Formerly the HMCS *Labrador*: An analysis of the vessel transfer that removed the Royal Canadian Navy from the Canadian Arctic

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the question why the HMCS *Labrador*, an effective, valuable icebreaker and the first to be commissioned by the Royal Canadian Navy, was decommissioned in 1958 after less than four years of military service. The reasons for this are often described as "budgetary considerations"; However, it is conspicuous that the Navy would reverse its defence policy so radically and decommission its only vessel capable of arctic patrol and exploration, having so recently identified a weakness in Arctic capabilities. Foreign policy decision making theory is applied to investigate the personal backgrounds and structural constraints influencing those who participated in the decision-making process, and better understand their personal motives in an organizational context. This analysis reveals that based on Canadian defence commitments abroad and the budget cuts of a new Conservative government, the most likely future outcome of the HMCS *Labrador* was decommission. Yet, the findings speak to a pattern in Canadian post-war defence policy, where Canada's Navy struggled to articulate its role in the world other than through its responsibilities to NATO, and thereby more closely linking itself with the US.

INTRODUCTION

In October 1956 the Naval Staff of Canada submitted a formal recommendation to transfer the HMCS *Labrador*, a naval icebreaker, from the Royal Canadian Navy (RCN) to another government department (Leeming 1983: 21; Naval Board 512th meeting 1956) and on 22 November 1957 the service-battered warship[1] was decommissioned, or "paid off", in a ceremony held in Saint John, New Brunswick. While Canadian Navy vessels come and go as technology evolves and military commitments change, this warship is of particular interest. The *Labrador* was the first icebreaker commissioned by the Canadian Navy and beyond the valuable research and sea charting it made possible, the ship's activities in the Arctic region were also instrumental

[1] A "warship" is a ship belonging to the armed forces of a state and that is regularly operated by military staff. It is not necessarily a vessel which is built or used primarily to serve as an offensive tool of war (Darlington 2020)

in the supply of the Distant Early Warnings (DEW) Line sites along Canada's Arctic coast. Based on the footnotes of RCN history, it seems that the *Labrador* was transferred primarily due to financial considerations and the budget crunch forced upon the RCN during the late 1950s. However, little has been written about this decision and the implications that the RCN faced by sacrificing its only means of operating freely within the Canadian Arctic. Notably, the RCN only recently acquired its first naval icebreaker since 1958 when the HMCS *Harry DeWolf* was launched in October 2020 (Melanson 2020: para 1) and commissioned in June 2021 (Cooke 2021: para 1). This new icebreaker is the namesake of the military officer who ultimately approved the recommendation to decommission the *Labrador* – a clear nod to the last vessel to bear the Canadian Navy ensign in the North. Furthermore, the RCN has stated that "HMCS *Harry DeWolf* and its sister ships will be at the core of an enhanced Canadian Arctic presence over the coming years" (Melanson 2020: para 8). I believe that by exploring the competing priorities which led to the decommissioning of the HMCS *Labrador*, this study will contribute to a better understanding of why the RCN has returned to the Arctic now and perhaps even provide insights into future developments.

The purpose of this research is to investigate the decision-making process leading to the decommissioning of the HMCS *Labrador*. It will therefore focus on exploring the process surrounding the transfer of the *Labrador*, including an analysis of the people involved and the role they played in the decision-making process. What has been written thus far about the decision to transfer the *Labrador* from the Department of National Defence to the department of Transport is limited and concludes that the decision was the result of financial constraints (Leeming 1983: 21). However, this decision marked a significant change in Canadian Naval

Defence policy and beckons to be better understood. This study uses the Neo-classical Realist approach of Foreign Policy Analysis. It reconstructs the decision-making process by examining three levels of analysis: (1) the international system level, (2) the government or state level, and (3) the individual or psychological level (Morin and Paquin 2018: 42-44).

LITERATURE REVIEW

The existing literature analysing the decommissioning of the HMCS *Labrador* is scant and sparse. This policy decision has not been given significant direct attention, even if many other military decisions from this period have been studied extensively. Some of the accounts mentioned in this section are helpful in establishing the history of the vessel, while others clarify the policy priorities of the Canadian Department of National Defence in the 1950s. A thorough analysis of how the decision to decommission the HMCS *Labrador* is however absent from the existing literature.

Pigott has provided a detailed account for the origins of the HMCS *Labrador*. He explains that in the post-war period the RCN was ill-equipped for Arctic operations. The RCN had just a few warships which were arcticized with an improved on-board heating system and upper-deck machinery, but in 1948 it became apparent that "without an icebreaker, a naval presence in the North was not sustainable" and therefore, the *Labrador* was laid down in November of 1949 (Pigott 2011: 207). All that Pigott states beyond this, though, is that the icebreaker was decommissioned in 1957 and transferred to the department of transport in 1958. Other relevant works document the crucial use of the *Labrador* during its time with the RCN (Morenus 1957: 42;

Hobson 1986: 29-30), and the value of a naval presence in the Canadian Arctic as a deterrent measure against Soviet surveillance (Eayrs 1972: 338; Simpson 1998: 30; Milner 2010: 223).

Concerning the study of the Canadian naval administration, Lund's *Rise and Fall of the Canadian Navy* is a monumental collection of information dealing with the individual RCN decision-makers, the challenges they faced, and the ways in which they helped or hindered the successes of the RCN. The HMCS *Labrador*, however, is given just one mention on a single page – the fact that it was transferred to another government department (Lund 1999: 391). Leeming's discussion of the HMCS *Labrador* is somewhat more in-depth. He notes that a request was made to the Naval Board to transfer the vessel in October 1956, but that the Naval Board declined the recommendation. The transfer was not finally approved until the new Minister of National Defence, George Pearkes, enforced new financial pressures on the RCN and the Chair of the Naval Board, Vice-Admiral Harry DeWolf (Leeming 1983: 21).

