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THE MILITARY AFFAIRS COLUMN BY TIM DUNNE

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Sajjan sage choice for Defence portfolio

I think I made a mistake.

In [my last column](#) published Sept. 30, I wrote that “I could be forgiven for concluding that Justin Trudeau’s Liberals are ambivalent about Canada’s military.” With Harjit Sajjan’s appointment as minister of National Defence, I might have to eat my own words.

Mr. Sajjan joined the Canadian Army reserves 25 years ago, rose to the rank of lieutenant-colonel and was appointed commanding officer of the British Columbia Regiment (Duke of Connaught’s Own). He served in Bosnia Herzegovina, followed by three deployments to Kandahar, Afghanistan, for which he earned the Meritorious Service Medal, among other recognitions.

Reserve, or part time, soldiers enrol in the army for different reasons than their regular force (full-time) counterparts: their pay and benefits are not as generous, and their military time is taken from family time — the routine being one night per week, one weekend per month. But there is a frequent requirement for additional time to be taken for courses and training. The nature of military service, the commitment and the relationship with the Canadian Armed Forces are different for the reservist — not better or worse, just different.

The commanding officer accompanies his soldiers and becomes just as cold, wet, dirty, hungry, tired and uncomfortable as his troops. Although he commands them and is responsible for them, he is very much one of them.

Mr. Sajjan inherits a very complex portfolio, one that carries ponderous responsibilities to ensure that our forces are appropriately equipped to achieve mission success in any operation they are directed to undertake. In addition to the operational elements of the Canadian Armed Forces, there are critical programs and issues that will call on his pragmatic and ethical leadership and management.

Probably the most urgent and sensitive will be addressing suicide among serving and retired military personnel. The Globe and Mail’s recent series of articles identified a relationship between military service in Afghanistan and suicidal behaviour. However, the 2010 report of the Canadian Forces Expert Panel on Suicide Prevention theorized that disciplinary investigations may be another major contributing factor.

Eliminating harassment and abusive behaviour from both the military and civilian components of the department also needs attention. The Canadian military has been engaged in a multitude of activities to make our military more welcoming to women, First Nations, ethnic and LGBT communities. These efforts are stymied by the insidious actions of a minority of small-minded miscreants who contaminate the professional military workplace.

The myriad of equipment acquisition programs, from new ships for the Royal Canadian Navy and combat vehicles for the Canadian Army to new advanced technology fighter aircraft for the Royal Canadian Air Force will be another challenge.

Mr. Sajjan will have to walk that fine line of affordability on one side and of operational effectiveness on the other. This will be a demanding responsibility and, as a combat veteran, I am certain that he understands that the very lives of our sailors, soldiers and aviators hang in the balance.

Additionally, there are some issues I'd like to see Mr. Sajjan address that have not yet made it onto the public agenda.

The RCN's Victoria-class submarines were manufactured in the early 1990s. They do not need to be replaced yet, but we have learned from experience that these acquisition programs are painfully slow. The replacement process should be either sped up or started now.

As well, Mr. Sajjan needs to hit the reset button on the domestic practice of Canadian military justice.

The Canadian Forces Military Police (MPs) should be replaced by the RCMP. The original intent for the MPs was for wartime control of vehicular traffic in the battle area and custody of prisoners of war. Converting the MP branch to a peacetime reserve organization and replacing them with the RCMP could result in annual savings for DND of tens of millions of dollars.

The Judge Advocate General must entrench the right of the presumption of innocence, guaranteed under the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms and the Criminal Code of Canada, for all who are investigated but not charged. And criminal behaviour by military members should be referred to Crown prosecution services within the provinces where the offences were committed. The Code of Service Discipline should be invoked only on international deployments where status-of-forces agreements are in play.

If Mr. Sajjan can accomplish these things, not only will I eat my own words, I will savour the taste.

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