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Time to Rethink Military Recruitment

by Charlotte Duval-Lantoine

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POLICY PERSPECTIVE

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"A death spiral." Those are the words Minister of National Defence Bill Blair used to describe the current military personnel crisis. For years now, the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) is over 15,000 people short of the target established in *Strong, Secured, Engaged* (*SSE*) – the 2017 defence policy. And the spiral is not showing any sign of resolving in the short term. The defence policy update of April 2024, *Our North, Strong and Free* (*ONSAF*), projected that the military will not reach its goal of 101,500 strong until 2032.

The consequences of such a shortage are significant. The latest Department Plan for 2024-25 show a worrisome state of readiness, and the CAF is losing the human resources necessary to effectively and successfully introduce, operate, and maintain the new capabilities promised in *SSE,* the 2022 NORAD Modernization investments, and *ONSAF*. Despite the majority of capabilities listed in *ONSAF* to be explored, the equipment section in the defence policy is the most advanced one. The personnel discussion, despite including noteworthy investments, fail to reflect the urgency in which the CAF finds itself.

This is not to say that the CAF is not working hard to resolve the issue. During a March 7, 2024 panel of the Conference of Defence Association Institute's 92nd Ottawa conference, Chief Military Personnel Lieutenant-General Lise Bourgon outlined the work her office had done to improve recruitment.

1. The CAF signed a Memorandum of Understanding with Immigration, Refugees, and Citizenship Canada on helping accelerate the obtention of clearance for applicants who are permanent residents.

2. The CAF is rethinking how to approach medical standards in a context of universality of service.

3. The CAF has allowed more flexibility in terms of who gets to sit the pre-basic training aptitude test after seeing that attrition happened at this stage. Recruits will still have to pass the aptitude test after basic training.

4. The CAF is working towards creating a mobile friendly application portal that would improve the application interface for candidates and support better monitoring on the military's part.

5. The CAF is developing community programs, because it is aware of the power word of mouth and community support in encouraging recruitment of youth.

Further, Blair has suggested, at the same conference and at subsequent events, that the CAF will introduce a probationary period to accelerate processing and allow candidates to work within the military while awaiting lengthy processes, such as the obtention of security clearance, to complete. This demonstrates movement on the part of the CAF within three lines of efforts: continuing to expand the recruiting pool and attract new talent (by rethinking medical requirements for soldiers

and developing new methods of outreach), improving the application process for all, and monitoring to identify blind spots and points for attrition.

However, most lines of efforts seem to overlook what data is suggesting, and they reveal a certain unwillingness, from decision-makers, military leaders, and public commentators alike, to modernize our approach to personnel challenges. As the CAF seeks to adopt advanced technologies to improve its operational effectiveness, its views on recruitment, retention, and personnel management should also enter the 21st century.

Missing in Action: Data

Until recently, little was known about the state of recruitment within the CAF. But Blair's May 27, 2024 statement to the House of Commons' National Defence Committee (NDDN) shone important light about the situation. In 2023-24, 70,880 Canadians and permanent residents applied to the Canadian Forces Recruiting Group. Only 4,000 were enrolled. When John McKay, NDDN chair, probed further, Vice Chief of the Defence Staff Lieutenant-General Frances Allen replied:

> Certainly, we always want to do what we can to reduce both the time and the process necessary to bring Canadians into the armed forces. In any recruiting process, and this certainly has been true historically, not everybody who applies will meet the standards necessary to join the Canadian Armed Forces and not everybody's interest necessarily stays the same. We know, however, we have a role to play in making the recruiting process faster and easier so that people's interest does not go elsewhere.

When McKay responded "If I know there are 70,000 people outside the door who want to get in and are, by and large, qualified, and we have a 16,000-person deficit—in other words, people are leaving more quickly than they're being replaced—commitments to improving sound like a series of excuses," LGen Allen discussed the review into changing medical standards and how they fit within the framework of universality of service and the work towards accelerating security clearances.

What this exchange and that this basic data suggests is that it is not necessarily an issue of young Canadians wanting to join the military (or not), it is mostly about getting them in. And while the military has been arguing that the pandemic made the issue worse, the past five years of data[1] (and the latest Auditor General report on the matter, from 2016) would suggest otherwise:

[1] Obtained from the Minister of National Defence's Office.

