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CANADIAN FORCES COLLEGE - COLLÈGE DES FORCES CANADIENNES

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**Strategic Communication:  
A Transformational Approach**

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## **ABSTRACT**

With no doctrinal process associated with the term, “strategic communication” means different things to different people. This paper offers a view of what strategic communication is in a Canadian context and reviews ways to improve strategic communication in a systemic and sustainable manner.

Based on the premise that, until recently, the Canadian Forces (CF) has failed in its strategic communication efforts, the author offers the thesis that in order for the CF to effectively communicate strategically on a more consistent basis, it must redevelop its ability to operate at the strategic level, become credible in the eyes of the government that it serves, remain relevant to the people it represents and engage the media with one open and transparent voice.

The thesis is framed by three themes: strategic art, CF Transformation and senior leadership engagement. These themes are woven into three groupings of re-establishing the strategic level of thinking, civil-military relations and military media interactions. A secondary premise is introduced acknowledging that although CF Transformation has enjoyed good initial success, there is some doubt whether the necessary momentum has been attained in order to ensure its ultimate success.

The paper broadly concludes that a confident, trusted senior leadership, which is politically aware and media savvy is a precondition to successful strategic communication.

## Introduction

These are interesting times in which we live. Two decades into the revolution in military affairs, the Canadian Forces (CF) is still at a crossroads in its understanding of how technology has affected operations, the new threat environment is still being defined and many Canadians have yet to realize that the country is at war conducting combat operations in Afghanistan for the first time since Korea. After thirty years of declining defence budgets, the recent trend of increases has caught the CF in a position where, while it was well set up to operate in an environment of resource scarcity, it might not be prepared to manage the new funding provided by the current government. After years of operating in the backwaters of Canadian politics, the CF and its leaders have increasingly found themselves in the limelight and mainly for the right reasons. Gen Hillier, Chief of the Defence Staff (CDS) 2005-2008, in particular, has enjoyed a popularity that has not been seen in a very long time. His success is often attributed to his ability as a strategic communicator.<sup>1</sup> Based on this description of its senior leader, strategic communication has entered the military lexicon. This has been done without the rigour normally required by a formal doctrinal process.

With no doctrinal process associated with it, the term “strategic communication” means different things to different people. If one were to ask a signaler, the answer would certainly include the terms bandwidth and information exchange requirements, with connectivity and baseline application thrown in for good measure. To the Public Affairs specialist, it is about educating the Canadian people on what the CF does and making a clear distinction between communication and information operations. Ask an

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<sup>1</sup> Various newspaper articles including Steve Chase, “Outspoken general bows out with no regrets,” *Globe and Mail*, 16 April, 2008.

operator and the answer would focus on how to shape the battle space on the moral plane through information operations at all levels. With such a disparate perception, it would serve us well to start out with a common understanding. For the purposes of this paper, strategic communication will be defined as those messages that shape the environment within which the civil authority, citizenry and military spheres interact.

Current communications strategy has shifted both target and method. Senior leadership has targeted an expanded audience that not only includes the traditional audience of the civil authority but now includes the Canadian populace. Where previous senior leadership tended to communicate through staff to staff interactions with the civil authority as established by the current policy development process, the current leadership has personally engaged both the senior political leadership and the general population as a whole. The application of what Major General Richard Chilcoat, a former commandant of the United States Army War College, termed “the strategic art”<sup>2</sup> has resulted in at least short-term success for the acquisition of significant capability and a renewed pride in the military both internally and externally. The CF will need to build sufficient mental agility as an institution to sustain this success by increasing its competency in applying military art at the strategic level.

The current CF Transformation presents hope for the future ability to communicate at the strategic level in a manner that is less ad hoc and personality driven than previously exercised. By separating the strategic and operational levels, there is an opportunity to refine the CF capability at each level. The concepts of command centricity, mission command and a focus on operational effectiveness have been

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<sup>2</sup> The term strategic art was introduced in MGen Richard A. Chilcoat, “Strategic Art: The New Discipline for 21<sup>st</sup> Century Leaders” (Strategic Studies Institute, US Army War College, Carlisle Barracks, PA, 1995).

embraced by most.<sup>3</sup> The practical aspects of aligning authority, responsibility and accountability require more work but are largely on track. The idea of a single team solution consisting of Regular and Reserve components and DND civilians, although noble in cause, has proven problematic in its implementation. However, the principle that has been the most difficult to foster has been the intent to build a CF culture vice functional and environmental cultures. Some would argue that the joint culture has in fact regressed as organizations look inward in order to position themselves to benefit from the presumably new found riches. It is in this area that the CF will need to focus significant energy.

These themes of strategic art, CF Transformation and senior leadership engagement frame the current environment within which CF strategic communication is conducted. As this paper will demonstrate, until very recently, CF strategic communication has been ineffective. There has been some success under current leadership; however, this success may be short lived if a more systemic approach is not developed. In order for the CF to effectively communicate strategically on a more consistent basis, it must redevelop its ability to operate at the strategic level, become credible in the eyes of the government that it serves, remain relevant to the people it represents and engage the media with one open and transparent voice.

The intent of this paper is not to propose what messages should be developed in order to successfully communicate at the strategic level. Rather, it will examine some of the conditions that need to be set in order to ensure that the conduit through which successful strategic communication can be conducted is built.

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<sup>3</sup> Canadian Forces Transformation Team, *Executive Summary and Key Recommendations* (Ottawa: CDS Action Team 1 (Command and Control), 2005), 3.

## **Factors Affecting the Information Battle Space**

Historically, the CF has not been effective in strategic communication. It has struggled to convince its target audience of its own relevance. This failure has manifested itself in declining defence budgets and an ambivalent public attitude towards its military. There are a number of reasons for this ineffectiveness, some of which are not necessarily within the CF's ability to change. There are many, however, that are. Although not all inclusive, this paper will identify a number of areas where the CF has challenges in strategic communication and suggest possible solutions. There is an argument to be made that recent communication efforts have been fairly successful. This success needs to be maintained by developing in a more systemic and sustainable fashion.

