

Canadian Military Is a Patriarchal, Authoritarian Threat to Democracy

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Details of former Chief of the Defence Staff Jonathan Vance’s sexual relations with a subordinate has put the patriarchal character of the military back in the spotlight. But there’s been insufficient discussion of the ways in which the issue highlights the authoritarian nature of the armed forces and its negative impact on pluralistic, democratic, values.

Six years ago former Supreme Court justice Marie Deschamps released a report detailing widespread sexual assault within the Canadian Forces (CF). Her 2015 investigation found a “[culture](#) of misogyny” in the CF “hostile to women and LGBTQ members.” In 2019 Deschamps [told](#) the House of Commons defence committee there had been little progress in eliminating sexism within the CF and between April 1 2016 and March 9 of this year there were [581](#) sexual assault and 221 sexual harassment complaints implicating CF members.

In a bid to change the culture of the military and offer greater protection to victims, Deschamps made 10 proposals. The most important suggestion was to establish a misconduct reporting system outside of the chain of command to receive reports of sexual assault and harassment. But the military largely failed to implement her proposals.

Instead of calling on the military to immediately move forward with Deschamps’ proposals, the Trudeau government responded to growing criticism of their complicity in Vance’s sexual misdeeds by asking another former Supreme Court judge, Louise Arbour, to conduct an ... investigation. On CBC’s Power and Politics last week the panelists were clear that the government instigated a new investigation simply to change the channel on an embarrassing scandal. But they ignored broader questions about the military, ignoring the ways in which Deschamps’ proposals put into question not only CF patriarchy, but also its authoritarian and hierarchal, character.

Ranging from Private Basic/Ordinary Seaman to General/Admiral, there are [nineteen](#) ranks in the CF. In deference to authority, the lower ranks must salute and obey orders from higher ranks. CF uniforms, badges and bars help individuals know who they must salute and obey.

There are few ways to legitimately challenge authority in the CF. Military members are not permitted to sign petitions complaining of unjust conditions. Nor are the rank-and-file allowed to unionize. Majority rule or even influence runs counter to CF principles. The rank-and-file collectively refusing an order is considered mutiny and is punishable by life in prison (formerly by death).

Military personnel are not entitled to jury trials. Unlike a number of European countries, the CF military justice system is not under civilian authority. CF members are subject to military law and tried in military courts even when the alleged crimes are committed off-duty and aren't related to military affairs.

Soldiers must follow a DND code of values and ethics and Queens Regulations and Orders, which reinforce hierarchy and undercut solidarity. Members are required to reveal secrets about their peers when supervisors ask. Failure to do so is severely punished.

CF members are restricted in what they can say publicly or post online. Under the Defence Administrative Orders and Directives and Queens Regulations and Orders, soldiers are not allowed to discredit the CF or discourage other troops from their duties. Any "[enunciation](#), defence or criticism, expressed or implied, of service, departmental or government policy" is forbidden.

The military's authoritarian ways seep into other areas of Canadian life. The largest and oldest government-funded youth program, [50,000](#) kids participate in the cadets. The CF boasts that cadets "[develop](#) a great sense of pride and discipline through their involvement in a hierarchical system that allows them to hone their leadership skills."

The cadets have also been embroiled in sexual assault scandals. In 2006 Ottawa agreed to pay [\\$8 million](#) to 35 former sea cadets who were sexually assaulted and a 2016 suit launched by former cadets in the Atlantic provinces alleged the organization created an environment "[which encouraged](#) or fostered silence and obedience" when abuse took place. Some suggest that abusers are attracted to cadet training positions since it puts them in contact with children and the hierarchical structure — having to obey commanding officers — enables abuse.

The authoritarian, hierarchical, nature of the military isn't simply a danger to those abused. CF culture and structures are frequently in opposition to pluralistic, democratic, values. So are the demands of warfare. This is the reason why people with extreme right-wing beliefs are often attracted to the military as it conforms to their views on how society should function.

Loyalty, conformity and obeying orders are considered essential by the CF. There's little room to challenge authority or injustices and voting is nearly nonexistent. Political meetings are not [allowed](#) on base and it is prohibited to establish a feminist, environmental or socialist club.

The military command structures reinforce the most undemocratic and ignorant impulses of Canadian society while the patriarchal, authoritarian, nature of the Canadian Forces is a threat to many within the institution. Fixing this will not be simple.

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