CANADIAN GLOBAL AFFAIRS INSTITUTE
INSTITUT CANADIEN DES AFFAIRES MONDIALES

Exploring the Barriers to Culture Change

Defence Deconstructed Podcast Transcript

May 12, 2023

Host: Charlotte Duval-Lantoine – Ottawa Operations Manager & Fellow, Canadian Global Affairs Institute
Dr. Vanessa Brown – Associate Professor, Canadian Forces College
Dr. Allan English – Professor, Queen's University

Charlotte Duval-Lantoine (CDL): Comprehensive culture change, cultural evolution, cultural renovation, and change related to personnel management and conduct is not new for the Canadian Armed Forces. But 2021 has really reintroduce the question of whether or not our military is able to pursue that change, especially as CPCC or chief professional conduct and culture is pursuing its work for culture change. But also, as we are awaiting the external monitor appointed by Anita Anand to publish their first report.

CDL: So today we'll talk about the barriers, both formal and informal the military has to overcome to evolve its culture and to do so. I am joined by Dr. Vanessa Brown from the Canadian Forces College and Dr. Allan English from Queen's University.

CDL: Allan, I'll start with you. You have been working on CAF culture for a decade now and since Operation Honour you have really been zeroing in on the ability for the CAF to change its culture, especially as related to conduct and sexual misconduct. So why, in your opinion, has Operation Honour fallen from the way it has, aside from the scandals related to Jonathan Vance's on misconduct? I know there's a lot to say, but I want you to give me the broad strokes here.

***Dr. Allan English (AE)*:** Well, thanks, Charlotte, and thanks for inviting me. In my work, I've talked about systemic barriers and cultural factors that caused operation order to fail or in fact, impede significant change in the CAF.

***AE*:** But I think the most powerful explanation for the failure of Operation Honour is cultural factor, which is the lack of leadership buy in at the highest levels of the CAF. It started with the first CDS to respond to the Deschamps report, General Tom Lawson. And he set the tone, I think, for the whole thing when he said, quote, "I do not accept from any quarter that this type of behaviour is part of our military culture" –that's referring to the behavior that Deschamps detailed. And then later on in a TV interview, he said that some men were, quote, "biologically wired in a certain way to believe that it is a reasonable thing to press themselves and their desires on others," unquote. So, I mean, that sort of set the tone that really the senior leadership didn't really believe that this was a problem.

***AE*:** A year later, John Vance, who is CDS, then said that Operation Honour was generating a high level of skepticism in the CAF because it didn't fit in with people's personal experience, at least the people that were skeptical. And in 2021, the current CDS, General Eyre said that in his 35-year career, he'd never seen any inappropriate behaviour in the military. So, I think that sort of captures the view of some of the most senior officers in the CAF to the fact that Justice Deschamps called for comprehensive cultural change and Justice Arbor called for profound, radical change in the CAF, and you can see it in their documentation. The CAF's sexual misconduct strategy, *The Path to Dignity and Respect* of 2020 only commits the CAF to making a cultural realignment. And the Chief

of Professional Conduct and Culture, its website only speaks of the need to try to make shifts in the CAF culture. So, I think from the start to now, there's no acceptance in senior leadership of the CAF that this profound, radical, comprehensive change needs to be made. And that's why it hasn't.

***CDL*:** Thank you, Allan. Vanessa, I'll essentially turn to you and ask about the same question. You've been working at the Canadian Forces College since the early days of Operation Honour. And what has been your perception of Operation Honour and the culture change you was pursuing as a civilian that was interacting with senior officers?

***Vanessa Brown (VB)*:** Thank you for this question and thank you for inviting me to be here today, Charlotte. I think it's a really important question about how do military professionals actually see Operation Honour and the changes that are being made within the CAF now, or at least attempted to be made within the CAF from the headquarters perspective down to the unit level. So, my perspective gleans from my work with military professionals at Canadian Forces College and in particular on the Joint Command Staff program. I've been working on gender diversity, inclusion, equity areas within the Canadian Forces College for a number of years now and have been tracking the lived experiences really of military members within the context of professional military education.