Communicating at any level requires a solid understanding of the environment within which the communication is being conducted. For the purposes of this paper, the discussion will be limited to those key areas that have the most impact on the battle space within which the CF must operate. Certainly each of the points brought forward are subjects unto themselves. A scan of the battle space will have to suffice at this point. This will allow for a common understanding upon which a more in-depth look at the conditions required for effective strategic communication can be developed.

First, it is important to have a baseline appreciation as to the meaning of the strategic level. In simplistic terms, the military strategic level can be described as the level where decisions are made with respect to what type of force a nation requires to fight its wars and, after having decided this, when to engage those forces.<sup>4</sup> It includes both the actions that are intended to affect the enemy and those actions that strengthen the

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<sup>4</sup> A corollary with the development of military strategy is contained in Col Arthur F. Lykke Jr., "Defining Military Strategy," *Military Review*, Vol 77, no. 1 (January/February 1997): 183-186.

friendly force. These actions should be conducted in both the physical and moral planes. Once the strategic decision is made, the operational commander will employ the forces in a series of engagements that will lead to the successful attainment of the strategic objectives. In other words, the operational level is where campaigns are planned and executed. The tactical commander will win individual engagements.

There is an argument to be made that the CF is too small a force to require a differentiation between the strategic, operational and tactical levels of war. Certainly, the ability to separate the levels organizationally has proven difficult in application, particularly given the scarcity of resources both in terms of infrastructure and qualified personnel.<sup>5</sup> In the Canadian context, this division may be more intellectual than physical. It is useful to make this differentiation when trying to understand the effects of the decisions being made and in developing the decision-making processes that will support a commander at whatever level he or she is operating. It is particularly useful when dealing with the complexities associated with identifying and communicating to particular audiences.

Most Canadian officers and non-commissioned officers (NCOs) have reasonable comfort at the tactical level. Force ratios, rounds per gun, minefield density are all concepts that are taught to students of military science at the earliest stages of their development. Although the better tacticians will also apply some art to the process, the tactical level is often won through a strict application of tactics, techniques and procedures (TTPs). The balance is biased towards the science side of the equation.

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<sup>5</sup> For a more in depth discussion on how the physical separation of the levels has impacted the CF during recent transformation efforts see LGen R. Crabbe,., VAdm L.G. Mason and LGen F.R. Sutherland. *A Report on the Validation of the Transformed Canadian Forces Command Structure*, A Report Prepared for the CDS (Ottawa, ON: Department of National Defence, 31 January 2007).



Over the past two decades or so, it could also be argued that this level of comfort has moved to the operational level at least in an experiential way. For example, although Brigadier General David Fraser (former commander Multinational Brigade/Regional Command South (MNB/RC South)) may have been operating at the tactical level in the execution of tasks within his area of operations, he was acting at the operational level within the overall Afghanistan theatre strategic context. Moreover, it is not only the Army environment that is gaining this exposure. Officers of the Air Force and Navy such as Lieutenant General Watts and Rear Admiral Rouleau have also had opportunities to lead and operate at the operational level of war.<sup>6</sup> With these opportunities and with the formation of operational level headquarters such as the Canadian Expeditionary Force Command (CEFCOM), Canadian military professionals have been and will continue to be exposed to the operational art. The CF's commitment to professional development at this level through higher education with courses such as the Joint Command and Staff Programme will result in an officer corps ingrained in the operational art in a systemic and sustainable manner.

The same cannot be said of the strategic level. The requirement for Canadian officers to work at the strategic level during the period of the Cold War was avoided by the inclination to operate by environmental contribution to coalition operations particularly through NATO.<sup>7</sup> This approach did not necessarily require much thought and any level of comfort that was developed at the strategic level has been ad hoc at best and certainly not systemic in nature. There is no career progression model that provides

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<sup>6</sup> Further experience of commanding at the operational level will also be gained by the Navy during the summer 2008 opportunity to lead TF-150 in the Persian Gulf.

<sup>7</sup> This lack of strategic thought also applies to the government level. For further insight see Douglas L. Bland and Sean Maloney, *Campaigns for International Security: Canada's Defence Policy at the Turn of the Century* (Kingston, ON: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2004), Chap. 6.

regular exposure to potential candidates for command or staff at the strategic level. The National Security Studies Programme and the Executive Leadership Programme are good efforts in providing an educational baseline; however, there is no training regimen or systemic exposure to the strategic level that accompanies this educational focus that prepares an officer for service at this level. Indeed, strategic leaders are selected based on their success at the tactical level.<sup>8</sup>

In summary, the CF is an organization that is expert at the tactical level, emerging at the operational level and nascent at the strategic level. This is important to understand when setting the conditions for strategic communication. If the CF is to be effective in communicating strategically, it must first become much more expert than it currently is at this level. It is difficult to communicate effectively from a less than effective platform.

What other factors play a part in the environment which will impact on strategic communication? The impact of the so called revolution in military affairs (RMA) on the CF is still open to debate; however, one of the more tangible effects has been a preoccupation with technology. This preoccupation has been on *how* information was being *transmitted* and not on *what* information was being *communicated*. Information can be exchanged at a rate and volume never before seen. Bandwidth has become a new buzz word and the focus has been on the technical aspects of information management rather than the strategic, operational and tactical requirements of knowledge management.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Col Howard Marsh. "Command Challenges in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century," in *Generalship and the Art of the Admiral: Perspectives on Canadian Senior Military Leadership*, ed. Bernd Horn B and Stephen J. Harris, 189-210 (St. Catherines, ON: Vanwell Publishing Limited, 2001), 192.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

At the operational and tactical levels, technology has been pursued at an ever increasing pace. At times, the CF has been unable to integrate the technology at the same rate that it was available. Command support methodologies aimed at technical communications have been refined over a number of years. Command and control has become synonymous with communications systems and is still defined in most areas as those capabilities, both in terms of hardware and software, which allow entities to exchange information. Information exchange requirements are expressed in terms of kilo and mega bytes and the operator has turned to a specialist community to manage the entire spectrum. The gap that has developed is no longer the speed and volume at which information can be passed, but the speed that the information can be processed in such a way that the human can use it in the relevant information battle space.