Fiscal Year (1 April to 31 March)	Applications Received	Candidates Enrolled
2019-2020	36,662	5,167
2020-2021	45,626	2,023
2021-2022	38,030	4,778
2022-2023	43,934	3,930
2023-2024	70,880	4,301

We now have the basic quantitative proof that Canadians and permanent residents do in fact want to join the military. The military continues to be an employer of choice to many, even in time of labour market contraction. But this is the only assumption we can revoke using this data. What is missing is *why* less that 10 per cent of candidates make it through the process.

Paralleling the messaging coming from the United States, and underlying LGen Allen's comments to NDDN, is that it is an issue of standards. As about one fourth of the American public is ineligible to join the U.S. military, we might assume that so few Canadians and permanent residents are admitted in the CAF because of the high standards the organization upholds. The conversations around permanent residents and the opening of the Canadian military to them reflect this assumption – a topic we will explore in the next section.

The reality is, we do not know why so few candidates make it through the system. CBC's Ashley Burke's reporting on the processing of applicants with permanent residency reveals that the current recruitment structure is not fit for purpose. In 2016, the Office of the Auditor General observed that the CAF was lacking the capacity to fill positions facing critical shortages. The Auditor General noted that the recruitment processes were tailored to the resources the military committed to them, not to the need of the organization.

The question no longer is "do young Canadians no longer have a sense of service?" but rather becomes "is the system able to process those who want to serve in a timely fashion?"

An additional question remains from the data: what does the CAF consider as an application (starting the recruiting process, submitting the full application, which might include, until recently passing the aptitude test)? In parallel, what are the criteria to be considered "enrolled"? Does that include having completed basic training, or even further, occupational training? Those questions add a piece to the puzzle, which is attrition during the recruitment process. There is CAF data showing that a significant amount of attrition occurs after basic training, while one is

waiting for their occupational training.[2] The CAF suffers from long waiting lists for occupational training, which may lead some to leave while they wait to start their military career.

We only have ideas as to why the military is facing a personnel "death spiral." Unless NDDN does an extensive study on it or until the Office of the Auditor General releases its 2025 (planned) study into Canadian Forces recruitment, the quality of the data presented to the public will continue to be opaque and lacking proper answers. Let us keep in mind that this conversation addresses only one piece of the puzzle, i.e., recruitment. Data on attrition is even more sparse.

Proper data is required for creative reforms to take hold. Until we can get it, we ought to enhance the quality of our conversation on recruitment. At this stage, our (both societal and military) understanding of recruitment and how the process may drive early attrition remains superficial.

Unhelpful Conversation: Lowering the Standards and Allowing Permanent Residents to Serve

A narrative that needs to change when discussing recruitment and how to fix the personnel challenges, is one of standards. During his March 7, 2024 keynote to the Ottawa Conference, Blair said, following his mention of recruitment of permanent residents "We need to maintain our high standards, and it is not my intention in any way to compromise the remarkable standards of the Canadian Armed Forces that has led to the excellence that we have come to expect".

We need to be careful with the discourse around lowering standards, especially when it comes to the recruitment of minorities (including permanent residents). There is a need to seriously ask ourselves: what does it mean to maintain the CAF's high standards, or to lower them? Answering this question is necessary, as narratives around the CAF (both positive and negative) can have a powerful effect on one's willingness to join.

The fear of lowering standards has been used to limit women's service in the Canadian military since at least the 1970s.[3] In some circles, the idea that women are evaluated – especially physically – on "lower" standards as men remains an assumption that is present to this day. In fact, while there is a hypothesis that women are less likely to join the CAF because women are inherently more peaceful, there has not been any study done on why women join the CAF and how they view the standards against which they are evaluated. Are some women deterred from serving because they think they are inherently unable to meet the CAF's high standards? Reflection on the role this narrative plays on minority groups the military is seeking to attract could be useful.

Centering the conversation around recruitment to the issue of standards is also forgetting that standards are culturally-bound, and they change around history. Allan English's study of the growth of the Royal Canadian Air Force (RCAF) in the 1950s tells a history of a service (note: this

[2] Joelle Laplante, Matt Ross, and Andrew Woodard, "Basic Training Leavers and Stayers in the Canadian Armed Forces: Insights from Project Horizon," *On Track* 32 (July 2024), 100, https://cdainstitute.ca/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/ON-TRACK-Issue-32.pdf
[3] Charlotte Duval-Lantoine, *The Ones We Let Down* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2022), 26-41.

precedes unification and civilianization of the military) ready to change its standards to meet its need. Within a decade, the RCAF expanded fourfold. What was at the heart of the RCAF's growth was a value-based, people-centric human resources system, which valued skills and experience and sought to retain it.[4]