This study begins with an explanation of my methods of research and analysis. Then, it provides a summary of the background context in which the vessel was laid down and, shortly after, decommissioned. The policy analysis is divided into three sections: the event that triggered the decision-making process, the policy options considered, and then a detailed account of how the actors involved came to the decision to decommission the naval icebreaker. This decision, the study argues, was based on the constraints under which the actors were operating. The study concludes with a summary of the main findings.

RESEARCH METHOD: A CASE STUDY IN FOREIGN POLICY ANALYSIS

This research project was designed as a case study. The purpose of the case study is to "tackle subjects about which little was previously known or about which existing knowledge is

fundamentally flawed" (Gerring, 2007: 79). As the literature review demonstrated, the existing knowledge about the decommissioning of the HMCS *Labrador* is the simple fact that the decision was primarily an economic one, suggesting that any state or individual actor would have come to same final decision under the same circumstances. The study analyses this decision in order to evaluate the options available to the decision-makers involved and the constraints under which they made their decision. Some of the questions asked are: was there conflict within the federal government administration over this issue? Were there aspirations that another icebreaker would be commissioned under Canadian Naval command in the future? Did the election of a new, Conservative government play a causal role in this event? This case study will be guided primarily by the works of Pierson (2004), Gerring (2007), and Allison (1969). Each of these political scientists have something powerful to contribute to the case study in the context of policy analysis.

The case study method allows researchers to focus on a single case and allows them to tackle the same question from several perspectives and apply different theoretical approaches and tool kits. It aims to identify and explain the causal pathway between X and Y, by taking several causal mechanisms into account. In other words, the case study method attempts to identify and explain the possible causal pathways between each of X1, X2, X3 and Y. The case study is also more historical than its quantitative counterparts, as the researcher attempts to "reconstruct the world as it was seen through the eyes of past actors" (Oren 2015: 312). Therefore, the controlled comparison is made between points in time: the analysis begins at the trigger for the decision-making process and ends at the time the decision is made. Using the Neo-Classical Realist approach, this study explores variables at three different levels of analysis: the systemic, the

state, and the individual. At each level of analysis, there are important factors, which serve as constraints in the decision-making process. This theoretical approach is beneficial to the case study method, as the research is provided with a loose, structural model through which a rich, comprehensive review of a policy decision can be conducted.

To put this in the context of the decision surrounding the HMCS *Labrador*, this study develops on three levels of analysis. At the systemic level, it considers Canada's foreign relations focusing on perceived threats and alliance commitments. During the 1950s, the world was coming to terms with the transition from a multi-polar system, where multiple states try to maintain a balance of power, to a bi-polar system in which two states truly hold power and compete for the top spot. This is undeniably an oversimplification, but it illustrates the international struggle of the Cold War and the tendency for each, less-powerful state to bandwagon with one superpower or its opponent.

At the state-level of analysis the dynamics of the decision-making process is analysed. Here the study borrows from such political science toolkits as Historical Institutionalism, developed by Hall and Taylor (1996), and the Organizational Model, developed by Graham Allison (1969). Institutions are decision-making units which are designed to solve problems. The three key institutions included as a part of this policy analysis are (1) the elected political party and cabinet, (2) the RCN Naval Staff, and (3) the Naval Board. Each of these units of policymaking existed within a historical context of institutional norms and developed standard operating procedures (SOPs) vis-à-vis years of policy hurdles and successes. Understanding how these institutions collect information, frame problems, and prioritize their unit goals is crucial to

understanding why the HMCS *Labrador*, notwithstanding its 'accomplishments,' came to be regarded as a disposable asset by the RCN.

Finally, at the individual level of analysis this study focuses on the individuals who were directly involved in the decision-making process that led to the decommissioning of the HMCS *Labrador* and how they were constrained by factors at the two higher levels of analysis. These individuals had to collect and interpret information in order to bargain with one another and come to a final decision. Independent variables at this level include policy-expertise, experience, partisanship, and cognitive complexity. The key players analysed for the purpose of this policy decision are Prime Minister John Diefenbaker, Defence Minister George Pearkes, Chief of Naval Staff Vice Admiral (VAdmr) Harry DeWolf, and Director of Naval Plans and Operations Captain William Landymore.

This study deals with the period between two temporal benchmarks: the initial request from the Naval Staff in October 1956 to transfer the HMCS *Labrador* and the final decision to decommission the vessel in August 1957. The study first examines the trigger that initiated the decision-making process and then focuses on the following questions: who identified the on-going operations of the HMCS *Labrador* to be an issue? How did decision-makers frame the issue they faced? How did the final decision differ from the initial request, and why did those changes occur? The hypothesis of this study is that a deeper analysis of the individuals involved will reveal that certain veto players within the RCN strongly resisted the decision to decommission the HMCS *Labrador* but that public pressure on Prime Minister Diefenbaker to fulfill campaign promises and reduce military spending forced the RCN to find a creative alternative between

keeping the vessel and losing it forever. Therefore, the dependent variable of this case study is the final decision of the RCN regarding the HMCS *Labrador*.

The study identifies the causal factors at play and analyses which causal mechanisms played the strongest role in influencing the policy alternatives being considered. These independent variables are situated at the three levels of analysis. At the systemic level, the independent variables were the type of international system and Canada's relative power position in it (a middle-power allied with one of the poles, the United States). At the state level, the independent variables were Canada's military budget and capabilities, the nature of Canada's decision-making bodies and institutions, the role of interest groups and the public, and the mobility of the RCN. It is important to note that these variables identified at the top two levels of analysis are not objective data. Indeed, they are best understood as perceptions of the decision makers. This means that the study needs to reconstruct how the decision makers perceived those variables, as it is their individual perceptions that have value in this analysis. At the individual level of analysis, the study explores how state decision-makers were constrained by the factors at the two higher levels and how they collected and interpreted information in order to bargain with one another to come to a final decision. Independent variables at this level included policy-expertise, experience, partisanship, and cognitive complexity.