VB: So, I've been able to see things at the grassroots level, particularly in the middle senior leadership cadre that has been really illuminating. And I think some of the problems at the – at that level that that military students were relaying to me was that, you know, this is really a top-down policy, it's an order. And the way in which Operation Honour an order was seen both positively and negatively, depending on which student you ask.But I think that the attempt to create an order was significant at the time because the military doesn't fail on operations. Right. So, if this is Operation Honour and the military doesn't fail, that's the metanarrative that we have that this was a strong – a strong narrative, but not one that essentially was taken equally across the services because it's a – it's kind of an army way to order from a top-down approach, a leadership approach call for change.

***VB*:** And at the time, I think Deschamps already had said this is a culture problem, too, right? And then Arbour doubled down on this. We have to understand our culture. And I think I think the fundamental flaw with Operation Honour, aside from the leadership at the time, is that is another regulative, kind of legal approach to shifting mindsets and behaviors. And again, hasn't really tapped into how do we do this from a culture of a cultural and normative way. And so, I think that legal determinism that we have this new regulation and we presume that will it will impact and affect culture. I think the military is now recognizing that that has not worked in the past. And we essentially need to do something different. And so here is where we are today. How do we understand culture and how do we move it substantively? And I think in a radical way. But I also want to tap into what Allan was saying earlier about the hesitance and resistance to throw the baby out with the bathwater. You know, we've heard things like cultural evolution, cultural renovation, and I've even heard some things like culture growth.

***VB*:** So, I think we have to really pay attention to the resistance through language and through discourse. And my perspective would be to turn back to what do we need to change and what is a radical change look like for the military and understand how that would be resisted and also negotiated and advocated for within the military itself. And I'll stop there.

***CDL*:** Excellent. That's a perfect segue into what I really wanted to touch on is, is the nerf de la guerre, really, the core issue, because even though I opened with Operation Honour, which is now completely defunct or has culminated in 2021, according to the chief of the defense staff. We're talking about culture change, whether we talk about cultural renovation, evolution of shifts, realignment, we really – what we need to change is the values, beliefs, attitudes and behaviors that the CAF rewards.

***CDL*:** And I'll turn to you Allan. In some of your articles and conference papers, you've written quite a bit about the tyranny of the posting cycle and that it is a significant barrier to culture change. And you tell the audience what you mean by this term, what it entails, and why it is an impediment to change.

***AE*:** Before I start, I thought I'd make a comment on what Vanessa said because I was at the IUS [Inter-University Symposium on Armed Forces and Society] 2018 conference, and at the 2016 conference, a number of us had said that an operational planning approach based on the operational planning process was the wrong approach to take to Operation Honour because it was a complex problem and it couldn't be solved by a linear problem solving model. And before 2018, the CAF came out with a statement that they picked that model, the operation model because the CAF doesn't fail in operations. And I said to the audience: you should really never say that before a military historian, because I think my students could probably compile quite a list where the CAF did fail. They succeeded on many [operations], but they did fail. And that's. Anyway, I'll stop there.

***AE*:** But okay, tyranny the posting cycle. Well, I mean anyone that study military knows that particularly at the higher levels and the command levels, people get posted every 2 to 3 years. In fact, command postings are normally – there's so many people that need to get through them and so few command opportunities that there are normally two years. So, I'd say that the tyranny of the posting cycle is one of the systemic barriers to change because it's part of the system and what it means is that there's constant turnover in positions in the CAF that disrupts change processes because you get a whole bunch of new people coming in and they have to familiarize themselves with what's going on.

***AE*:** I use Operation Honour as an example – in the five years between its start in 2015 and October 2020, there were seven incumbents in the VCDS position and the VCS, of course, was the person that had all responsibility for Operation Honour. So that's one every nine months. Four leaders of Operation Honor – and it went through various name change, that's one every 15 months. And there was a 70% staff turnover after two years. So it was just intense organizational chaos. And talking to the people that were working

there, I mean, they were just shaking their heads. But we have to remember that that was deliberately planned. Operation Honour was originally – the original Op order, it's 22 months to go from start to the maintain their whole phase four.