Security concerns around letting foreign-born individuals in the military are understandable, but is more a question of perception than fact. First, an applicant has to complete a thorough police check from both their own country (if they left their country as an adult) and Canada to obtain permanent residency. Having a criminal record makes one's application much more complex. Second, to join the CAF, one needs reliable level of clearance, not secret or top secret. Third, Canadian citizens also present a security risk. Cameron Ortis, the RCMP intelligence officer convicted of leaking secret information is a born and raised Canadian. The leaks of documents that concerned CAF leadership in 2020 happened at a time when the CAF did not admit permanent resident as recruits.

Let's be Smarter about Recruitment

When it comes to military recruitment, many misunderstandings remain. Thinking of recruitment only in economic terms is short-sighted, but so is thinking of it in terms of sense of service. Research going as far back as the 1980s show that motivations to join are multifaceted.[5] While the CAF cannot control all of them, understanding that the process itself can be a deterrent to go through the system is critical. The military has started down this path, and the movements we are seeing are encouraging.

However, data gaps still exist and there is a counterproductive narrative that has yet to be quashed. Better understanding where attrition happens throughout the recruitment process and how to overcome culturally determined fears of what high military standards mean are critical for the CAF to move forward. Encouragingly, an excellent initiative has been undertaken in recent weeks; the memorandum of understanding between Fanshawe College and the 31 Canadian Brigade Group show an innovative way of letting people in the Reserves without a risk adverse approach and fear for standards.

Society has changed, and the military has to evolve with it. Change yields certain risks, but, with a personnel shortage of 14,000 across the Regular Forces and the Reserves, the Canadian military ought to accept risks, embrace challenges to its views of what a service member looks like, and

[4] Allan English, "The 2024 Defence Policy Update and its Predecessors: Why the CAF is in a "Death Spiral"," *Canadian Military History* 33, no. 1 (2024), 13-14.
[5] James Burk, "Patriotism and the All-Volunteer Force," *Journal of Political and Military Sociology* 12 (Fall 1984), 229-241; Meredith A. Kleykamp, "College, Jobs, or the Military: Enlistment During a Time of War," Social Science Quarterly 86, no. 2 (June 2006), 272-290; Peter Legree, Paul Gade, Daniel E. Martin, and Veronica Nieva, "Military Enlistment and Family Dynamics: Youth and Parental Perspectives," *Military Psychology* 12, no. 1 (2000), 31-49, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/263920961_Military_Enlistment_and_Family_Dynamics_Youth_and_Parental_Perspectives?enrichId=rgreq-2204cff3d408bfa038d4cb72814b9a2c-XXX&enrichSource=Y292ZXJQYWdlOzI2MzkyMDk2MTtBUzo5OTI4NjkyMjU2MzU4NEAxNDAwNjgzMjU1MDM0&el=1_x_2&_esc=publicationCoverPdf; Mady W. Segal, David R. Segal, Jerald G. Bachman, Peter Freedman-Doan, and Patrick M. O'Malley, "Gender Propensity To Enlist in the U.S. Military," *Gender Issues* 16 (1998), 65-87, https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s12147-998-0022-0#citeas;

adapt its policies and processes as needed. The one size fits all approach is not working, and it is time to rethink how the CAF does recruitment and who it recruits if it wants to reach the state of readiness it desperately needs.

About the Author

Charlotte Duval-Lantoine *is the Ottawa Operations Manager and a Fellow at the Canadian Global Affairs Institute, as well as Triple Helix's Executive Director and Gender Advisor. She is the author of The Ones We Let Down: Toxic Leadership Culture and Gender Integration in the Canadian Forces, 1989-1999 (McGill-Queen's University Press, 2022). This book, which looks into the toxic culture of leadership in the Canadian Armed Forces during the 1990s and its impact on gender integration, was named among* The Hill Times' *Best Books of 2022. Her research interests include questions of military leadership, culture change, and personnel policy, topics on which she regularly comments in the media. For this work, Charlotte was recognized as a 2022 Women in Defence and Security Emerging Leader. She regularly participates in consultation organized by the Department of National Defence and has given talks to West Point and RMC cadets, to the National Strategic Program at the Canadian Forces College, and to the Australian War College. She is currently working on projects on civilian-military relations, the Somalia Affair, and the role of personnel policy in organizational change and readiness in the Canadian military.*

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