THE CONSTRUCTION OF A HEAVY ICEBREAKER

The commissioning and subsequent decommissioning of the *Labrador* occurred during a period of rising global tensions. The USSR and the US were engaged in an arms race that had been ongoing since the end of the Second World War – a race that threatened to end in a nuclear confrontation. The only true deterrent to a nuclear strike against North America was to amass

such a vast nuclear arsenal that mutual destruction would be the inevitable consequence of a strike. Although this global posture of deterrence prevented a direct armed conflict between the USSR and the US, both countries prepared for the worst by investing in new technology, foreign alliances, and military expansion.

In April 1949, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) was ratified and every nation that had signed the Treaty, Canada included, walked away with new commitments and responsibilities. In accordance with NATO, Canada's foreign policy goals during this period were focused on supporting the Western defence posture of deterrence and unity against a common enemy, the other side of the Iron Curtain. Furthermore, both NATO and the Canadian Federal Government's 1949 "White Paper" committed the Navy to protecting coastal areas, including the Arctic (Pigott 2011: 207). This presented a challenge to the RCN: how could a Navy without an icebreaker of its own patrol and defend Canada's Northern coastline? A lesson had also been learned by an Arctic search and rescue crisis in September 1948. Following the conclusion of a publicized, “show the flag” cruise of two RCN destroyers from Halifax to Churchill, several delegates took off in a US Beechcraft and crashed into Arctic territory which could not be accessed by the RCN ships. If not for a massive contribution for the Royal Canadian Air Force, they may have never been found. The RCN realized from this event that “without an icebreaker, a naval presence in the North was not sustainable” (Pigott 2011: 206). Thus, in 1948, Defence Minister Brooke Claxton announced the construction of a heavy icebreaker, which would become the HMCS *Labrador* (Hobson 1986: 16).

The Royal Canadian Navy had earned the reputation during the Second World War of having an expertise for planning and executing anti-submarine warfare (ASW). By the end of the

war, Canada's navy was the third largest in the world (Milner 2012: 177) and the RCN had demonstrated the ability to command its own fleet abroad with remarkable efficiency. Up until the 1950s Canadian Naval policy was traditionally aligned with that of the British Royal Navy (RN) from which it received both equipment and instructions. However, post-war Canada was drifting away from its "Royal" ties and was gradually forming a foreign policy which was more closely aligned with that of the US rather than the UK (Lund 1999: 136). Defence Minister Claxton stated in 1950 that "[Canada's] role in NATO [was] clearly defined as anti-submarine warfare along the coasts of both sides of the Atlantic." The RCN had clearly found its niche as an expert in anti-submarine warfare, a niche it hoped to exploit in participating in NATO and protecting the North American coasts. In establishing a deterrent to foreign threats, Canada and the US shared a mutual interest in cooperating militarily. The greatest physical indication of this union of defence was the creation of the Distant Early Warning Line.

One primary concern for the US was the northern coastline in the Canadian Arctic that was not secured to the same extent as its east and west coasts. It was the longest undefended coast in the world. Should a Soviet assault have come across the Arctic Circle and through the Canadian Arctic Archipelago, the US had no means of responding quickly in self-defence. Thus, talks began between Canada and the USA to construct a set of radar stations along the Arctic coast that would detect a northern threat to North America. The Distant Early Warning Line (DEW Line) is often called the greatest construction project of the twentieth century. Dozens of radar stations were established roughly along the 69th parallel, in one of the most inhospitable locations on the planet, in a time span of just under three years. It was a joint operation between the Canadian and US governments and a massive undertaking for the air and naval forces of both

states (Pigott 2011: 216). The project was completed and became operational by July 1957. Upon completion, maintenance costs and day-to-day operations were passed primarily to Canada and the Royal Canadian Air Force in particular.

The HMCS *Labrador* was an essential instrument to the success of the DEW line construction. The ship was first launched in 1951 and was commissioned in 1954 to the RCN.[2] The warship was the first Canadian military icebreaker and it was central to the successful transit of Canadian and US vessels through the Northwest Passage, contributing also to the detailed charting and geo-surveying of the Canadian Arctic. Shortly after the completion of the DEW line in 1957, though, the *Labrador* was unexpectedly decommissioned from the RCN and transferred to the Department of Transport.

THE TRIGGER

In the post-war years, the RCN was struggling to redefine its systemic role while building on what infrastructure was already well-established. In June 1948, Defence Minister Brooke Claxton argued in Parliament that the role of the RCN "would largely consist of guarding the lines of communications, as the Royal Canadian Navy [had done] so well during the last war." Yet on the same day, he announced that Canada would purchase a heavy icebreaker (Hobson 1986: 16). Clearly, there were signs before the HMCS *Labrador* was even laid down that the RCN faced the risk of stretching itself too thin. The DEW line had been an expensive mega project completed in one of the most unforgiving climates on the planet. Domestically it was a hard pill to swallow and as one Senator expressed in the Senate on 1 February 1956: "Personally, I doubt whether the

[2] From Canada.ca (2018) *HMCS Labrador*

country is getting value for the enormous sums of money which have been spent on [the DEW Line]" (Debates, Senate, 22nd Parliament 1956-1957). Claxton also thought that the DEW Line was not worth the cost and manpower, believing that a single aircraft alert could mobilize all of North America (Eayrs 1972: 45). Despite criticism, though, Canadian Prime Minister Louis St. Laurent held fast on commitments to complete the Mid-Canada Line and to continue sea supply operations to Arctic DEW Line sites.

Based on the minutes of the meeting of the Naval Board, dated 14 November 1956, (Naval-Board 512th Meeting 1956), a formal request to "dispose" of the HMCS *Labrador* had been submitted by the Naval Staff and the Director of Naval Personnel and Operations (DNPO), Captain William Landymore in October 1956. The DEW Line project had required a massive contribution from the Royal Canadian Air Force and by 1957 air bases were well established along the line of Arctic radar stations. The Naval Staff argued that the future movements of staff and equipment might therefore be managed by Canadian aircraft rather than warships. There were even hopes that a railway would continue deep into the Arctic and, therefore, support the continued supply to DEW Line sites.[3] According to the Naval Staff, the costly maintenance of the service-battered[4] warship and icebreaker ought no longer to burden the RCN. It could be better managed by someone else.