This gap cannot be closed by the specialist. For example, in the specialists (Associate Deputy Minister (Information Management) (ADM (IM))) management approach and in the absence of operator interest, specialists turned to business practices resulting in such systems as PeopleSoft and Financial Management and Accounting System (FMAS) that are proving at the very least to be cumbersome in executing things they were not designed to do.<sup>10</sup> This is not a criticism of the specialist community per se but more of one of the lack of leadership interest in one of the more critical aspects of operating in the information age. It is interesting to note that the environment with the most success in integrating information systems into its command philosophy has been the Navy where a more hands on approach has been taken by the MARS classification.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 192.

<sup>11</sup> Col Howard Marsh. "Command Challenges in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century," in *Generalship and the Art of the Admiral: Perspectives on Canadian Senior Military Leadership*, ed. Bernd Horn B and Stephen J. Harris, 189-210 (St. Catherines, ON: Vanwell Publishing Limited, 2001), 197.

So how does this affect strategic communication? The focus on the building and evolution of the pipeline has had a detrimental effect drawing attention away from what should be more important to the operator:

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technologyfits

relatively stable manner rooted on a set of core values that are the basis of all their decision making. It is these core values that have been the target of recent senior leadership interaction. Perhaps Canadian society is less anti militaristic than has been thought in previous years.

This finding of stable public opinion is supported by research conducted by the European Consortium for Political Research.<sup>13</sup> Looking at the phenomena associated with the casualty hypothesis<sup>14</sup>, there is empirical data that supports the theory that casualties in and of themselves do not sway public opinion in as decisive a manner as one might think. If the cause is seen as worthwhile, citizens of nations are much more willing to pay the price. If this is true, there is a case to make that values such as honour and obligation remain a part of western society. Certainly, Canadian casualties in Afghanistan have not caused the catastrophic strategic failure anticipated by some. That is not to say that casualties do not play a role in strategic decision making, but if the cause is right, Canadians are willing to pay the price.

These two points are important in strategic communication in that all too often the fear of public opinion retribution has caused unnecessary spin at the most senior levels. This fear has led to a reactive posture to media events on a daily basis rather than a proactive and positive longer term approach to communication. Instead of setting conditions for success through strategic communication, an environment to set the

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<sup>13</sup> European Consortium for Political Research. *Public Opinion and the International Use of Force*, ed. Philip Everts and Pierangelo Isernia (New York, NY: Routledge, 2001).

<sup>14</sup> Casualty hypothesis is an accepted term that talks about the impact of casualties on western society public opinion. At its root is the thought that European nations cannot politically withstand the effect of casualties.

conditions to avoid failure has evolved.<sup>15</sup> To be fair, this is one of the areas over which the CF has less control in that it is often at the political level that this reactive spin occurs. If political spin in reaction to media events is inevitable, then the CF needs to develop a mechanism to attenuate the effect.

In summary, the current dynamics at play within the strategic communication environment are the nascent strategic ability of the CF, the need to evolve CF operations in the information age beyond the focus on technology itself and a growing understanding of how hard power is perceived within the Canadian mainstream public. Strategic communication can be improved in three areas. CF can improve organizationally and professionally within this environment by building and maintaining a true strategic capability, by improving its relations with the civil authority and by evolving its military media interface.

### **Building Strategic Capability**

In order for the CF to better communicate at the strategic level, it must first develop its capability at that level. Somewhat intuitively obvious, it is difficult to communicate at a level when it is less than what it should be. At the risk of running contrary to current thought, the change at the military strategic level is less than one would think.<sup>16</sup> It is true that the threat has become less well defined and interestingly more intertwined with civilian security organizations, however, in the end, the CF will be expected to defend Canada, participate in some manner in continental defence and

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<sup>15</sup> This is the author's personal opinion and is arrived at by a number of engagements within the risk management environment, particularly as Commander Task Force Afghanistan August 2005 – March 2006 and as the CEFCOM J3 while coordinating all CF deployed operations.

<sup>16</sup> Department of National Defence, Directorate of Strategic Analysis, Policy Division, Policy Group, *Strategic Assessment 2006/07*, B. Lombardi, General Editor (Ottawa, December 2006).

contribute to international actions that are deemed appropriate.<sup>17</sup> The options available within each of these national strategic imperatives have also evolved. For example, options beyond a European-based North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and a struggling United Nations (UN) should be explored.

The development of the ability to think and operate at the strategic level will be difficult. Certainly, one of the second order effects of the organizational separation of the strategic and operational levels of command dictated by CF Transformation is the potential for the CF to focus some rebuilding efforts at the strategic level. This second order effect has not been realized at this point and indeed, it remains to be seen if the transformation, initiated by Gen Hillier, will achieve the irreversible momentum he talked about.

There are two main organizational changes associated with CF transformation at the strategic level. One of these changes has been the formulation of the Strategic Joint Staff (SJS) at National Defence Headquarters (NDHQ). This construct has been designed to provide the strategic commander with the necessary tools to advise on when, where and in what apportionment forces are to engage. This particular function was executed effectively prior to transformation and should continue to be successful in the new construct. With a significant operations and planning staff, the challenge has been to identify the boundaries between the strategic and operational levels. Currently organized based on the traditional, continental staff system, the SJS often delves into the operational

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<sup>17</sup> International terrorism, national unity, global warming, proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, cyber attack on economic institutions are all examples of threat that are multidimensional and interagency in nature. In addition some of the capabilities and decisions required for the future force package are well articulated in Sean M Maloney, "Memo to Canada: The World Has Changed Again," in *The New Security Environment: Is the Canadian Military up to the Challenge?* Eds. David Rudd and David S. McDonough (Toronto, ON: Canadian Institute of Strategic Studies, 2004), 93-106.

