated from the Department of National Defence. There is also a clear expectation from the current government, as it was with the Glassco Commission in 1963, the Management Review Group in 1972, and Minister Young’s 1997 Report to the Prime Minister, that the growing presence, authority, and influence of knowledgeable senior public servants inside Defence will not only allow them to critically probe and challenge military advice and recommendations, but provide the government with better strategic choices and more effective policies to allow it to make wiser defence decisions for Canada. The most useful model to run Canadian defence remains one in which the CDS and the DM work closely together, supported by an integrated civilian-military staff, and linked closely with the elected politicians, other departments, and the central agencies of government.

Events of the last decade and changes of recent years in government and NDHQ have, on one hand, brought a certain degree of clarity to the responsibilities and accountabilities of the DM and the CDS, but, on the other, these have contributed to accentuate the CDS-DM polarization that Colonel Manson had predicted and feared in 1973. General Hillier’s transformation of the CAF and NDHQ in 2005-2006, and the conflict in Afghanistan, have contributed significantly to bring a greater distinction between the military and civilian roles in NDHQ, in particular for operational issues. The robust command structure that now exists in the CAF, from the tactical to the strategic level, with the CDS commanding at NDHQ supported by a dedicated strategic joint staff, ensures that military advice and orders to CAF units come from military commanders in the chain of command, as is stipulated in the National Defence Act. Civilian public servants certainly participate in the process on many levels, but military commanders decide, and are accountable. At the same time, the enactment of the Federal Accountability Act in 2006 has conferred even more authority upon the DM, by being legally answerable to Parliament, as the DND’s accounting officer, for the proper use, allocation, and management of departmental resources and finances.\textsuperscript{49} Those responsibilities are bound to continue to collide with those of the CDS, who is charged in the National Defence Act with the “control and administration” of the CAF.

As this article has argued, government-after-government has seen it important, over four decades to frequently affirm, and to maintain, the integration of civilian public servants with military officers in one strategic defence headquarters, often justifying NDHQ for reasons of efficiency and effectiveness, rather than articulating it on the need to enhance civil control of the military. The gradual changing role of public servants in the top echelons of Defence must be seen within the context of the important evolutionary changes that took place in government over the years, and, in particular, defence accountability at large, rather than strictly as an assertion of civilian supremacy or political control over the military.\textsuperscript{70}

Ultimately, as a former CDS astutely said nearly two decades ago, the organization of Canadian defence, and, in particular, the role of senior defence civil servants within NDHQ, has a crucial impact on civil-military relations in Canada, affecting not only how the different groups – politicians, military officers, public servants in defence and elsewhere in government – interact, but, more critically, the quality and relevance of the military and defence advice provided to government.\textsuperscript{71} Those contemplating future changes to the role, authority, and organization of the unelected, unarmed servants of the state at National Defence must be mindful of this reality.
I am grateful to the following individuals for their helpful suggestions and comments in reviewing earlier drafts: Dr. Joel Sokolsky, Dr. Allan English, Dr. Ross Pigeau, Major-General Mike Hood, Captain(N) Craig Barnes, Captain(N) Sean Cantelon, and Captain Michel Gosselin.


It must be stressed, however, that the National Defence Act is clear that the CDS does not report to a public servant, but to the Minister of National Defence and to the government (i.e., Prime Minister).

This expression and the title are adapted from Peter Feaver's well-known expression from his work *Armed Servants: Agency, Oversight and Civil-Military Relations*, paperback edition. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005).

The role, authority, power, and influence of senior civil servants involved in defence issues in the central agencies of government is also critical, but deserves a separate study of its own. This article focuses exclusively upon civil servants inside DND.


D.G. Loomis, “The Canadian Forces and the Department in War and Peace,” supporting paper to NDHQ Study S3/85 (Ottawa: DND, 1985), p. 43; see in particular the discussion at pp. 70–78.


Defence in the 70s, in Bland, *Volume 1*, p. 172.


Management of Defence in Canada, in Bland, Volume 2, p. 168, and pp. 185–200 for a complete list of symptoms identified by the MRG.

This ADM was initially identified to as ADM Strategy, Policy and Plans, but was quickly shortened to ADM Policy (by fall 1972. Management of Defence in Canada, in Bland, Volume 2, p. 212 and pp. 219–222.

It is important to note that the MRG report called for the DM to be incorporated into the Minister’s office, and to outrank the CDS. This recommendation was never implemented, with the CDS and the DM remaining on an equal level to this day.


Ibid, p. 337.


Kasurak, p. 112.


Robert Fowler, “The Organization of Canadian Defence” (Ottawa: DND, 1994), a document prepared for the Special Joint Committee of the Senate and House of Commons; the document was later tabled in 1996 by DM Robert Fowler as Exhibit P-105 for his testimony to the Somalia Inquiry (emphasis added). In this testimony, Fowler implied that the document he tabled was a departmental document, and had been endorsed by the CDS. Emphasis added.


The first ‘danger’ quote is from the Commission’s counsel when questioning General De Chastelain. Testimony of General De Chastelain, 20 February 1996, in Vol. 49, in particular, lines 9825–9845. In his testimony, Robert Fowler (who had just left his DM post for an ambassadorial assignment) strongly echoed the statements made by General De Chastelain. Testimony of Robert Fowler, 20 February 1996, in Vol. 50, in particular, lines 10160–10165.

Bercuson, pp. 72–74.


Bill C-25, An Act to Amend the National Defence Act received royal assent in December 1998, and consisted of the most significant amendments to the NDA since 1950. The focus of the bill was upon the military justice system.

M. Douglas Young, Report to the Prime Minister on the Leadership and Management of the Canadian Forces (Ottawa: DND, 1997); p. 30.

Young, pp. 29–30.


Létourneau, p. 249.


See Gosselin and Stone, “From Minister Hellyer to General Hillier,” for a more complete discussion on Hillier’s transformation initiative.


Lagassé, Accountability for National Defence, p. 29; and Bland, Chiefs of Defence, p. 198.