[3] From Canada, Department of Northern Affairs and Natural Resources (1959), page 34: “Railways will come in time, and when they do, the North will boom. (Big changes are expected in the next five or 10 years.”

[4] According to accounts from Morenus (1957: 123), the HMCS *Labrador* performed unparalleled service in clearing channels and opening lanes through the arctic ice, and was “dented, dulled, but undaunted”.

During a meeting of the Naval Staff, dated 21 August 1956, the disposal of the HMCS *Labrador* was discussed. During this meeting, eight specific concerns were raised by various group members:

a) the loss of senior seagoing billets and sea experience in the Arctic for staff

(b) the loss of considerable prestige built up by the HMCS *Labrador*

(c) the lost public relations value of RCN peace-time operations

(d) the loss of inter-departmental activity, such as was achieved in the Arctic

(e) the lost advantage of flying the White Ensign in the Canadian North

(f) the disposal of a ship which was proposed by cabinet in the first place

(g) the possible need to hold onto the ship as a "trader" for future requests

(h) the need for the HMCS *Labrador* to deal with operations by USSR submarines

Although these concerns were more than simply budgetary, a formal recommendation was delayed until a supporting paper could be produced regarding the RCN's role in possible Arctic military operations over the period of 1957-1967 (Naval Staff Meeting 22/56 1956). This task was assigned to the Director of Naval Plans and Operations, Captain William M Landymore. In 1956, Landymore had formed a Naval Warfare Study Group, made up of 174 experienced naval war-time officers (Campbell 2005: 169), who agreed unanimously that the greatest need of the RCN was to reduce expenditure on maintaining old vessels and to invest in cutting-edge ships. Their primary concern was a quick transition from peace to war. Two papers were submitted for Naval Staff review on 23 October 1956: (a) "Naval Operations in Sea Ice", and (b) "Peacetime Employment of HMCS Labrador." The first paper summarized that even with an arcticized fleet, the resupply, removal of enemy lodgements and destruction of enemy submarines could be

better handled by other means because RCN movements were restricted by seasonal factors and the RCN did not currently have the ability to attack submarines below the northern sea ice (Naval Staff Meeting 29/56 1956). Therefore, the use of the HMCS *Labrador* for military action was marginal at best. The second paper attempted to measure the value of maintaining an RCN presence in the Arctic, including concerns of sovereignty, Arctic training, deterrence, and public image. However, the highest priority of the RCN was to have the most efficient possible forces available for D-Day and so despite all of the combined concerns raised by RCN staff, retention of the HMCS *Labrador* was not justified (Naval Staff Meeting 29/56 1956). Following the Naval Staff review of these studies, the Director of Naval Plans and Operations, Captain William Landymore, urgently submitted a request on behalf of the Naval Staff to the Naval Board to transfer the HMCS *Labrador* to another government department as an economic measure (Leeming 1983: 21; Naval Board 512th Meeting 1956). However, the Naval Board responded to Landymore's initial request to transfer the Labrador on 14 November 1956 by declining immediate support and leaving the decision in abeyance (Leeming 1983: 21; Naval Board 512th Meeting 1956).

Even with the detailed studies provided by the Naval Staff to support its recommendation, it is likely that the request was given very little attention by DeWolf. He was not surprised when the request to transfer the HMCS *Labrador* was brought to the table. This is known because the topic was accidentally tabled prematurely on 5 September 1956, the period during which research on the topic was still being conducted under the direction of Capt. Landymore (Naval Board 503rd Meeting 1956). On 14 December 1956 the Naval Board discussed the findings of the Naval Staff and agreed that "if the LABRDOR actually prejudice[d] the commissioning of a ship of the D-Day forces, LABRADOR would have to be given second priority" (Naval Board 512th

Meeting 1956). This stance appears to dismiss the urgency stressed by the Naval Staff and inhibit the modernization initiative sought by Capt. Landymore. Vice Admiral DeWolf, however, had his own set of priorities for the RCN. He was hesitant to let go of the warships actively operating the Canadian fleet, especially in a region that was shared so intimately with the US military. DeWolf argued that "there [was] a very real value in showing the white ensign in the Canadian North", understanding the vessel's importance as a symbol of Canadian sovereignty in the region (Pigott 2011: 208). Clearly, a larger controversy existed over the question of sovereignty in the region. The Northwest Passage, for example, was not and is still not accepted internationally as Canadian domestic waters (Byers and Berhane 2009: 1137) and it was increasingly occupied by American military personnel. DeWolf opposed the idea of Canada decommissioning its only military icebreaker, especially at a time when Arctic marine activity was at its most intense since the search for Captain John Franklin in the 19th century.

This issue was not raised again until it was revisited in August 1957, shortly following the election victory of John Diefenbaker and the Conservative party. The HMCS *Labrador* was decommissioned just 3 months later. Why this request was initially denied and later approved will be explored in the next section.

ORGANIZATIONAL CONSTRAINTS

During the 540th meeting of the Naval Board the possible war-time role of the HMCS *Labrador* was discussed. This meeting took place over three days (26-28 August 1957) and it is clear from its records that the RCN was coming to terms with the difficult choice imposed upon them by Defence Minister Pearkes. According to the minutes, the Minister of Transport, George Hees, had recently requested that the ship "be allocated to them for the 1958 operations" and

subsequently submitted a letter requesting that the *Labrador* "be placed under his administrative control or … be turned over completely to the Department of Transport." Therefore, the Vice-Chief of Naval Staff, Rear-Admiral Horatio Nelson Lay, requested on behalf of the Naval Staff that the Naval Board reconsider its previous decision regarding the HMCS *Labrador* (Naval Board 540th Meeting 1957). This time, the conversation was reduced to the hard facts of the matter: (1) that the *Labrador* was "entirely suitable for only her original purpose of ice-breaking;" and (2) that "there was no role for an ice-breaker in [anti-submarine warfare] operations" (Naval Board 540th Meeting 1957).