and tactical levels in its efforts to provide the political and senior military leadership with the information that they seemingly need. This is a reactive process that does not allow for forward thinking and does not set the preconditions for proactive work. This should attenuate over time.<sup>18</sup>

Interestingly, the SJS still lacks an information operations (IO) cell from which aspects of strategic communication could be developed and coordinated. Particularly at the strategic level, this capability has often been the last formed or the first cut when resources become constrained. The same does not occur at the operational and tactical levels. Other capabilities are typically reduced to ensure this capability is available to the operational and tactical commanders. At both CEFCOM and Joint Task Force Afghanistan, there are IO cells and it could be argued that the defence message has been very well communicated at those levels. As a result, the SJS is at a disadvantage. Without the ability to interact with the operational level within an IO framework, the operations staff is unable to get ahead of the power curve and is constantly in a reactive mode at the political military interface. To be clear, the formation of the SJS has set conditions for success; however, the IO cell is an area that will need to be resourced if any success in strategic communication is to be achieved.

The other significant, and somewhat more problematic, organizational change at the strategic level has been the formation of the Chief of Force Development (CFD). The organization has not been able to develop the necessary critical mass to assume the intended mandate of uniting the force development processes within the CF. Not surprisingly, the complexity of the CFD mandate and the institutional inertia currently

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<sup>18</sup> The author is not alone in this opinion. See LGen R.R. Crabbe, VAdm L.G. Mason and LGen F.R. Sutherland. *A Report on the Validation of the Transformed Canadian Forces Command Structure* (Ottawa, ON: Department of National Defence, 31 January 2007).



present with respect to force development has made this aspect of CF transformation particularly difficult. A propensity to operate by environment as components within a coalition construct will be difficult to overcome as the CF moves to the more joint, interagency approach envisioned by CF Transformation.<sup>19</sup> Of the six principles upon which CF Transformation was based, the establishment of a CF culture has met the most resistance.<sup>20</sup> In the fullness of time, CFD will provide the necessary tools to offer the analytical support to the decision making required to identify what type of forces will be needed in the future.

The primary challenge for CFD in the near term will be to articulate the CDS' vision enunciated under CF Transformation in more practical and concrete terms. By developing a single, unified operating concept, the CF will be able to communicate its strategic requirements more effectively to either the government or to the people. CFD has initiated this process with the introduction of the integrated capstone concept. Initially called the Strategic Operating Concept, this initiative will describe the capabilities that the CF will need to possess in the future. Although this is not necessarily ground breaking, the approach being taken recognizes the failure of previous efforts to seek a united voice. What will it take to be relevant, responsive and effective? What type of force will be required to fight the snakes while at the same time be prepared to quickly contribute to fighting the bear?<sup>21</sup> Senior leadership support to this initiative is critical to ensuring that the conceptual underpinnings are developed such that a unified

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<sup>19</sup> Gen Rick Hillier, "Setting Our Course: The Way Ahead For Our Canadian Forces," [http://www.cds.forces.gc.ca/00native/ppt/cds-vision\\_e.ppt](http://www.cds.forces.gc.ca/00native/ppt/cds-vision_e.ppt) accessed 30 April, 2008.

<sup>20</sup> LGen R.R. Crabbe, VAdm L.G. Mason and LGen F.R. Sutherland, *A Report on the Validation of the Transformed Canadian Forces Command Structure* (Ottawa, ON: Department of National Defence, 31 January 2007).

<sup>21</sup> Gen Rick Hillier, "Setting Our Course: The Way Ahead For Our Canadian Forces," [http://www.cds.forces.gc.ca/00native/ppt/cds-vision\\_e.ppt](http://www.cds.forces.gc.ca/00native/ppt/cds-vision_e.ppt)

operating concept is achieved. A precondition to successful strategic communication will be the CF's ability to talk with one united voice.

As the CF sets the conditions for success at the strategic level through the organizational separation of the strategic and operational levels and the development of a united culture and voice, an intellectual balance will also need to be achieved. As discussed earlier, the strategic level can be broken into two facets: those associated with the decision to conduct operations and those associated with force development. In each of these disciplines, processes have been developed that are linear in nature and based on a scientific approach. The CF Operational Planning Process (CFOPP), Capability Based Planning and other menu type approaches have all proven successful in providing a large number of officers a common framework on which planning can be conducted. All of these doctrinally based models provide the discipline that lends itself to producing output and provides a certain appeal to those who operate in a hierarchical organization and require a black and white environment. The challenge is that the CF operates in an environment that is human at its most basic. War, in whatever form that it will evolve to, is still a social phenomenon, not a technological one.<sup>22</sup>

Military strategy is a combination of the military art and science brought to bear in integrating national will, economy and politics in the attainment of national objectives.<sup>23</sup> Those inclined to military science would look at the development of strategy in a logical manner that is linear in its progression and culminates in an effect that is finite in time and space. If one does A, then B will happen. Process would be

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<sup>22</sup> John A. English, *Marching Through Chaos: The Descent of Armies in Theory and Practice* (Westport Conn: Praeger, 1996), 67.

<sup>23</sup> Col Arthur F. Lykke Jr. Defining Military Strategy. *Military Review*, Vol 77, No 1 (January/February 1997), 183-186.

important and the more clarity that the strategy could achieve, the better. The strategy is communicated to the government in a closed process that is direct in nature and confined to a small group of interested parties. A good example of this is the current procurement process. If the CF is able to show best value for the dollar (A), then the procurement will be approved (B). The CF requirement is communicated in terms of specific platforms directly linked to departmentally defined tasks aligned to national interests.

Those more inclined to military art would approach strategy more intuitively, in a manner more circular or iterative in nature. Process would be less important and a larger gray zone would be accepted and in fact desired. The requirement would be communicated to a larger audience in an open process that would leverage input from a larger community. This approach is currently being used by the senior leadership in the CF as it operates in the realm of public opinion.<sup>24</sup> The CF requirement is communicated in terms of effects more linked to intrinsic values of the Canadian society it serves than to national interests. This provides an effect of reputation and develops the strategic freedom of manoeuvre required to fight the budgetary allocation and procurement battles.

