

COLUMNS

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Armed Forces unification a bad idea 1960s-era defence minister Paul Hellyer pushed hard for unproven policy

DEFENCE MATTERS



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Forty years ago, one of the greatest frauds ever perpetrated on Canadians took place. The three separate services of the armed forces - the Royal Canadian Navy, Canadian Army and Royal Canadian Air Force - ceased to exist.

In their place was something new - the brainchild of Paul Hellyer, an aggressive and ambitious Liberal defence minister. Hellyer's creation was an amorphous organization called the Canadian Forces.

The Armed Forces have still not recovered from the profound damage caused by Hellyer's sweeping double whammy - integration and unification.

Integration - the amalgamation of support services - was not a new idea, nor was it necessarily a bad one. By 1963, when Hellyer became minister, medical, dental, legal and chaplain resources had been integrated. Some further integration made sense to eliminate duplication and waste.

If he had stopped at integration, Hellyer would probably be remembered more favourably than he is today. But integration alone would never catch the public imagination and propel him to be prime minister, replacing Lester B. Pearson. Something more was needed.

Hellyer had an ally in the *Glassco Report* on government organization, which pointed out bottlenecks, administrative confusion and duplication of effort in DND. His solution was unification - the replacement of the three separate services with one, under one chief of defence staff.

In March 1964, the Liberals tabled a white paper on defence: the single-handed creation of Hellyer. Buried in the detail was the formation of a "single, unified defence force."

When senior officers protested, Hellyer considered it the equivalent of mutiny. During the 1944 manpower crisis of the Second World War, the air force had unceremoniously unloaded him on the army, where he had to repeat basic training. This lack of co-ordination and waste of time still annoyed him.

Hellyer moved swiftly. National Defence Headquarters was reorganized, new commands were formed. Navy shore establishments, army camps and air force stations became Canadian Forces Bases.

Premise questioned

Senior officers, attempting the equivalent of changing a tire on a moving car, had little time to react. Few accepted Hellyer's main premises for unification. It could not alter the fact that much of the armed forces work was accomplished in single-service settings.

But Hellyer, enamoured by words like "flexible" and "mobile," wouldn't listen.

While common uniforms, badges of rank and rank titles certainly Canadianized the Armed Forces, they did little more than demoralize sailors, soldiers and airmen. Several senior officers resigned. Their places were quickly filled by opportunistic individuals who - like Hellyer - saw unification as a way to make their mark.

Outside the Armed Forces, unification never became a major concern for most Canadians. When the opposition Conservatives finally seized on it as an issue, they subjected Hellyer's reorganization bill to criticism and delays. It only passed with the imminent closure of Parliament in April 1967.

Suddenly, Hellyer's path to replace Pearson was decidedly bumpy. He wanted a less-controversial department. By the time unification became law on Feb. 1, 1968, he was transport minister.

But Hellyer's carefully laid succession plans came to naught. At the Liberal leadership convention, he lost to newcomer Pierre Trudeau. Under Trudeau, the downward spiral of the Armed Forces picked up speed.

Hellyer's ambitions drove him jump to the Progressive Conservatives. When he lost his bid for leadership of that party, he returned to the Liberals.

Unable to win the leadership of either mainstream party, Hellyer created his own in 1997, and became its first leader. The Canadian Action Party never won a seat.

In 1985, the Conservative government fulfilled an election promise by putting the three separate services back into distinctive uniforms. But they did nothing more to reverse unification, including single-service-rank badges and titles (although the navy had previously succeeded in reinstating its traditional rank designations).

Not far enough

The Conservatives should have gone further and de-unified the Forces. The Armed Forces are quite capable of working together and conducting joint operations without being unified.

Throughout the disastrous unification process, Hellyer maintained the rest of the world was watching Canada closely, and others would emulate his reorganization. We're still waiting.

In 2010, the navy will celebrate its centennial. It would be a fitting occasion to reinstate the three separate services with their proper, historical names of Royal Canadian Navy, Canadian Army and Royal Canadian Air Force.

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