What is crucial to understanding the outcome of this policy issue is learning why the Naval Board essentially ignored the initial recommendation to transfer the HMCS *Labrador* in 1956 and why that changed in 1957. It may have been a reaction to some external event which shook the status quo, or perhaps the policy shift came from the bottom up within the Canadian government. The norm – or Strategic Culture[5] - for Canadian military policy, up until the 1950s had been to bandwagon with British interests and defense policy, making use of British-sourced weaponry and Naval vessels. However, after two world wars the UK had exhausted itself and France had been under German occupation and found itself lacking the power to match either the US or USSR. Therefore, the defence of post-war North America was primarily a Canada-USA responsibility (Sokolsky 2004: 51) and so Canada was becoming increasingly reliant on military cooperation with its southern neighbour. In 1946, Defence Minister Claxton was already claiming that Canada would only enter a war if the US did, a policy alignment which gave the RCN a new

[5] A nation's strategic culture is understood as how elites or decision makers choose certain policy options based on a set of national beliefs about "us" and "them" (Morin and Paquin 2018: 286).

sense of purpose (Lund 1999: 136). However, it would take some time for this transition to take place. This is mainly because of obligations Canada had made to support Anti-Submarine Warfare (ASW) operations under NATO. In 1949, for example, Canada began the process of borrowing 3 British submarines in an effort to extend its ASW capabilities (Hobson 1986: 17). This trend of expansion and rearmament continued until circumstances changed in 1953 with the death of Soviet leader, Stalin, and the end of hostilities in Korea.

Canada in the 1950s had to face the reality that it must remain at a constant state of readiness, as the next threat to Western defence may arise anywhere, from Asia to its own Northern Arctic Coast. This readiness, however, was a costly commitment. In February 1956, St. Laurent's Cabinet approved a DND budget of $143 million for the NATO Mutual Aid Programme for 1956-1957, including a Navy commitment of $3 million. Canada was also responsible for a 6.15% share for the 1957-1959 NATO Common Infrastructure Programme (Canada, External Relations, volume 22 1956). Therefore, the RCN was pressed to make difficult decisions about the make-up of the RCN fleet and decide what capabilities were necessary for operations abroad. If the focus was to be supporting NATO and defending trans-Atlantic movements, as Claxton claimed in 1948, then a vessel such as the HMCS *Labrador* had very little to contribute. It was a ship designed to supply and survey the Arctic coasts which were otherwise inaccessible by sea. Also, the inhospitable Arctic waters were becoming accessible by modern submarines and so there were concerns of missile-capable Soviet submarines lurking below the sea ice. Despite this unique role, however, the ship was not suited for ASW. Therefore, it is not surprising that the single heavy icebreaker under military command might no longer be of any service to the Canadian military. Because the ship was still serviceable and versatile in its utility for Canadian

Arctic exploration, the obvious decision was to transfer the vessel into a civilian role. This action would relieve the RCN of its Arctic operations and permit the reallocation of resources toward weapons development and Trans-Atlantic obligations.

This matter, however, was not easily settled. The debate to decommission the HMCS *Labrador* was back on the table and the Naval Board was considering three options:

(1) Decommission the HMCS *Labrador* from RCN operations; This would allow the RCN to find some savings and narrow its focus on anti-submarine warfare.

(2) Refit some of the current fleet in order to maintain an Arctic presence; This would allow the RCN to remain flexible and independent in its operations, without requiring external support from to survey all Canadian coasts.

(3) Keep the HMCS *Labrador* active in the Arctic at this time and find cuts elsewhere; This option had already been explored in 1956 and it likely allowed the RCN to maintain a status quo in one policy area, in order to focus attention on more pressing decisions.

There are two important factors to evaluate in this sequence of events: (1) the competing priorities of each political party, and (2) the competing priorities within the RCN. Priorities are largely determined by path dependency.[6] The Liberal Party of Canada, until 1957, had enjoyed over 20 years in office and was only gradually beginning to cut down defence spending in the 1950s.[7] The St. Laurent Liberal government had begun to lose public favor for its defence policy decisions and St. Laurent himself was receiving criticism as “an old, tired leader” (Pickersgill 2000:

[6] This theory argues that "once a country or region has started down a track, the costs of reversal are very high" (Pierson 2000). In the early stages, a government will reach many junctures where difficult decisions will have to be made. These early decisions have a powerful influence over how similar issues are address down the road, as institutional structures will make veering off the straight path difficult – especially for elected officials seeking re-election.

[7] Canada, Special Committee of Defence Expenditure, p 200-211

46). These circumstances were made worse in 1955 with the introduction of a bill to remove the 1956 expiry date for the Department of Defence Production. This department was seen by both the public and the opposition party to have arbitrary powers. Throughout the debates on this particular issue, the opposition was successful in portraying the Minister in charge, C.D. Howe, as a power-hungry minister who “dominated government” (Pickersgill 2000: 46). St. Laurent also had to answer to a defence budget in the 1950s that went beyond estimates year after year. To illustrate this, a National Defence estimate in 1957 forecasted that military maintenance and operations over 1957 and 1958 would cost as much as 35 million dollars over what had been appropriated in the previous year (Campney 1957). For the electorate, defence spending had become associated with power-seeking and an unbounded government budget. This may have contributed to the heavy losses suffered by the Liberal party following the federal election in June 1957, and the concurrent success of Conservative opposition leader, John Diefenbaker.