There is a balance that needs to be found between the two approaches. The preponderance of one over the other would depend on the target audience. For example, the machinery of government tends to demand the products that are logical and linear nature. Based on the bottom line, the authors of such a product would seek clarity and reduce the size of the gray zone as much as possible. In this way, organizations such as the Treasury Board could be engaged from the firm base of science. On the other hand,

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<sup>24</sup> Although there is no documented strategic communication policy that proves this point, the author's experience in the prosecution of communications efforts aligned to the current Afghanistan campaign has led to this conclusion. Visits by senior policy makers, senior civil servants, senate and other parliamentary committees have opened the conduit to more informed and inclusive decision making. The Team Canada approach has also included notable Canadians from all walks of life.

politicians tend to seek greater room to manoeuvre for subsequent follow on actions.

When operating in such an environment, senior leadership would seek to achieve the larger gray zone demanded by its target audience. This is an area that the military officer is not traditionally exposed to and there will be a need to develop more politically savvy senior leaders.

foreign policy, the CF senior leadership needs to “maintain their competency in science but improve their performance in the arts”.<sup>25</sup>

### **Credibility in Civil Military Relations**

In order for the CF to communicate more effectively at the strategic level, it will need to build and maintain credibility in the eyes of the civilian authority it serves. Without credibility, any message that is transmitted will be perceived as irrelevant, treated with a certain amount of skepticism and in the end, disregarded. Two major characteristics of credibility are confidence and trust. Within government circles, the main group that interacts with the civilian authority is the officer corps, particularly the general and flag officers. By developing confidence and trust with the civil authority, the officers themselves become the platforms for strategic communication. As Marshall McLuhan so famously noted, the medium is the message.<sup>26</sup>

In order to understand the skill set that is required to interact with the civilian authority, a brief description of the working environment is warranted. The civilian authority is political in nature, driven by domestic imperatives that at times may be working at odds with the security issues presented by external influences. In the Canadian context, national unity is likely the primary national interest with the economy being a close second. Now that the events of 9/11 have started to fade in the minds of the public and the decision to remain committed to the Afghanistan mission out to 2011 has been made, interest in defence will likely start to recede. One of the main challenges

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<sup>25</sup> Dr David J. Bercuson, “Canadian Military Leadership in an Era of Military Transformation,” in *From the Outside Looking In : Media and Defence Analyst Perspectives on Canadian Military Leadership*, ed. Bernd Horn, 41-53 (Kingston, ON: Canadian Defence Academy Press, 2005), 52.

<sup>26</sup> Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1964).

for the military in the near future will be to ensure that defence matters are given proper attention relative to the national priorities.

In further describing the environment, the natural tension that exists in civil military relations is best described by Peter Feaver, an American political scientist. He describes the tension as the need “to reconcile a military strong enough to do anything civilians ask them to do with a military subordinate enough to do only what civilians authorize them to do.”<sup>27</sup> Developed in an American context, this theory was developed with a view that there is a risk that the US military will become more powerful than the government it serves. In the Canadian context, it is the military that is concerned whether it will be capable of doing what its civilian authority asks of it and if the civilian authority is aware of the resources required to undertake these actions. Known as the capability-commitment gap, the military is concerned another “bungle in the jungle” will occur as transpired in Zaire in the fall of 1996 where its ability to lead a multinational force was brought into question.

Other examples of the inherent tensions in Canadian civil-military relations are provided that demonstrate both perspectives. In 1962, during the Cuban Missile Crisis, the Canadian military took actions that were not directed by the government and in fact ran contrary to political intent.<sup>28</sup> These precipitate military actions were arguably the catalyst to the Canadian government unification efforts later in the decade. More recently, the Canadian military interactions with their American counterparts in the Ballistic Missile Defence and Iraq issues could also have been viewed as placing the

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<sup>27</sup> Peter D. Feaver, “The Civil-Military Problematique: Huntington, Janowitz, and the Question of Civilian Control, *Armed Forces & Society*, Vol 23, No. 2, Winter, 1996.

<sup>28</sup> Cdr Peter T. Haydon, *The Cuban Missile Crisis: Canadian Involvement Reconsidered* (Toronto: Canadian Printco Ltd., 1993), 35.

government in an awkward position. In both cases, the actions by the military began to shape the options available to the government prior to government direction.<sup>29</sup> Recent forays into the policy realm by General Hillier met stiff resistance in some quarters of the government and in fact, by retired senior officers. In other quarters, these forays were viewed as speaking truth to power.<sup>30</sup>

In Canada, the political-military interface is not organizationally robust in nature nor is it rigorously framed in process. The Standing Committee on National Defence (SCOND) exists with the authorization to examine all matters relating to the mandate, management and operation of the Department of National Defence as well as any issue referred to it by the House of Commons.<sup>31</sup> This committee is made up of elected officials and has proven over time to be hampered by partisan politics. Although partisan politics is not necessarily a fault in and of itself, the committee is often used as a means for members of parliament to express the concerns of their own political parties. This tendency to use the committee as a media platform prevents it from generating anything substantial in nature. It tends to be reactive to events and has not evolved into a mechanism to coordinate ongoing activities or look toward the future. Over time it has become more of an auditing mechanism than a true oversight committee.

The Senate Committee on National Security and Defence (SCONSAD) is another committee that has been formed to address national defence issues. As stated on its website, its mandate is quite broad: all matters relating to national defence and security

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<sup>29</sup> Janice Gross Stein and Eugene Lang, *The Unexpected War: Canada in Kandahar* (Toronto, Penguin Group, 2007), Chap 9.

<sup>30</sup> Janice Gross Stein and Eugene Lang, "Too Few Hilliers: The General Goes Where Ottawa Mandarins Fear to Tread," *The Walrus*, 24 April 2008.

