

Accountability for National Defence: Ministerial Responsibility, Military Command and Parliamentary Oversight

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Canadians have grown increasingly interested in national defence matters in recent years. A result of the 2001 attacks against the United States and of Canadian Forces operations in Afghanistan, this renewed interest in military issues has been expressed in several ways. Public opinion polls indicate that Canadians have grown more appreciative of the military; according to one survey, the Canadian Forces are seen as the country's most respected public institution (Strategic Counsel 2007, 7). Events and paraphernalia showing support for members of the forces have proliferated. Media outlets have devoted far more attention to the military over the past eight years, particularly since the Canadian Forces were deployed on a strenuous counterinsurgency mission in 2005. Political leaders have also paid greater attention to the military. Prime Minister Paul Martin declared that he would rebuild the Canadian Forces, and his government inaugurated a substantial, multiyear increase in the defence budget.

Prime Minister Stephen Harper has vowed to further improve the state of the military. His Conservative government has outlined a long-term funding formula to recapitalize the armed forces. Members of Parliament have debated defence questions with greater rigour. Issues related to the mission in Afghanistan have been raised regularly during Question Period since 2001, MPs have twice debated and voted on extending the Canadian Forces' deployment in Kandahar, and the first report of the parliamentary budget officer, requested by MP Paul Dewar, addressed the costs of the Afghan mission. Since 2001 the Senate Standing Committee on National Security and Defence has issued a number of critical reports about Canada's defence capabilities. At the time of this writing, furthermore, opposition MPs were calling for the resignation of Harper's second minister of national defence, Peter MacKay, because of his handling of the controversy over the treatment of Afghan detainees, an issue that contributed to the removal of two previous ministers from the defence portfolio.

Accompanying this renewed focus on military matters has been a concern with Canadian defence accountability. Although accountability concerns have surrounded matters of national defence for several decades, this public and political interest in the military has amplified calls for a reform of how the armed forces are governed and managed. These calls for reform have centred on two broad issues: the role of the House of Commons and the Senate in overseeing and shaping national defence policy; and the administration and policy-making processes of the Department of National Defence. To borrow C.E.S. Franks' terminology, defence accountability has re-emerged as an issue in both the "public" parliamentary world and the "private" governmental world of Canadian politics (1987, 97).

Echoing the larger parliamentary reform movement, scholars, parliamentarians and pundits have long criticized the indirect role that the House of Commons plays in decisions about the