Prime Minister John Diefenbaker's foreign policy actions were constrained by the budgetary conundrum that he had inherited from the St. Laurent government. The country was committed to significant to NATO spending, due to agreements made during the period of the previous Liberal government. But it was also important for the Conservative party to set itself apart from the policy actions of the Liberal government and take concrete steps toward reducing defence expenditures. In order to deal with this policy challenge in addition to his other policy concerns, Diefenbaker did what the Organizational Model would predict: he delegated the cost-cutting task down to Ministers of the individual departments who further delegated the responsibility down to the institutions and administrators with the expertise to identify what resources best met government priorities. Diefenbaker’s cabinet gave Defence Minister George

Pearkes a defence budget of about $1.7 billion for the entire Armed Forces with additional restrictions on personnel.[8] This was not out of step with military budgets in the years prior to Diefenbaker's election, but it did force Pearkes to seek a balance between domestic obligations and external commitments. Pearkes was confident that the budget could be reduced considerably while maintaining defence goals. Under his direction, defence spending successfully decreased from 36.3% to 26.4% of the government's total budget from 1957 to 1960.[9]

The SOP for reducing defense expenditure had been to cut expenses first at the fringes, and to repurpose personnel rather than remove them from service altogether. This meant decommissioning smaller boats, refocusing operations and limiting training. By this time, the majority of RCN ships were manned at the very minimum of required staff and the primary strategy according to Pearkes was to "commission as many hulls for NATO as possible" (Lund 1999: 436). The *HMCS Labrador,* however, was no small ship and it bore the unique responsibility of surveilling the Canadian Arctic Coast and supporting DEW Line operations via sea route. Spending on maintenance and repair of military equipment and resources, like the HMCS Labrador, accounted for at least one third of Canadian Forces spending estimates (Campney 1957), which directly impacted the Navy's ability to invest in new technologies that Landymore and the Naval Staff had identified as a critical need. By paying off the *Labrador* the Navy would not only relieve itself of the ship's costly maintenance, but also free up the ship's staff for other responsibilities (Darlington 2020). The naval staff could be repurposed, for example, to other vessels which played an active role in the defense of Canada and the support of trans-Atlantic

[8] Canada, Special Committee of Defence Expenditure, p 200-211
[9] Canada, Special Committee of Defence Expenditure, p 200-211. See also Roy 1977: 303

submarines and convoys. The HMCS *Labrador*, which had a crew of over 200 (about 2% of all sea-going billets[10]), had six expensive engines, central heating and was armed with only two single mounts for 40-mm guns[11], all of which did not make it an ideal candidate for trans-Atlantic operations. Indeed, if the Canadian Navy needed a low-cost, anti-submarine seacraft for frequent trips across the North Atlantic, as was increasing becoming the case in the late 1950s, the *Labrador* was not it.

Pearkes had to work within a restricted "winning set" of options, balancing what was financially tolerable to Diefenbaker and what was required by external obligations to NATO. Therefore, from the beginnings of the 23rd Parliament the Naval Staff was under significant pressure from Defence Minister Pearkes to reduce naval expenditures in support of the national budget. Unfortunately for the RCN, part of these cuts would have to include a reconsideration of the vessels that made up the RCN fleet. By 1957 the Naval Board was reduced to seven senior naval officers and was chaired by the Chief of Naval staff, Vice Admiral Harry DeWolf (Hennessy 2005: 147). According to interviews Lund conducted with VAdmr DeWolf and other senior Canadian military members, Canada's role in supporting NATO translated into ASW becoming the primary focus of the RCN (Lund 1999: 146). There was certainly a risk of group think within this organization as Board members were subordinate in rank to VAdmr DeWolf, the Board's chair, and would have felt a sense of conformity and obligation to him and his policy positions. The Vice Admiral, a celebrated naval war hero from the Second World War, was therefore the final

[10] While exact figures indicating the regular costs of maintaining the *Labrador* are unavailable, the staffing requirement can put the budgetary burden of Arctic operations into perspective. As of December 1956, the RCN had a total regular staff of 19,005 (Campney 1957). The findings of Lund (1999) also indicate that from 1949 to 1960 the RCN struggled to get more than about 50% of its staff “afloat” in active operations at any single point in time. This means that the *Labrador’s* required staff of 200 made up roughly 2% of the RCN offshore positions.
[11] From Canada.ca (2018) *HMCS Labrador*

authority for day-to-day activities of Canada's Navy. Any request to reduce naval activity in the Arctic had to convince him before becoming reality. To fully comprehend what happened in this situation, the researcher must analyze the individual decision-makers involved and within what constraints they acted to achieve their own policy goals.

CONFLICTS OF INDIVIDUAL INTERESTS

The obvious choice for the transfer of the warship was the Department of Transport; Afterall, St. Laurent had first suggested that this department take responsibility for some DEW Line supply operations back in April of the same year (Debates 23rd Parliament 1957). Prime Minister Diefenbaker's actions were constrained by his political partisanship when, as the leader of the opposition, he led the Conservative Party to an election victory in 1957. It is important to remember that he was an elected official who was generally more concerned with resolving domestic matters than foreign ones, particularly when it came to Northern Affairs and Natural Resources (Diefenbaker Vol. 2 1976: 284). Moreover, where some leaders would surround themselves with experts, Diefenbaker largely ignored the expertise of those civil servants who filled the regular bureaucratic functions within the Canadian Federal Government. Instead, he tended to seek consensus and to run his Cabinet as a committee (Rasmussen 1998: 159). Diefenbaker was also wary that much of the existing bureaucratic structure was steeped in a culture of liberal governance. He was therefore suspicious of the senior "liberal" decision-makers within federal institutions and held a certain animosity toward military and foreign affairs leaders.

As a part of his electoral campaign, Diefenbaker had made promises to fund social programs by making major cuts to other government spending (Diefenbaker Vol. 2 1976: 30-31).

Analysts have argued that Diefenbaker very clearly followed aspects of the Whitehall Model, where politicians form policy and leave the task to civil servants to put it into action (Rasmussen 1998: 155). Consequently, where long-serving civil servants might have had an important roll as expert advisors in policy, Diefenbaker ignored their counsel. Therefore, the RCN, like the rest of the defence establishment, was about to face a shake-down and re-prioritization, and there would likely be obstacles to consensus along the way. This was well received by Defence Minister George Pearkes who was a member of the military, rising from Private in 1915 to Major General, before he retired out of frustration with the liberal federal bureaucracy in 1945 (Roy 1977: 227). From then on, the former soldier had been a vocal member of the opposing Conservative party until the party final won the leadership race by a small majority in 1957. Much like Diefenbaker, Pearkes would not relent on his objective to cut military spending as quickly as possible.

