

Military monikers won't revive the monarchy in Canada

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So now we are to have a re-born Royal Canadian Navy, Royal Canadian Air Force and Canadian Army. These old and historic names have great resonance and no one can deny this. But do they matter today?

Certainly this re-naming is part and parcel of a Harper government plan to put the monarchy more to the front and centre of Canadian life and to undo the St. Laurent-Pearson-Trudeau-Chrétien efforts to put Canadian symbols at the heart of this nation's sense of itself. Under the Liberals, the Red Ensign was dispatched, the Royal Mail became Canada Post, and the armed forces were unified — all blows at the monarchical connection. Now the present government has put the Queen prominently back into its revised (and overall much better) guide for new immigrants, has run the only popular Royals — the Duke and Duchess of Cambridge — around the provinces (after the failure of Prince Charles' tour), has placed a photo of the Queen in the lobby of the Pearson Building, and has restored the "R" in RCN and RCAF.

Let there be no doubt that there is a plan here, one that neglects the increasing weakness of the Royal connection for all Canadians, as opinion polls show, and especially to all those who have come to this blessed land in the last half-century from all over the globe.

For the Canadian Forces, this change probably does not mean much, except that money will need to be spent on the design and printing of new letterheads, while the makers of badges, shoulder flashes, and possibly flags and ensigns will reap an unexpected bonanza.

The serving soldiers, sailors, and airmen likely won't care very much, and only the old sweats will rejoice. But if this change is the precursor of an assault on what remains of the unification of the three services in 1968 — and the protagonists of the Royal designation include most of the diehard anti-unificationists — then matters may get more serious and costly.

Certainly we can predict that the army corps and services that lost their Royal designation with unification will face the same demand for its restoration. Will the Canadian Engineers, for example, once more become the RCE?

We need to recall why these changes came about. Lester Pearson was the secretary of state for external affairs in 1956 when he proposed the creation of the United Nations Emergency Force that froze the Suez Crisis and won him the Nobel Peace Prize.

The British, French, and Israelis had invaded Egypt, and Canada was to provide an infantry battalion for the peacekeeping force. But, the Egyptians protested, the Canadians wore British-style uniforms and carried British-pattern weapons, had the Union Jack in the corner of their flag, and the regiment selected for service was the Queen's Own Rifles of Canada. How, Cairo asked quite sensibly, could Egyptian soldiers and civilians differentiate them from the imperialist invaders? That was a good question, and Canada made its way into UNEF only because Egypt came to agree that Canada could provide the logistic troops that the UN force needed to function.

Pearson drew the right lessons from his triumph that had almost turned into a debacle: the British connection was no longer necessarily a plus for Canada. Thus the Maple Leaf flag and a unified Canadian Forces with a new uniform and much less "Royal" to it. Many regiments disappeared — the Black Watch, the Canadian Guards, and the Queen's Own, all redolent of Empire. But the survivors — the Royal 22e, the Princess Patricia's, and the Royal Canadian Regiment — hung on, the government having only so much gumption. In the 1990s, the Somalia crisis brought the regimental system under threat and

for a time it looked as if Canada might have the First, Second, and Third Regiments of Canadian Infantry. Perhaps that might have been better, but again, the Liberals had only so much energy to spend on fighting the military.

Defence Minister Peter MacKay this week talked of our military men and women standing taller and prouder under the old-new Royal designations. This is, of course, claptrap, utter nonsense. Our men and women in uniform stand tall because they are proud of their own deeds in action and of their connection to the great and historic battles of their metaphorical ancestors in Canada's military. They stand tall for the earned traditions they hold dear, not for a Royal designation that is utterly, increasingly, meaningless in the Canada of the 21st century. The reality is that soldiers fight for their regiments and their comrades; sailors fight for their shipmates; airmen for their squadron. The grand designations of the RCN and RCAF are abstractions for most, just as much as the nation is something fought for only as an ideal.

The British connection and the monarchy are even grander abstractions with little or no meaning for today's servicemen and women. Stephen Harper can propose all he likes, but the reality is that Canadians in and outside the Canadian Forces have turned their backs on the monarchy.

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