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THE CANADIAN FORCES, POPULISM, AND RIGHT-WING EXTREMISM

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AIM

1. This service paper will provide an understanding and context for populism and right-wing extremism in Canada, and their relevance to the Canadian Forces. Although there may be a correlation between the two, these phenomena are distinct. This paper will demonstrate that as a professional military in a Janowitzian liberal democratic society, the Canadian Forces is limited in its ability to influence a rise in populism, but has clear obligations in the face of a rise of right-wing extremism, particularly in relation to the impact on its own workforce.

2. First, appropriate contextual definitions of both “populism” and “right-wing extremism” will be developed and contrasted. Then, the role of the Canadian Forces within society will briefly be discussed, drawing on contemporary military-civil relations theory, as well as Canadian Forces doctrine. This will enable further analysis into the impact of each of these phenomena on the Canadian Forces and will inform which actions should be taken in response.

INTRODUCTION

3. During the 2016 United States (US) electoral campaign, the republican nominee’s unprecedentedly controversial campaign drew the attention of academics and political pundits the world over. Donald Trump’s surprising ascent to power began the same year that the United Kingdom adopted a controversial and defining vote to withdraw from the European Union. Just two years later, here in Canada, Ontario voters elected premier Doug Ford, whom many have argued had a campaign style and messages which bore

similarities to both the Trump and Leave campaigns. And for the first time in Canadian history, the recent federal election included candidates for the “People’s Party of Canada”. Events such as these have prompted a surge in the use of the term *populism* in the media and academia alike to describe the phenomenon now clearly occurring in the West. This rise in populism has occurred alongside another unmistakable phenomenon: the rise in the “alt-right” or *right-wing extremism*. The latter is characterised by increased social unrest, messages of hatred and intolerance, and in the most extreme cases, incidents of violence and even terrorism against our own citizens.

DISCUSSION

Populism

4. The term “populism” as a political phenomenon owes its origin to the left-wing People’s Party, or “populist party”, from the US in the late 19th century.¹ This was essentially a self-designation representing their platform. The term has been in usage in academia since the 1950s and describes a form of politics that exists on both the left and right ends of the spectrum in different parts of the world. It has been described in various works as being “among others, an ideology, a movement, and a syndrome”.² In attempting to define the term, it is useful to recognize that the phenomenon itself exists predominantly within the context of a liberal democracy – that is, a society in which governments are freely elected and have separated powers according to a constitution.

¹ J. B. Allcock, “‘Populism’: A Brief Biography,” *Sociology* 5, no. 3 (1971): 371.

² Cas Mudde, “The Populist Radical Right: A Pathological Normalcy,” *West European Politics* 33, no. 6 (November 1, 2010): 11, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402382.2010.508901>.

This characteristic is important since, in the West, we place a high value on our liberal-democratic ideals; and populism is in some ways an artefact of our system of government.

5. The challenge in defining populism as strictly an ideology lies in the overt fact that it is manifested differently across many different cultures and societies. In Western societies, it is generally associated with anti-immigration sentiments and xenophobia. In Latin America, the messaging centres more around economic mismanagement or corruption.³ The common element is a theme of being representative of *the people*, and more importantly, the *common* people, in distinction from *the elite*. In fact, “most populists not only detest the political establishment, but they also critique the economic elite, the cultural elite, and the media elite.”⁴ Indeed, it is a hallmark of populist politicians to invoke a perception of disparity between the mass that is their electoral base, and some other demographic of their society, generally considered to be the “ruling” class. In most cases, it is not *actual* poverty which drives populism, but rather “*feelings* of economic precarity.”⁵ Note that it is not strictly necessary for such disparities to actually exist, nor for there to be actual definable subgroups representing “the people” and “the elite.”

6. So while populisms across the world bear some similarities and common trends, academia has not been able to find consensus on how to define it strictly in ideological terms. Rather, populism appears more to be “a political strategy employed by a specific

³ Mudde, “The Populist Radical Right,” 1.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁵ Sean Speer, “Working-Class Opportunity and the Threat of Populism in Canada,” December 2018, 4.

type of leader who seeks to govern based on direct and unmediated support from their followers.”⁶ This latter description is certainly relatable and apt as far as what can be seen in North America, and is a suitable characterisation for further analysis as it pertains to the Canadian Forces. In short, populism is a political mechanism for winning votes by appealing to a broad electorate on a platform that identifies them as an underdog, and the politician as their champion. In the West, the movement is characterised by xenophobic anti-immigration policies, among other polarizing messages.

Right-wing Extremism

7. For the Canadian Forces, it is important to distinguish *populism*, from the more insidious *right-wing extremism*. While populism clearly is gaining a majority-vote within certain western societies, right-wing extremism thankfully still occupies a minority, despite being on the rise world-wide, and indeed, even in Canada.⁷ Some examples of this immoderate form right-wing politics include the “gilets jaunes” protests in France, the “alternative-right” white nationalist movement in the US, and Canada’s own “proud boys” all-male neo-fascist organization.