The Captain of the HMCS *Labrador* at the time, Thomas Pullen, was also strongly opposed to the decommissioning of the Arctic icebreaker. While undeniably biased, given his position, he maintained that "no ship had done more for Canada [and] no ship [was] better known to people in Canada or abroad" (Elliot-Meisel 1999: 17). To Pullen's credit, the *Labrador* was treasured as much by the US military as it was by the Canadian one. This was demonstrated when the US presented the HMCS *Labrador* with an honorary membership into the US Army 727th Transportation Corps. It occurred on 6 July 1956, when Colonel C. J. Rinker and the members of staff of the 727th Transportation Command met with Captain Pullen in St. John's, NL, and presented him with an “impressive scroll” in the “fine spirit of cooperation” between the two countries (*Daily News* 13 July 1956: 3). Clearly, then, the icebreaker represented not only Canadian sovereignty in the Arctic, but also the cooperative role Canada could play with the US

in regard to defense policy. Pullen, however, was a ship's Captain trying to appeal to the very highest authorities of Canada's defence department. His protests went mostly unheard.

Landymore simply could not support the *Labrador's* humble role as a convoy-leading icebreaker in the Arctic (Pigott 2011: 208). He was also under pressure from Rear-Admiral Lay to argue in support of an ASW-focused Navy. He therefore felt the constraint of Diefenbaker's cuts to defence spending and protested that, given the circumstances, the primary obligation of the RCN should be the support of NATO. Canada's contemporary anti-submarine seacraft were also disappointingly incapable of protecting the North American coastline and so new investments would need to be made if the RCN hoped to provide a significant deterrent to foreign threats, such as surveillance from rival nuclear-powered submarines (Hennessey 2005: 174). The focus for Landymore, then, was the Atlantic and Pacific coasts of North America, not the Arctic, the only coast that now had an established radar system for monitoring foreign missile activity.

Defence Minister Pearkes did share some of DeWolf's concerns over Canadian sovereignty. Agreements between Canada and the US established that “Canada should assume the responsibility for [the] sea supply operation [of the DEW Line]."[12] This type of arrangement was necessary as US-Canada cooperation over the previous decade had led to an increase in the number of American military personnel operating on Canadian territory, and sovereignty was therefore becoming a concern for the Canadian government and defence elite. Pearkes made every attempt to establish a Canadian presence in all stations on Canadian territory many of which were already manned partly or entirely by American military personnel (Roy 1977: 268). However, most of Canada's war-time sailors had been reservists during the Second World War

[12] Documents of Canadian External Relations (1957), volume 23, Chapter 1, Part2, Section F

and were no longer active military members. He felt, therefore, that the RCN was understaffed and would struggle to meet NATO obligations. Pearkes also knew that the USSR was practicing mandatory conscription and that this was not an option for his own military (Roy 1977: 244, 272). The staff he had, then, would have to be repurposed where possible, a sentiment echoed by Captain Landymore. There were other options in support of Arctic sovereignty that Pearkes advocated for, such as the Canadian Rangers who had served as a means of maintaining surveillance in the remote Arctic since 1947 and could go on to provide a "cost-effective" solution to Canada's sovereignty concerns during the Cold War (Pigott 2011: 193).

For Defence Minister Pearkes, deterrence was the answer to the growing nuclear threat. He wanted to make it clear that it would not be worth anyone's time "to consider launching a war" (Roy 1977: 280). Pearkes also perceived that, although Canada had traditionally aligned itself closely with Britain, the power dynamics of the world were now changed and the US had now surpassed the UK on the world stage (Roy 1977: 246). For him, this meant forming a close alliance and cooperation with the US and maintain Canadian commitments to NATO.

Although the warship *Labrador* was treasured as a symbol of the Canadian presence in the Arctic, Diefenbaker and Pearkes were not convinced that this role of confirming Canadian sovereignty in the region could not be continued by the ongoing operations and research of the Department of Transport (Eyre 1987: 295). DeWolf believed, though, that by removing the *Labrador* from naval service, the RCN would lose the ability to operate in the region and would therefore be essentially withdrawing from the Canadian Arctic. The Navy would also no longer be able to exchange information with the US military and would have to "rely on the good graces of its southern neighbour for advances in Arctic science" and information about US subpolar

activity (Cable 2009: 6). DeWolf was averse to losing the *Labrador* and everything it meant for the RCN. As prospect theory[13] would suggest, DeWolf's instinct was to fight the loss of the *Labrador* in order to defend the resources of the RCN, even if it resulted in an RCN that was overstretched and incapable of effectively responding to security threats. However, the budgetary constraints placed on the Naval bureaucracy and pressures from both the Cabinet and Naval Staff resulted in somewhat of a "wake-up" call for DeWolf and the Naval Board. Ultimately, the Board would have to be satisfied with the prospect of future RCN ships having some Arctic capabilities, while Landymore and Pearkes would have to commit to that prospect.

In August 1957, the Naval Board revisited the issue of the disposal of the HMCS *Labrador* and broke with the status quo. They agreed with the findings of the Naval Staff and the priorities identified by Cabinet that the HMCS *Labrador* would be transferred to the Department of Transportation. This decision, however, came with the condition that the *Labrador* be returned to RCN control if it should be required for a return to Arctic operations (Naval Board 540th Meeting 1956). This is an important detail in understanding this policy decision, as it highlights the cooperation and compromise which took place during the debates over the future of the HMCS *Labrador*.