<sup>31</sup> Standing Committee on National Defence, "About This Committee," <http://cmte.parl.gc.ca/cmte/>; Internet; accessed 24 April 2008.

generally, including veterans affairs.<sup>32</sup> Given the longevity within the Senate, the committee is composed of members that have become well informed over time. Coming from the Senate, however, the committee is sometimes seen as not conforming to governmental intent and is often boxed in politically. This limits its usefulness and leads to a somewhat unfair perception of irrelevancy. In addition, it has become a lightning rod for controversy and its dealings with the media have become somewhat controversial.

As a rule the committee system within parliament mirrors the ministerial construct. There are very few if any that provide a coordinating function and most, if not all, plays more of a watchdog function than anything else. There is no National Security Council type organization that fuses all of the security activities across the government with the mandate to provide advice to government in a more coordinated and proactive fashion. As previously discussed, security and defence have become more intertwined than ever before. A central body consisting of a mixture of elected and non-elected members would provide a mechanism to ensure that all issues are addressed in a prioritized manner and just as importantly, that duplication of effort is avoided. As with the case of uniting the defence voice previously discussed, an organization such as this would also be an excellent conduit through which strategic communication could be consolidated and delivered.

One would like to think that civil-military relations are best conducted in an atmosphere of mutual respect and common interest. Although the subordination of the military to civilian decision is paramount in maintaining a liberal democracy, this subordination should not be viewed as subjugation. In order to avoid any tendency in this

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<sup>32</sup> [http://www.parl.gc.ca/common/Committee\\_SenHome.asp?Language=E&Parl=39&Ses=2&comm\\_id=76](http://www.parl.gc.ca/common/Committee_SenHome.asp?Language=E&Parl=39&Ses=2&comm_id=76); accessed 19 May 2008.



regard, the officer corps must be able to work with the best that society has to offer. The body of officers interacting with the civil authority must have the political savvy, the educational background and strength of character to pursue the interests of the organization in as complex a battlefield as there is. The officer corps needs to be seen as expert in the profession of arms operating as equals in the attainment of national security objectives. It must possess the necessary confidence that comes from experience, training and education.

Military professionalism is the root of confidence within the CF officer and is what identifies each individual within the civil-military relationship. It encompasses the attributes of responsibility, expertise, identity and a vocational ethic known as the military ethos.<sup>33</sup> As a collective, the military profession differentiates itself from other professions by having been given the authority to apply military force in the interest of the nation.<sup>34</sup> As individuals, the military professional defines himself or herself as accepting of unlimited liability, instilled with the fighting spirit, and inculcated with the ideal of discipline and teamwork.<sup>35</sup> It will remain important that officers develop and maintain these unifying attributes as a baseline for professional behaviour. In this way, they will act as the “medium” for CF strategic communication with its civil authority.

Skill is developed through education, training and experience. It is in finding the balance between the three that the challenge will lie in preparing officers to operate at the political-military interface. The current model for officer development does not explicitly incorporate this skill set. Only on the education front, with the National

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<sup>33</sup> Department of National Defence, A-PA-005-000/AP-001 *Duty with Honour: The Profession of Arms in Canada* (Ottawa, DND Canada, 2003), 14.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 7

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

Security Studies Program (NSSP) or its follow on National Security Program (NSP) and the Executive Leadership Program (ELP) is there any systemic approach being developed. Training is limited to those that are already in place with activities such as the TOP OFF series of exercises. There is no systemic approach to having those that will likely operate at the strategic level to gain experience. All too often, the first time that an officer is exposed to the political environment that is Ottawa is when he or she is already a senior officer. The CF would do well to expose potential senior leaders to this level earlier in their career.

This is not a novel idea. A number of recommendations in this regard were submitted by the Honourable Mr. Doug Young, then Minister of National Defence, in his report of 25 March 1997. In the report, Minister Young strongly recommended that officers be given the opportunity early in their careers to serve at NDHQ in order to ensure that they be prepared to operate effectively in that environment at senior rank. Although there was a flurry of activity at that time within the personnel world, it was an initiative that did not gain lasting momentum. Indeed, there still exists a culture in the CF within which there is a certain pride in not having served at NDHQ, until absolutely necessary. It is time for a more systemic approach to the preparation of strategic leaders which will give them the necessary confidence to deal with their civilian counterparts.

Another element of credibility is trust. Current CF leadership doctrine places a large importance on the aspect of trust internal to the CF community.<sup>36</sup> The tenets upon which this importance is placed are transferable to the development of good civil-military relations. Trust is important in an environment of uncertainty where people have to

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<sup>36</sup> Department of National Defence, A-PA-005-000/AP-004 *Leadership in the Canadian Forces: Conceptual Foundations* (Ottawa, DND Canada, 2005), 73

work together on important matters and where there is a real risk of failure. It is built upon the ability to show consideration for other people's opinions, to value the work produced by others and to focus on the accomplishment of the task. In a trusting environment, the threshold to withstand the stresses inherent in high paced jobs is much higher and the output under extremely adverse conditions is much better than in those environments where trust does not exist.<sup>37</sup> Trust takes time to develop and requires constant attention. It can be at the institutional or personal level. At the personal level, it is termed relationship building. Exposure to people working in other organizational cultures normally results in a better understanding of why things are done in a particular way.

As the CF and the government start to embrace interagency work in earnest, the importance of establishing good personal relations cannot be overstated. The CF must seek ways to develop these relationships at the earliest opportunity in preparing officers for more senior engagements throughout their careers. The CF is placing the senior officer at an extreme disadvantage if he or she is asked to learn other government departments' dynamics for the first time on the fly. More secondments or exchanges with other government departments will expose those involved to other organizational cultures and will allow for the relationships to be built over time. People tend to progress at similar rates, and the contacts made at the more junior ranks will be worth the investment when it comes time to play a major decision making role at the senior level.

