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Peacekeeping if necessary ...

Canada doesn't have an army to impress its enemies or allies, but to appease domestic opinion

Mark F. Proudman

National Post

Canadian troops will arrive home tomorrow from Afghanistan, where they were deployed on a combat mission for the first time since the Korean War, 50 years ago. The government will use their outstanding performance to argue that the Liberals are fully committed to the war on terror; our troops will have the pleasure of knowing that their performance in battle has become, in the hands of Liberal politicians, an argument against equipping them better in the future.



The Associated Press
Princess Patricias Canadian Light Infantry officers salute during their battle group's departure parade and flag-lowering ceremony last week at the airbase in Kandahar, Afghanistan.

Canadians have in fact been in combat more recently than the Korean War, but not intentionally: Soldiers of Princess Patricias Canadian Light Infantry, the same regiment now leaving Afghanistan, successfully fought Croat forces in the Medak pocket in Bosnia in 1993. And two decades earlier, the Canadian Airborne Regiment, on a UN mission in Cyprus, fought Turkish forces attacking a Nicosia airport during the Turkish invasion of that island in 1974. But those were supposed to be peacekeeping missions: The Afghan mission was the first since the Korean War that was intended to lead to combat.

Much has changed in the six months since the Princess Patricias' deployment. As Sept. 11 fades into the past, the Canadian intelligentsia's customary anti-Americanism is reasserting itself, and the accidental bombing of our troops by a U.S. fighter jet has not helped matters. It is easy to forget that our troops went to Afghanistan not to fight terrorism, or even to impress the Americans, but to assuage domestic opinion. This is an old, if unedifying, Canadian tradition.

The government's spinners are putting it about that Canada was among the first countries to offer troops to fight alongside the Americans. This is a patent untruth: The government's first inclination was to contribute to the British-led peacekeeping force in Kabul. Only when the British declined to accept a high-profile Canadian contingent did the government turn to the Americans,



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pressing them to accept a Canadian batallion.

When the Americans agreed, Ottawa was delighted.

"This will blow their socks off," said a National Defence official, gleefully anticipating the reaction to a combat mission by critics of Canada's hesitant, on-again-off-again response to terrorism. Clearly, blowing the domestic critics' socks off was higher on Ottawa's agenda than any possible effect Canadian forces might have had on the enemy.

Alliance leader Stephen Harper has expressed outrage that the government has been "pushed every step of the way" by public opinion. This is not new -- since 1918, no Canadian government has sought to play an important military role in any war; most Canadian military actions have been aimed primarily at the domestic audience.

Reading declassified Cabinet minutes from such historic crises as those of the Second World War (when minutes began to be kept) and the Suez affair, one is struck by the absence of any serious thought given to the underlying situation. The entire focus of our leaders' discussions has always been the domestic audience.

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It wasn't always that way. During the First World War, Canadian military action had been focused on defeating the enemy. The Conservative Prime Minister, Sir Robert Borden, insisted that Canada keep a corps of 60,000 combat troops on the front line at all times, and he brought in conscription, used troops against rioters in Quebec, and gerrymandered the election of 1917 in order to achieve that goal.

The date of the battle of Amiens, Aug. 8, 1918, is not often mentioned in Canadian history books, but it is in European ones. The German commander, Field Marshal Erich von Ludendorff, called it "the black day of the German Army." The Canadian Corps, commanded by General Sir Arthur Currie, a former Victoria real estate agent and reserve artillery officer, was in the van of the Allied attack that led to the collapse of the German armies and thence to the armistice of Nov. 11, 1918. The Canadians lost 4,000 men that day.

This military triumph, ironically, caused permanent damage to the standing of Borden's Tory party in Quebec, which, unlike English Canada, saw the war as a British conflict, unrelated to Quebec's interests. The Liberals' status as the "natural party of government" dates from this period. That status is founded on the customary exclusion of the Tories (and other more conservative parties) from Quebec. The Liberals know this, and have been wary of military engagement ever since.

In the inter-war years, Liberal Prime Minister Mackenzie King went out of his way to avoid military preparations. But back then, English Canadians were proudly pro-British; they saw the Union Jack and the Red Ensign as their flags, and when war broke out in 1939, there was no possibility that English Canadians would tolerate Canada staying out of it.

King had promised Quebec that he would not introduce conscription as the Tories had done. He gradually slid out of this commitment, but he did it so adroitly, and so slowly -- the process took four years -- that he was able to keep his Quebec support intact. King was not even afraid of the occasional absurdity: Between 1940 and 1942, it was possible for an American to be conscripted to defend Canada, but not a Canadian.