8. The term right-wing extremism also defies simple definition. In their work on right-wing extremism in Canada, Perry & Scrivens offer the following description: “a loose movement, characterized by racially, ethnically and sexually defined nationalism.

⁶ Mudde, “The Populist Radical Right,” 12.

⁷ Barbara Perry and Ryan Scrivens, *Right-Wing Extremism in Canada* (Cham, SWITZERLAND: Palgrave Macmillan US, 2019), 1, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/cfvlibrary-ebooks/detail.action?docID=5855453>.

This nationalism is often framed in terms of white power and is grounded in xenophobic and exclusionary understandings...”.⁸ While we see some similar themes from populism: xenophobia, nationalism, and the legitimacy of the “ruling class”; the right-wing extremists differ principally in their extremity. Theirs is wont to go as far as to incite hatred and visit violence on others in ways that are both reprehensible and illegal. Their growth has been attributed in part to the facilitation provided by the internet and social media, which allow for wide dissemination of their messages, while permitting relative anonymity when needed.⁹

9. In contrast with populism, right-wing extremism is not directly concerned with acquiring political power through legitimate means. Neither would anyone argue that their ideals as are representative of society – rather it would be the opposite – they are entirely contrary to the values of Canadian society. (It would be difficult to say the same for populism, where these ideals are seen to have won recent elections in the US and Canada). It is safe to say that right-wing extremists are a blight on an otherwise highly respectable society, and that Canadians should wish to minimize their influence. Unfortunately for the Canadian Forces, it would appear as though their ilk have permeated the ranks. As the Global News reported in 2018, Military Police Criminal Intelligence identified no fewer than sixteen service members who were associated with six different hate groups, including “proud boys”, while simultaneously dismissing these

⁸ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁹ Perry and Scrivens, *Right-Wing Extremism in Canada*, 5.

groups as being of no significant threat to the forces.¹⁰ In an article that ran in the *Globe and Mail*, anti-hate educator Elizabeth Moore argued “this shows a distressing lack of understanding of their own history and the dangers of having radicalized individuals with weapons training on the ground.”¹¹ Editorial remarks aside, it is clear that the Canadian Forces are not immune to extremism.

10. While Moore goes on to draw parallels with other problems in military culture, such as Somalia and sexual misconduct, it is important to highlight that right-wing extremism is not, as yet can be seen, being fostered within the Canadian Forces. Or, put differently, the presence of right-wing extremism among the ranks is not necessarily indicative of a problem with military culture in this regard – the Canadian Forces is not breeding extremists. Rather, this is generally perceived as being a product of already-radicalized individuals “infiltrating” the ranks. The distinction is important, yet no less indicative of a problem, as will be discussed further shortly.

Military-civil Relations

11. With a working understanding of populism and right-wing extremism, it is possible to examine their relevance and impact on the Canadian Forces. This first

¹⁰ Stewart Bell and Mercedes Stephenson, “Canadian Armed Forces Members Linked to Six Hate Groups: Internal Report,” *Global News*, May 27, 2019, <https://globalnews.ca/news/5322011/canadian-armed-forces-members-linked-to-six-hate-groups-internal-report/>.

¹¹ Moore, Elizabeth, “Opinion: The Canadian Armed Forces Ignore Extremism in Their Ranks at Their Peril – and Ours, Too,” *The Globe and Mail*, May 30, 2019, <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/opinion/article-the-canadian-armed-forces-ignore-extremism-in-their-ranks-at-their/>.

involves examining the role of the Canadian Forces within society and the Canadian political landscape more broadly.

12. Canada's system of civil-military relations is decidedly Janowitzian: the military remains entirely subservient to the responsible government, yet is nevertheless non-partisanly involved in managing the overall Department of National Defence, and in matters of policy. Janowitz describes the military officer as being "subject to civilian control, not only because of the 'rule of law' and tradition, but also because of self-imposed professional standards and meaningful integration with civilian values....".¹² In this system, the military is an expert advisor to government on the use of military power as an expression of foreign policy, but ultimately the government retains full authority to direct military action as it chooses. Canadian Forces doctrine therefore states that it is "a societal imperative the military remain subordinate to civil authority and that it reflect, to an appropriate degree, societal values and norms."¹³ Each of these fundamental imperatives are critical in the present analysis; the former applying most to the issue of rising populism in Canadian politics, and the latter in the face of right-wing extremism.

Implications for the Canadian Forces

13. The military's absolute subordination to government has specific consequences in a world increasingly influenced by populist ideals. Should the Canadian people elect a

¹² Morris Janowitz, *The Professional Soldier: A Social and Political Portrait* (New York: The Free Press, 1960), 120.

¹³ Canada. Department of National Defence. A-PA-005-000/AP-001, *Duty with Honour — The Profession of Arms in Canada*. 2nd ed. (Kingston, ON: Canadian Defence Academy, Canadian Forces Leadership Institute, 2009), 42.

populist government, the military would be legally bound to uphold and act on the policies of this government, even if they were entirely opposed to some or even many individual soldiers' personal values, beliefs, or ideals. Additionally, since this government would necessarily have been elected by the people, one could infer that the general values of Canadian society may have somewhat shifted from what we today recognize as Canadian ideals. Consequently, should a populist government advocate for an escalation of hostilities with a major world power, it would be necessary for the military to support such policies at all levels of leadership and on the front line. Moreover, the military would be duty-bound to ensure its members operate and act in a manner consistent with these decidedly *Canadian* values.