The CF must strive to gain and maintain credibility with the government that it serves if it wishes to be able to communicate effectively at the strategic level. In order to gain this credibility, the CF must produce officers that are confident in themselves and

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<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 73

have the trust of the people they interact with. In order to gain this confidence and trust, the CF officer must be trained, educated and provided with the requisite experience in a systemic manner. In this way, the medium becomes the message.

### **Public Affairs and the Media**

Whether one likes it or not, it is the media who represent the critical path to effective mass communication. Although this may change over time with the evolution of the internet, the media will continue for some time to be the main conduit through which the CF will communicate with its stakeholders. Senior leaders will need to be comfortable interacting with the media and just as importantly recognize the limitations that they represent.

Stephen Aubin, a well-known author and specialist in the media, argues that the media have an inherent bias.<sup>38</sup> They are not in the business of providing communication support to any particular organization and will not be used for purposes other than their own. An organization plays a dangerous game if it tries to spin a story or assume that the media will see events in the same manner as it does. The media have preconceived notions and at times, information that may seem benign to the communicator will result in unforeseen effects as the “story” is written to fit internal media demands. An organization using the media to communicate with its constituency would do well to treat the media as neutral at best and hostile at worst. Aubin goes on to say that although in most cases the media are driving public opinion, at times, particularly at the developmental stage of an emerging issue, the media will wait to see where public opinion will go and then reinforce the tendency.

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<sup>38</sup> Stephen P. Aubin, *Distorting Defense: Network News and National Security* (Westport, Connecticut: Praeger Publishers, 1998).

The tension arising from the military imperative to limit information from potential threats and the media responsibility to report will not be eliminated.<sup>39</sup> The cultural divide is too large. There is no incentive for the journalist to comply with military restrictions. In fact, a culture has developed where many of the media view themselves as the watchdogs of corporate Canada. That is not to say that the military-media relationship needs to be confrontational. In fact, the actions taken to build good media relations are akin to those of building good civil military relations. Trust is a key factor and an ability to interact in a transparent and open manner will be essential.

Derek Stouffel, a Canadian journalist familiar with dealing with DND, admits that the media are often ignorant of the facts and at times unfriendly to the military position.<sup>40</sup> One way to counter this position, Stouffel urges, is for the military to be responsive to media demands even if somewhat frustrated by those demands. If the demands are not serviced, the media will go to where a response is provided. It is this dynamic that has resulted in the emergence of self styled experts that often lack an understanding of the proper context within which they make their opinions known. That is not to say that the CF needs to cater to every whim of every journalist. In fact, Stouffel stresses, the continuance of the current practice to be open and transparent will result in the media trust that will mitigate the sometimes adversarial relationship.

This servicing of the demand forwarded by Stouffel should be at all levels. Steve Lukitis, a former editor of a garrison town newspaper, urges garrison commanders to

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<sup>39</sup> LCol J.R.D. Gervais, "The Media and the Conduct of War" in *The Changing Face of War: Learning from History* ed. Allan English, 255-271 (Kingston, ON: McGill's-Queen's University Press for the Royal Military College, 1998)

<sup>40</sup> Derek Stouffel, "The Military and the Media in Canada: A Relationship from Tension to Trust" in *From the Outside Looking In : Media and Defence Analyst Perspectives on Canadian Military Leadership* ed. by Bend Horn, 19-33 (Kingston, ON: Canadian Defence Academy Press, 2005).

connect with the local media, based on a media dictum that all politics is local.<sup>41</sup> This connection at the local level by commanders sends the right message both internally to other CF members and to the local community. In this way, an acceptance of the CF community as part of the local environment can be developed. In the somewhat transient and insular community that the military can represent, this trust must be earned and not assumed.

Another challenge in the media-military relationship is the media's challenge to regulate its own members with respect to ethical standards. Within an environment that is competitive in nature, there are examples of ambitious journalists looking at career opportunity who may have attempted to make a story where one may not have existed. Although libel law is available to those that require a forum to ensure personal protection against outright falsehoods, innuendo and potential half truths are difficult to defend against. The Associate Deputy Minister (Public Affairs) (ADM(PA)) will need to continue to ensure that the public and the media are educated in an open and transparent manner.

In a notably personal reflection on his actions in the mid-nineties, Larry Gordon, a former Chief of Public Affairs Renewal within DND, recognized the forward thinking of senior leadership towards the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century that set the conditions for the current departmental posture.<sup>42</sup> Based on principles of transparency and openness, the team developed a policy framework that was arguably ahead of its time and flew in the face of

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<sup>41</sup> Dr Steve Lukits, "The Local Front in News Coverage of the Military" in *From the Outside Looking In : Media and Defence Analyst Perspectives on Canadian Military Leadership* ed. Bernd Horn, 34-42 (Kingston, ON: Canadian Defence Academy Press, 2005).

<sup>42</sup> Larry Gordon, "Let Canadians Decide," in *Generalship and the Art of the Admiral: Perspectives on Canadian Senior Military Leadership* ed. Bernd Horn and Stephen J. Harris, 373-382 (St. Catherines, ON: Vanwell Publishing Limited, 2001).

the overall governmental approach. Letting people talk about what they did and asking them to be part of the solution was brilliant in its simplicity and courageous in its acceptance of risk. Based on a need for cultural change, catalyzed by the Somalia affair, the Public Affairs branch established the conduit and policy framework through which DND could communicate with the society it served.

The mission of Public Affairs (PA) in the CF is to promote understanding and awareness among Canadians of the role, mandate and activities of the CF and DND, and of the contributions that the CF and DND make to Canadian society and the international community.<sup>43</sup> This policy was developed in 1998 as a direct result of the Somalia Affair. The Canadian people had lost faith in their military. A sense of deep disappointment accompanied the breach of trust. The CF had failed strategically and it needed to make amends. A true cultural change in the CF's approach to its interactions with the Canadian people was required. The open and transparent approach to media relations was developed as the cornerstone of CF public affairs.