***AE*:** So, they posted the people in for two years because they said it's a 22-month program. So, it was all expected. So, this high turnover rate means that sort of any planning is going to be disrupted because people are constantly turning over. I mean, again, I was talking to some people that were working there and they said some of them left before the replacements came in. There were no briefings. The records were not particularly complete. So I've said this means that the half-life for any CAF transformation is about three years because once that posting seasoned turnover happens, your guess is as good as mine what's going to happen in the organization. So that to me is one of the key systemic barriers to making change in the forces is the constant churn in personnel.

***CDL*:** Thanks, Allan. And Vanessa, now to you. You know, the tyranny of the posting cycle is somewhat of a formal process, but that's going to impact how things are done informally and vice versa, right? And so, in your perspective as well, what kind of characteristics, leadership style behaviors are rewarded when we talk about the way that people approach their role in the military?

***VB*:** Absolutely. So, I'll give you a little background about how I know what I know and how what I know is also always changing and nebulous. So I did my PhD on understanding how gender and cultural perspectives were being integrated within profession of military education and whether this moved Canadian Armed Forces members in any way to assist with culture change after they've gone through the Joint Command and Staff program in particular.

***VB*:** So, what do I know from this research? There are significant inherited legacies that Canadian Armed Forces members are socialized into within the organization that that dictate how they ought to or how they perceive they ought to behave. And some of these legacies are from structural issues and systemic issues such as the tyranny of the posting cycle and others are to do with hierarchy and chain of command, others are to do with service culture, unit culture, regimental culture. And so these learned behaviors and evoke a particular style of leadership. But I will also say is that military members inherit historical struggles within the Canadian landscape and the way in which the military has been used as an arm to, of the state. And so some of those historical legacies include things like white supremacy, colonialism, patriarchy, and how does the military – how is military then used to enforce and sometimes negotiate the outcomes of these larger systems of power?

***VB*:** And I would say at the very basic level, within military socialization, military members learn how to be ideal military members and those ideals are often latently racialized, they're often implicitly gendered, and they create a social hierarchy as well as the chain of command, a social hierarchy that's very heavily policed. And you can see this playing out with particularly within the joint context of the Joint Command and Staff

program, across the services, across different occupations, across different trades, and then seeing that intersectionality of gender, racialization, class, education, region, language play out.

***VB*:** And so, what students were articulating is a perception of a command culture that's largely operational. That tends to be army, but also tends to be combat oriented. So, the closer you are to combat, the more idealized you may be in that type of leadership style, then becomes the thing that's idealized, particularly in the classroom. And so, students are negotiating this. Sometimes they're enacting this, and sometimes they're recognizing, 'hey, there are different ways in which I need to be a leader once I move on through to the organization. And so, I need to recognize what leadership performance is. I need to be able to do in order to be operationally effective, in order to be a good leader and intentionally to enable the military to move its culture.'

***VB*:** So, I think that that that heavy social policing of what leadership looks like had tended to be a very directive alpha, masculine and particularly Anglo type of way of leading the organization. And I think students were really grappling with this at the time. And so, if you want to read more about that, you can check out my 300-page thesis.[1] The sum of the parts is that there is often unnamed, but idealized leadership norm that the CAF is grappling with. You can see that with character-based leadership, you can see that with updates to *Trusted to Serve,* the CAF doctrine. So we're grappling with this socialized, longstanding, historical imagination of what a leader looks like within the CAF, and deconstructing that in order to build something new.

***CDL*:** So, thanks for that, and I'm going to go a little bit further and stay with you, Vanessa, because we have seen the publication of quite a few value statements, statements from the CAF that kind of try to realign with what they want to see as outcomes in terms of dignity and respect and, you know, the type of leadership that they want.

***CDL*:** But from Operation Honour onward, there has been – I mean, now that we're seeing a debate over change in those value statements, because we have the CAF ethos *Trusted to Serve*. And last month at the CDA Institute conference, Eyre announced that there will be a new CAF doctrine. But, there seems to be a missing piece when it comes to those values actually taking hold and moving forward with the way that the military functions. So, can you talk a little bit more about that?