14. In such a situation, the military's duty to provide expert advice to government would be all-the-more critical in defending Canada's greater interests. Indeed, it is likely that Canadian security would come to rely heavily on the wisdom and temperance of its senior military leaders in navigating the fine balancing act of advising such a government. However, in the face of a slow rise of populist rhetoric in Canadian society, the military must remain decidedly non-partisan and is therefore not in a position to directly influence the sway of Canadian political ideals.

15. This is in contrast, however, to the military's abject obligation to act on the presence of right-wing extremism within its ranks. Indeed, the doctrine is clear that "the legitimacy of the profession of arms requires that it embody the values of the society it

defends.”¹⁴ Canadian society decries right-wing extremism, and therefore so must its military. These individuals have no place amongst those who are duty-bound to “respect the dignity of all persons” and be held to the highest possible public scrutiny for their conduct both on and off-duty. The Canadian Forces must unquestionably seek to expel individuals who offend the sensibilities of the Canadian people, and moreover prevent their entry in the first place. By failing to do so, the military risks losing the trust of the Canadian people and failing to uphold its own ethos.

16. Unfortunately, there are many challenges associated with eliminating right-wing extremism in society, and even much more so within an institution like the military. In their public-facing actions, extremists tend to navigate within the bounds of legal and “acceptable” behaviours – leaving their more deplorable acts and sayings for closed doors, or the anonymity offered by the internet.¹⁵ In short, while police intelligence are often successful in identifying these individuals, a person’s personal ideals are insufficient grounds to discharge them from the military. There is often insufficient evidence to indict on criminal or service discipline grounds, and the Canadian Forces administrative measures are currently ill-equipped to deal with “ideological” infractions. It is one thing to release an individual who has been convicted of publicly inciting hatred; it is another to discharge an individual simply for having an “affiliation” with a particular group.

¹⁴ Canada. *Duty with Honour*, 30.

¹⁵ Perry and Scrivens, *Right-Wing Extremism in Canada*, 5.

17. Nevertheless, it would be imprudent simply to ignore the problem. Policies can be reviewed and renewed to deal with new challenges. Military police could cooperate more explicitly with the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) in identifying extremists within the military, and updated policies could be leveraged to ensure either their conformance with doctrine, or discharge from the forces. Additionally, resources could be assigned to ensuring these individuals do not get through the recruiting system: either by early detection in the recruitment process, or by somehow deterring them from even applying. This latter may be more challenging since the para-military nature of many right-wing extremist organizations make professional military training and experience an attractive prospect for their nefarious designs. More research and analysis is therefore required to develop the necessary policy mechanisms to deal with the issue on either front.

CONCLUSION

18. Liberal democracies around the world are increasingly impacted by the rise of divisive and polarising populist politics, and a related but distinct call for hatred and right-wing extremism. A confluence of internal and external factors, such as erosions in inter-state stability and the rise of global acts of terrorism, are likely influences but beyond the scope of this paper. In a free world led by *very stable geniuses*,¹⁶ the leadership of the Canadian Forces must take note and prepare themselves to effectively manage military-civil relations in an increasingly unpredictable political environment.

¹⁶ Trump, Donald. Twitter Post. January 6, 2018, 4:30am.
<https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/949619270631256064>

They must also vigorously uphold the principles of Duty with Honour and ensure they are entirely representative of the society they defend. This obligation demands that the Canadian Forces vigorously rout all forms of right-wing extremism from their ranks. Both efforts will require careful policy development, with the call-to-action decidedly stronger in the case of right-wing extremism. However, it may be suggested that every soldier, sailor, airman and airwoman, as informed Canadian citizens, holds an intrinsic ability – perhaps even a duty – to act as a unifying force in Canadian society, both on and off duty. Canadian Forces personnel are uniquely positioned in society to model those values which they so richly cherish and have sought to defend with their lives. To do otherwise may be complicit with letting the terrorists win.

RECOMMENDATIONS

19. In facing a rising surge of populism in Canada, it is necessary for its military's more senior members to remain adept in their role as advisors while maintaining the appropriate degree of political neutrality. It is recommended that senior leaders receive relevant training in this regard, and opportunities for dialogue and reflection with their peers on the challenges of liaising and working with increasingly populist government officials. The National Security Programme at the Canadian Forces College provides a unique opportunity for this important professional development.

20. Regarding the presence of right-wing extremists in the Canadian Forces, it is recommended that the Chief of Military Personnel engage with internal and external stakeholders, as well as sociological subject matter experts on hate groups and extremism.

The aim would be to develop policies and tools to ensure recruiting centers are able to detect and reject these individuals. Additionally, the Canadian Forces requires mechanisms that are effective in dealing with those individuals already in the ranks, either through administrative measures and rehabilitation, or outright release when warranted.

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