COLLABORATION: COMING UP WITH ALTERNATIVES

From the perspective of DeWolf, a new budget from a new majority party in power would certainly have been perceived as an external threat to naval operations, and therefore to the

[13] Prospect Theory was developed by Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky in 1979 and demonstrates that individuals are generally averse to loss and prefer to gamble what they have, even with low probability of success, rather than suffer a guaranteed loss (Morin & Paquin 2018: 237-244)

security and sovereignty of the nation. DeWolf was also not blind to the threat of foreign surveillance and espionage, and he was also vocal about his opinions. He was closely following the successes of a US Submarine, the USS Nautilus, which demonstrated impressive endurance during a display in February 1957, and was already planning a test voyage under the polar ice cap (Hennessey 2005: 152). Therefore, in April 1957, the Board revisited another Landymore request from 1956 for a new "tanker/maintenance ship" (Reynolds 2005: 237; Naval Board 491st Meeting 1956). The proposed vessel would carry auxiliary fuel, 100 tons of cargo, a dozen helicopters, and be able to travel a radius of 5000 miles. The request was speedily approved by the Naval Board but with two significant additions: the ship would be equipped with radar and it would be capable of operating in the Canadian Arctic (Reynolds 2005: 237). While this ship would take several years to build before it could be commissioned to the RCN, DeWolf was satisfied that the *Labrador* should continue its regular operations until a replacement ship existed. It is evident that DeWolf and the Naval Board were interested primarily in maximizing defence and remained rigid in their objective to operate for defence purposes along the entirety of the Canadian coastline. This organizational priority, however, was challenged by the in-coming Diefenbaker administration.

The original request from the Naval Staff to dispose of the HMCS *Labrador* had not suggested a final destination for the vessel but simply stated that it needed the *Labrador* to be removed from military responsibility. Notably, there was no established Canadian Coast Guard until some years later, in 1962.[14] The Minister of Transport, George Hees, was interested in acquiring the HMCS *Labrador* for year-round research and supply operations (Leeming 1983: 21). By this time, the *Labrador* had earned a claim to fame in the Arctic and it showed promise for

[14] From Canada.ca (2019) *History of the Canadian Coast Guard*

continued missions along Canada's Arctic coast. Hees could see that the government planned to take strong measures to deal with Canada's military budget and was about to take difficult steps to meet domestic and external commitments by the most cost-effective means possible. Hees saw this as an opportunity to absorb some of the resources no longer needed by the Canadian military, including the HMCS *Labrador*. He indicated that the icebreaker was needed for icebreaking duties on the St. Lawrence in the winter and could otherwise complete year-round services (Debates, HOC, 22nd Parliament 1956-1957). The offer from the Department of Transport, would at least allow the *Labrador* to be kept operational "without expense to the Navy" (Naval Board 540th Meeting 1957). DeWolf, however, would not see the RCN make such an irreversible decision based entirely on the priorities of the day. His background in Naval service and knowledge of the developing foreign threat made him wary of a decisive, complete departure from the Arctic water. Therefore, a compromise was decided, establishing the conditions under which the HMCS *Labrador* could be recovered by the RCN, should the need arise.

FINAL DECISION

The official decision by the Naval Board to pay-off the HMCS *Labrador* was made on 28 August 1957, on the condition that if the Navy required its services, the *Labrador* would be returned to the RCN upon request (Naval Board 540th Meeting 1957; Leeming 1983: 21). Discussions took place between Pearkes and Hees and, on 20 September 1957, the Cabinet announced that the two Ministers had agreed "in the interest of the economy" to transfer the HMCS *Labrador* to the department of Transport at a date that was yet to be agreed upon (Cabinet Conclusions, 20 September 1957). In the meantime, the ship was paid off in a ceremony held in

Saint John, New Brunswick, on 22 November 1957. There was a significant amount of upset from all sides at the end of the warship's military career and the Diefenbaker government continued to suffer criticism for the decision. For example, on 11 November 1957, the opposition accused the government of abandoning Canada's role of exploring and charting in the Arctic (Debates, HOC, 23rd Parliament 1957-1958) and in August of the following year the government received criticism when Canadians were rescued in Canadian Arctic waters by an American icebreaker, and not by a Canadian vessel such as the HMCS *Labrador* (Debates, HOC, 24th Parliament 1958). However, the icebreaker *Labrador* was officially transferred to the Department of Transport effective 1 April 1958 and it continued with non-military operations until it was withdrawn from service in 1987.[15]

CONCLUSION

In studying this particular change in Canadian defence policy, three interesting things come to light. First of all, it is clear that the Naval Board was more than a military organisation. It was more or less a policy-setting institution made up of a small group of military-expert elites. More attention and study should be given to the individual make-up of the Naval Board and the role it has played in the historically significant decisions of the Royal Canadian Navy.

Second, budgetary restrictions combined with expensive external commitments have led Canada to trim down its defence resources and to focus only on those most significant threats as they present themselves to North America or indeed the Western World in general. Finally, it is clear that, until very recently, Canada has not been seriously concerned about defence matters along its Arctic coast since the construction of the Distant Early Warning Line. Canada's Navy was

[15] From Canada.ca (2018) *HMCS Labrador*

without icebreaking abilities since the loss of the *Labrador* and until June 2021 the RCN entirely lacked “the capacity to operate within the Arctic ice" (Carnaghan and Goody 2006: 8). The RCN has now officially returned to the Canadian Arctic with the launch of a new line of *Harry DeWolf* Icebreakers (navy-marine.forces.gc.ca 2021). Based on the three conclusions made above, one might imagine how Canada's defence posture would have shifted had military icebreakers been re-introduced to the Canadian Arctic.

The choice to decommission the HMCS *Labrador* and transfer it to civilian service was not an easy one. The entire process took over a year from the initial request and the debate surrounding it did not end with the vessel's decommissioning in November 1957. Despite the obvious benefit of expenses spared from a vessel that had little to offer in regard to national defence, this policy decision demonstrates that elite staff members of defence organizations may prefer policy options which do not maximize the nation's budgetary or operational needs, but instead align with personal or institutional ideals and values.

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