***VB*:** Absolutely. So, I spoke a little bit about, you know, what we inherit, like what the CAF members are inheriting. And some of that is, are these structures and systems that are essentially unmoved by cultural and behaviour, behavioural items that are trying to shift – individual behaviour. And they tend to focus on the individual rather than what the institution needs to do systemically and structurally to also advance culture change within the armed forces.

[1]You can access Dr. Brown's dissertation here: https://repository.library.carleton.ca/concern/etds/bv73c1522

***VB*:** So, I think there's this kind of disconnect within what essentially needs to be taken, taken to a deeper level of analysis, based on the systems and structures that the CAF has maintained over time and understand the ways in which those may be creating inequities for some and tailwinds for others. And these things can be things like the posting cycle that creates significant stressors on military members, but particularly exacerbates the inequities of those who already tend to be marginalized within need, within the organization. That's just one example. But if you think about career management succession, if you think about these larger systems and processes within the CAF, we also need to take a social science approach to understanding the lived experiences of CAF members within those larger systems and understand the ways in which the cultural focus for policy might be in tension with existing systems and structures that we haven't dug into enough to understand their implications for staff members as they move through the CAF.

***CDL*:** Thank you. Vanessa. Allan, Same question to you.

***AE*:** Right. Well, this fits into what I call one of my systemic barriers, which is the lack of understanding of culture change within the CAF. And a key point that I think fits into this discussion is that every organization has two types of values: espoused values, what the organization says it's going to do and actual values. what the organization actually does, and it's really these actual values that are the real guides to behavior because that's what people learn is how you get along within the organization, not doing what the organization says you should do, but what other people are doing and other behaviours in the organization. So, both the Deschamps report and the Arbour report found that the actual values of the CAF, some of which are trends transmitted in basic training, produced a toxic culture which the Deputy Prime Minister was recently quoted as agreeing with and the training and reward systems in many ways reinforce this toxic culture of actual values as opposed to espoused values.

***AE*:** One of the Auditor General's reports since 2017 on the training that Operational Honour was giving, it said, did not increase the member's understanding of how to respond to and support victims. But instead it created confusion, frustration, fear and less camaraderie. So in the end, if you don't understand the difference between these espoused values and the actual values in the organization, what you've got is the CAF putting out what Justice Arbour called many "highly aspirational plans, ethics codes, ethos statements."

***AE*:** But nothing's going to change until the reward system changes. And this is something that – and training system changes and this is something that Justice Deschamps noted. She said that one of the big problems in the armed forces was that this is an espoused value that you're supposed to report all misconduct, particularly sexual misconduct, but that the actual value that was taught by NCMS on basic training and other training courses was that there's a code of silence. "You keep your mouth shut and you don't make the unit look bad." And she said, That's what's one of the main obstacles to dealing with sexual

misconduct in the forces is this actual values as opposed to what the forces are saying people should do.

***CDL*:** So, to wrap up the conversation – there's a lot to be done for the military to change its culture and to reach a reconstitution outcome. And we'll see how on what paths the CAF is with the external monitor's report. But I wanted to ask you and answer that very quickly. And I'm not at all to the any of you on the spot, but if you could list one action that the CAF needs to take to effectively change its culture, what would it be? Allan, I'll start with you.

***AE*:** Okay. Well, I think, first of all, a very quick one is for the senior leadership to recognize that profound, radical, comprehensive change is necessary and write that into the orders. But the main thing is to change the reward system, to say "what gets rewarded gets done." Well, right now, as a Justice Arbor said, what gets rewarded are inputs into the system, what she called "hyperactive response, not grounded in profound insight, with many changes being made to demonstrate that action was being taken without adequately considering their consequences." So, need to change the reward system so that instead of everybody being rewarded for doing this "flurry of activities," as she called it, that you break your change into stages, you reward somebody for identifying the problem and making a plan. You're will reward the next leader for executing the plan. And guess what? You reward the next leader for evaluating the plan.

