

## **Reassessing the Dreadnought Crisis of 1909 and the Origins of the Royal Canadian Navy**

**Richard H. Gimblett**

Virtually every relevant study has advanced a direct causal relationship between the Dreadnought Crisis of 1909 and the creation of a Canadian Navy in 1910. While historians have occasionally admitted that Canadians discussed the naval question prior to the German challenge to British naval supremacy, until the 1980s most followed the lead of the official history in underrating the importance of previous initiatives.<sup>1</sup> But new evidence, including the discovery of a draft 1904 bill for the establishment of a Canadian naval militia, forced a re-examination of the origins of the RCN.<sup>2</sup> The result is that recent scholarship has generally come to acknowledge that Canadian naval policy evolved over considerable time as a consequence of a variety of political and strategic issues, domestic as well as imperial.<sup>3</sup> While the Dreadnought Crisis remains a fruitful area for investigation, careful analysis reveals that the Dominion response to European events in March 1909 was shaped by Canada's willingness to shoulder some of the burdens of naval defence. Indeed, the institutional framework for a naval service was already well advanced. In this light, the effect of the crisis on Canadian naval development ultimately was negative.

In the thirty years prior to the Boer War, the stage was being set for the formulation of Canadian naval policy. While land forces evolved into a permanent militia following the withdrawal in the 1870s of imperial garrisons, there was no similar imperative for the navy. At the zenith of the Pax Britannica, the Royal Navy was the acknowledged mistress of the seas, and it was accepted without question in both Ottawa and London that the Admiralty would protect Canadian maritime interests.

In the latter half of the nineteenth century, there was a tendency to view all problems of naval defence in a wider imperial perspective. By the end of the century, the Admiralty was quite prepared to accept that "the protection of British interests in American waters could safely be left to the benevolent protection of American sea-power." But where Canadian concerns were at odds with imperial, there were hints that Admiralty protection had its limits. In 1886, the Fisheries Protection Service (FPS) was

*The Northern Mariner/Le Marin du nord, IV, No. 1 (January 1994), 35-53.*

established to avert diplomatic problems resulting from RN ships arresting American fishermen. Although it was a purely civil function of the Department of Marine and Fisheries, the service was quasi-naval in structure and its senior officers occasionally collaborated with the militia in proposing joint action for Great Lakes defence.

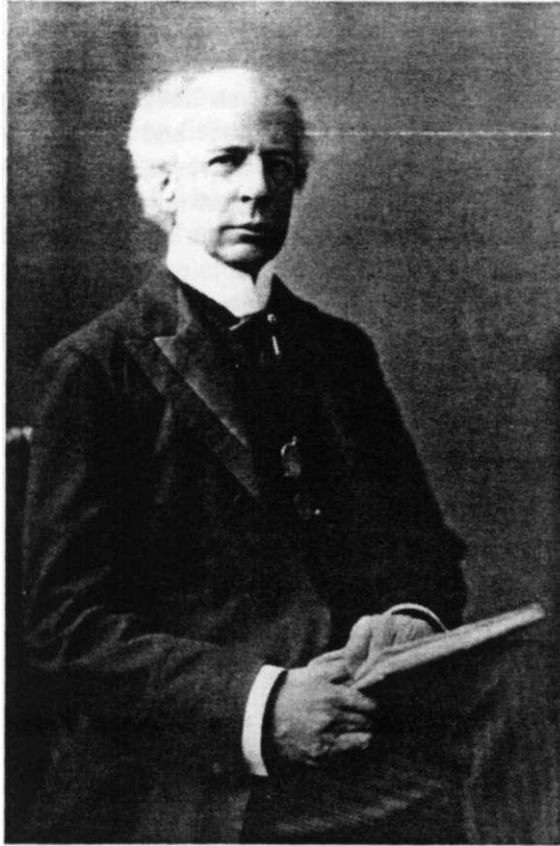
At about the same time, senior British officials began to pressure colonial beneficiaries of British naval defence to contribute to the cost of its upkeep. Canadian ministers at the Colonial Conferences of 1887, 1894, and 1897 did not hesitate, however, to decline to pay "tribute" on the grounds that Britain would maintain the RN anyway - which the British in fact did.<sup>5</sup>

The combined effect of these various influences was to foster varying degrees of interest throughout the Empire in the development of local forces or an expression of growing Dominion autonomy. While the majority of Canadians were content with the state of their naval defence, some were not immune to the revival of interest in naval matters sweeping the world in the 1890s. The first branch of the Navy League outside Britain was founded in Toronto in 1895. On the eve of Wilfrid Laurier's election in June 1896, one of its more influential members, H.J. Wickham, proposed a far-sighted suggestion for the "Naval Defence of Canada."<sup>6</sup> Expounding on a theme he would press on the new Prime Minister and a succession of Ministers of Marine and Fisheries over the next fifteen years, Wickham envisioned adapting the FPS to a naval equivalent of the militia, with permanent and reserve components operating torpedo boats for coastal defence. Based on the premise that Canada's best contribution to imperial defence would be to put her own defences in order, it was the first proper nationalist rejoinder to the contributionists and aimed at the formation of an efficient naval complement to the Canadian land forces. To that extent, Wickham and his followers did not see their scheme as a challenge to RN supremacy, and implicitly accepted the distinction between a naval militia and a navy proper.