In 1940, Canada sent a division to Britain to help defend against a possible Nazi invasion. After 1940, as Hitler turned against the Soviet Union and the danger of invasion receded, Canadian troops remained in Britain, while the Australians and the British fought the Germans in North Africa.

Why were Canadian troops not sent to Africa? Because the Canadian government insisted Canadian troops remain together and remain under Canadian command, which had the desired side effect of keeping them out of battle, keeping casualties low and thus keeping the conscription largely off the agenda.

But by 1943, English Canadian opinion was becoming impatient with inactivity, relieved only by the disastrous Dieppe raid of August, 1942. King therefore suddenly abandoned his determination to keep Canadian troops together, and insisted instead that the British include them in the coming invasions of Sicily and mainland Italy. After D-Day, there was a shortage of troops in northern Europe and a political crisis erupted in Ottawa over conscription.

As a consequence, Canadian troops were shifted from Italy back to the Western Front. The eminent Canadian war historian C.P. Stacey labelled the whole episode "a silly chapter in Canadian war policy" in which Canadian troops were shipped around Europe, not to help defeat the Germans, nor even to impress allies or secure a post-war bargaining position, but solely to satisfy Canadians at home.

King's intervention in the naval side of the Second World War followed similar lines. At the height of the Atlantic convoy war, King, needing to tell English Canadians how well his government was doing, asked Churchill (whom English Canadians trusted) to say something positive about the performance of the Royal Canadian Navy.

In fact, the performance of the Navy was terrible. University of New Brunswick historian Marc Milner has shown that the Canadian Navy was the worst of the Allied navies at sub-hunting. The fault for this lay not with the men in the Navy, but with the government -- the Navy had only six destroyers in 1939 and had been completely unprepared for the rapid expansion required by the war. Poor equipment and funding before the war led to poor performance in combat -- and, of course, inadequate pre-war preparation was itself a result, ultimately, of King's pandering to his Quebec supporters.

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Primary concern with the home audience remained the focus of military policy after the Second World War. In the 1956 Suez War, Britain and France invaded Egypt to seize the Suez Canal, which, in their opinion, they owned. Lester Pearson's famous negotiations for a ceasefire and a UN peacekeeping force caused the government political difficulties: Many English Canadians, following the lead of

The Globe and Mail, thought the British action had been justified. It became politic for the government to be seen doing something positive, so Canadian troops were deployed, not because they were necessary on the ground (the Egyptians didn't want them) but because they were necessary to Ottawa's image.

But Pearson had inadvertently discovered something: Peacekeeping is cheap. Moreover, it has an enlightened, internationalist, humanitarian air to it -- a message that became particularly appealing as the Americans got bogged down in Vietnam. Few troops are needed for peacekeeping, so conscription is unnecessary. Cheap and even out-of-date equipment is often good enough to get the job done. Canadian diplomats and politicians, from Pearson to Chrétien, have been able to be seen playing a prominent role on the world stage, without having to commit large forces or take great risks.

Even the senior ranks of the Canadian Forces, who initially saw peacekeeping as a distraction from its real job of fighting wars, now appreciates that peacekeeping is popular, and can even be useful when making the political case for increased defence spending -- the purchase of four "new" submarines has been justified by their potential usefulness in peacekeeping operations.

Peacekeeping has even made it into beer commercials -- what better evidence could there be for the place it has assumed in our self-image?

In fact, so engrained has peacekeeping become in Ottawa's consciousness that courage in combat -- because it's a reminder that real fighting is sometimes necessary -- is actually embarrassing to our leaders. In Afghanistan, the Americans have been so impressed by the trench-level soldierly skills of the Princess Pats that several Canadian soldiers have been nominated, by their U.S. brothers in arms, for decoration for bravery in combat. The nominators are not generals being polite at a press conference, they are the soldiers on the ground. But Ottawa is uncomfortable with such military virtues -- and the proposed decorations have disappeared into the bureaucracy on the Rideau.

Pierre Trudeau once said Canada has an army not to impress its enemies but to impress its friends. But our friends and allies have often been less than impressed by our small, poorly equipped forces, the excellent performance of our troops in Afghanistan notwithstanding. The unfortunate fact is that we have an army not even to impress our allies, but primarily to assuage domestic anglophone opinion.

So when Stephen Harper complains about our inadequate military, he is really complaining about the structure of the Canadian confederation and about political and ideological habits acquired, and engrained, over the course of almost a century.

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