***AE*:** And then after you read the evaluation, you decide if you need to go through another execute cycle. But that is the major weakness in all of this. As Operation Honour progress report four recognized is they have not done any evaluation of outputs. It's all been long lists of inputs. And so, I think those are the two things recognize that change is necessary and change the reward system.

***VB*:** So, in terms of quickly, I think there's really four areas that I would suggest that the institution really needs to be paying attention to. The first is training and education. I found through my analyses of the work that Canadian Armed Forces members are doing once they get critical education – so, when you think about critical theories of critical feminist theory, anti-racist theory, critical disability studies, critical sexuality studies, once you have a basis of critical knowledge about how to critique the organization that you're in, then you're empowered to deconstruct what's going on within the organization and rebuild it together.

***VB*:** And so, I would say don't discount military members for being active agents of change in this space, and often that is discounted from the outside. I see it very deeply within the military. I see students who have access to this higher education and who are enabled through these critical concepts to then make substantive changes within the military as they rise in in senior leadership roles. So, training and education is vitally important. I only see one segment of this at the Canadian Forces College, but I would suggest that introduction to critical concepts within the social sciences is at the at the lower levels will enable and empower military members to be the change themselves.

***VB*:** Second, transparency of current research that's going on within the Department of National Defense and Canadian Armed Forces is really vitally important. I would suggest that the work of DGMPRA, the Director General Military Personnel, Research and Analysis is really vitally important. They've been doing excellent work for a really long time, but often because they're client-based research goes back to the client, that wonderful research is pretty opaque to both the military and those outside the military. So, transparency of research and their and current actions that are going on within the armed forces is really, really important. The third is resourcing. So if you want to create an institutional change, you must resources and you must resource it well. I haven't seen enough resources being put into understanding systemic and structural barriers for equity deserving groups. I think that's something that needs to be done.

***VB*:** I think additional resources being put towards gender-based analysis plus and the disaggregation of data collection within the armed forces needs to happen. And I think this is something that will really enable the military to move forward in giant strides rather than baby steps. And my fourth area is institutional responsibility. So, I often see the institution attempting to transform behaviours of individuals as the focus. But I think the dual focus should also be on what are the institutional responsibilities for understanding structure, systems and culture and the institution's role in maintaining and reproducing these.

***CDL*:** And with that, I want to thank Allan and Vanessa for coming on today. Thank you very much for a fascinating conversation.

Canadian Global Affairs Institute

The Canadian Global Affairs Institute focuses on the entire range of Canada's international relations in all its forms including (in partnership with the University of Calgary's School of Public Policy), trade investment and international capacity building. Successor to the Canadian Defence and Foreign Affairs Institute (CDFAI, which was established in 2001), the Institute works to inform Canadians about the importance of having a respected and influential voice in those parts of the globe where Canada has significant interests due to trade and investment, origins of Canada's population, geographic security (and especially security of North America in conjunction with the United States), social development, or the peace and freedom of allied nations. The Institute aims to demonstrate to Canadians the importance of comprehensive foreign, defence and trade policies which both express our values and represent our interests.

The Institute was created to bridge the gap between what Canadians need to know about Canadian international activities and what they do know. Historically Canadians have tended to look abroad out of a search for markets because Canada depends heavily on foreign trade. In the modern post-Cold War world, however, global security and stability have become the bedrocks of global commerce and the free movement of people, goods and ideas across international boundaries. Canada has striven to open the world since the 1930s and was a driving factor behind the adoption of the main structures which underpin globalization such as the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, the World Trade Organization and emerging free trade networks connecting dozens of international economies. The Canadian Global Affairs Institute recognizes Canada's contribution to a globalized world and aims to inform Canadians about Canada's role in that process and the connection between globalization and security.

In all its activities the Institute is a charitable, non-partisan, non-advocacy organization that provides a platform for a variety of viewpoints. It is supported financially by the contributions of individuals, foundations, and corporations. Conclusions or opinions expressed in Institute publications and programs are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of Institute staff, fellows, directors, advisors or any individuals or organizations that provide financial support to, or collaborate with, the Institute.