Some measure of success of the new approach has been revealed by Carol Off, a well respected investigative reporter, who believes that the CF has become more "image conscious and media savvy."<sup>44</sup> She is convinced that this approach is one that needs to be continued; however, she also understands that this will take consistent effort and continued senior leadership oversight. Somewhat of an insider, she also believes that the senior leadership's greatest responsibility is to ensure that CF personnel are prepared to operate in today's complex security environment. It is incumbent on the leadership to

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<sup>43</sup> Department of National Defence, *DOAD 2000-8, Public Affairs Policy* (Ottawa, DND, 1998), 1

<sup>44</sup> Carol Off, "Winning the Public Trust" in *From the Outside Looking In : Media and Defence Analyst Perspectives on Canadian Military Leadership* ed. by Bernd Horn, 91-106 (Kingston, ON: Canadian Defence Academy Press, 2005), 93.

continually communicate the requirement to both the government and the people that they serve.

Another measure of success is the innovative thinking that is being conducted by the senior leadership of the CF and supporting efforts of ADM (PA) in the use of what is known as “soft news” venues. Matthew Baum, author of *Soft News Goes to War*, writes about the impact on public opinion of the use of softer venues such as *The David Letterman Show* and *The Tonight Show*. In his study, he finds that although most educated Americans get their news from the traditional sources, the bulk of Americans form their political and domestic opinions based on their understanding of how these influential talk show hosts have interpreted events.<sup>45</sup> In the Canadian context, the CF has done well in communicating to a larger audience, due in no small part to the development of good working relationships with notable Canadians such as Rick Mercer. Notable Canadians tend to have access to a broader audience than most senior leaders.

Although the Department of National Defence (DND) has done very well in establishing a mechanism to deal with the media, it is likely time that the mechanism itself is examined. Recent organizational changes within the PA function have allowed the PA Branch to be more forward looking and give it a capability to think and work at the strategic level. This has also brought it to a crossroads. At what point does ADM (PA) cross the line between explaining what the CF does and shaping public opinion? At what point do public affairs become information operations? Should PA conduct information operations?

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<sup>45</sup> Matthew A. Baum, *Soft News Goes to War: Public Opinion and American Foreign Policy in the New Media Age* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2003), Chap 1



Some would argue that the renewed perception of relevance of the CF within Canadian society has been built by current senior leadership leveraging the opportunity to “sell the product” presented by CF actions in Afghanistan.<sup>46</sup> Although the overall support to the Afghanistan effort is somewhat lukewarm, the support for the CF is at its highest levels since the Second World War. Although there are information operations being conducted at that level, in the main the CF is selling itself. ADM (PA) involvement has been limited to public education and there is a strict policy to not get involved in information operations within the PA branch. The senior leadership forays into the political spectrum have been command decisions that are within the purview of the individuals involved.

The policy of keeping information operations and public affairs separate should continue. Any perception by the media that it is being used by the CF for its own purposes would break the fragile trust that has been built in the recent past. There is still a shadow of the Somalia affair that lingers over the military-media relationship. Continuing dialogue with the people and the continued ability of CF senior leadership and its soldiers to exemplify Canadian values will likely maintain this level of support in the short term.

With the cultural divide that exists between the media and the military, the PA branch must continue to act in an open and transparent way. The soldier, sailor and airman and woman will continue to be the best spokespeople for the CF. The PA branch would better serve CF purposes by ensuring that the current policy of access to these

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<sup>46</sup> Various articles have demonstrated senior leadership attempts to link transformation and Afghanistan. One good example is Fred Lum, “Gen Hillier speaks to the Globe on Afghanistan,” *Globe and Mail*, 3 March, 2006 which provides a transcript of a meeting between Gen Hillier and the editorial board of the *Globe and Mail*.

people is kept alive and that efforts to limit access are countered as vigorously as possible. In this way trust will continue to be fostered and a healthy, less than confrontational, relationship can be maintained.

### **Conclusion**

This paper has argued that, until recently, CF strategic communication has been largely ineffective. This has resulted in a growing commitment capability gap that has led to a public perception of irrelevancy. This perception of irrelevance had led to the subjugation of the military by the civil authority, which had resulted in the loss of confidence by its senior leadership and a diminished credibility within governmental circles. The media had been all too quick to establish an adversarial approach and were served with plenty of opportunity to reinforce a lack of trust that was developed in the aftermath of the Somalia affair.

Recent efforts, lead by a new generation of senior officers, have stopped the downward spiral and some headway has been made to counter the tendencies mentioned above. Direct communication by the senior leadership with the people it serves has proven very successful; however, there is some concern that this success is fleeting in nature. A more systemic and sustainable construct is required.

CF Transformation is the key to the implementation of a mental agility at the strategic level that seeks to apply strategic art in the conduct of activities at that level. The development of a CF operating concept should be the priority of activity within CFD in order to provide the basis on which to talk with a united voice. This will mitigate the effect of the strong three service construct that has proven to be strength in current operations but a weakness in force development. An information operations cell within

the SJS is essential to the development of messages that are coordinated at the strategic level and driven by operations rather than bureaucratic imperatives.

The rebuilding of confidence within the officer corps to operate with the best that society has to offer at the political military interface, will require constant attention and will need to seek a balance between education, training and experience. Relationship building will be critical and trust will be the binding element to successful civil-military interaction. This will require early exposure of the political environment to the officer corps at an earlier stage in their careers. A central body of elected and non-elected officials that is mandated to coordinate and prioritize policy actions with respect to security is highly recommended. This body will, over time, develop a subject matter expertise that will result in a more coherent approach to national security and its related communicates efforts.

Lastly, the urge to shape public opinion through the use of media will need to seek balance. The fragile media-military trust that has been built can easily revert to 1990 levels with one breach of openness and transparency. In order for the CF to effectively communicate strategically on a more consistent basis, it must redevelop its ability to operate at the strategic level, become credible in the eyes of the government that it serves, remain relevant to the people it represents and engage the media with one open and transparent voice.

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