Within two years, one of the major conclusions of a commission investigating the Dominion's defence needs was that a naval force was crucial to any future organization of a Canadian Army.<sup>7</sup> But the militia, looking at the problem in purely military terms, remained obsessed with the prospect of American attack and envisioned a Canadian naval militia as the key to defence of the Great Lakes.<sup>8</sup> Laurier, on the other hand, was inclined to share a view not far-removed from that of the Admiralty: Canada could afford to be neither the victim nor the cause of Anglo-American confrontation, and disputes between the two powers should be settled by diplomacy. Any naval presence on the Lakes in contravention of the Rush-Bagot agreement of 1817, which strictly limited naval forces, was out of the question.

The creation of a Canadian naval service, then, did not as yet figure on Laurier's list of national priorities. Still, Wickham and the Toronto Navy League had good Liberal connections, and since their plan for coastal defence significantly ignored the Lakes, it was not dismissed out of hand. When the Minister of Marine and Fisheries, Sir Louis Davies, was sent to London in September 1899 to discuss the forthcoming Alaska

Boundary talks, he was authorized to speak with the First Lord of the Admiralty about the "proposed Canadian Naval Reserve."<sup>9</sup> With the outbreak of open war in South Africa, however, the concerns of both governments were diverted.



*Figure 1:* Sir Wilfred Laurier, Prime Minister 1896-1911, foresaw a Naval Militia as a solution to the Dominion's maritime needs as early as 1898.

*Source:* National Archives of Canada (NAC), C-52291.

The Boer War polarized imperial sentiments in Canada. As a result, the suggestion of any association with the RN, by definition the most imperial of institutions, sparked immediate interest. When in March 1900 Henri Bourassa, that most eloquent of French Canadian *nationalistes*, challenged Laurier with a statement attributed to the First Sea Lord that negotiations between the Admiralty and Canada over the naval reserve were "very well advanced," the Prime Minister was quick to dismiss it as mere "informal communications."<sup>10</sup> At the same time, however, the war demonstrated dramatically to

Canadians their capabilities in military endeavours. The success of Canadian soldiers on the far-off *veldts* quickly led to demands for general militia reform, professionalization, and independence from British supervision." In anticipation of a Colonial Conference in 1902, these came to include non-partisan support in both Parliament and the press for a Canadian navy.<sup>12</sup>

With this support in hand, when pressed in London in 1902 for contributions to the RN, Laurier was able to state that the "Canadian Government are prepared to consider the naval side of defence as well [as the military]" and that a naval reserve would be established at an early date.<sup>13</sup> Back in Canada, however, naval planning had to await a Cabinet shuffle; moreover, the preference of the new minister, J.R.F. Préfontaine, was to indulge in patronage.



*Figure 2:* Hon. Raymond Préfontaine, Minister of Marine and Fisheries 1902-1905, anxious to advance within the Liberal party, saw the patronage potential of a naval militia.

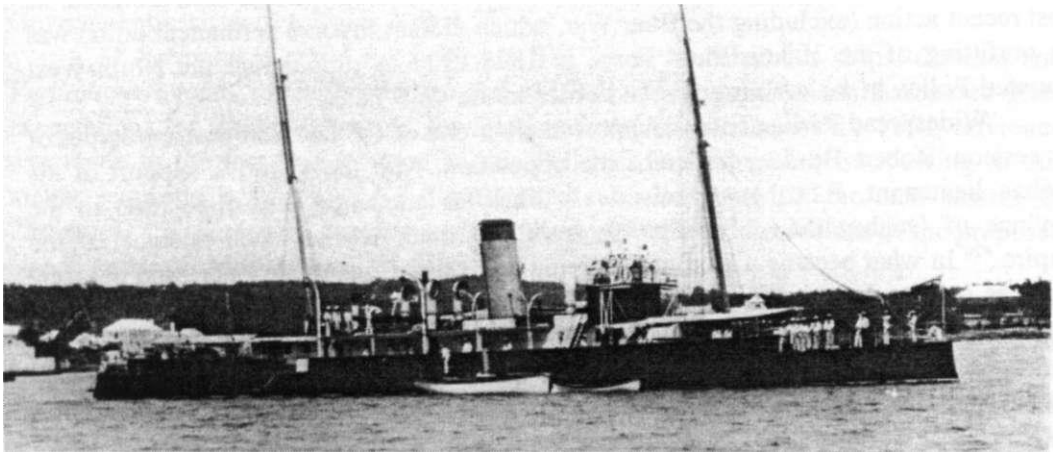
*Source:* NAC, C-3583.

Eventually, an article in the pro-Liberal Toronto *Globe* on 2 April 1903 reported that "Préfontaine has before him a scheme which involves the appearance of three third-class cruisers in Canadian waters." Laurier at first dismissed this as "premature and unauthorized," but Préfontaine soon admitted that a naval reserve was being investigated as part of a general study of the militia.<sup>14</sup> The work was given further impetus by the Alaska boundary arbitration, which was going against Canada on the undeniable grounds of lack of Canadian occupancy. The Prime Minister suddenly realized that Canadian

claims in other areas were similarly weak. He later admitted to the Governor-General, Lord Minto, that he was "really worried...about American expansion in Hudson Bay, in the Arctic, and in Newfoundland," all regions in which an increased Canadian maritime presence would be required to assure arbitration in the Dominion's favour."

Reacting to the final Alaskan award in early October 1903, Laurier decided the time had arrived to confirm the Marine and Fisheries plans. The government tabled an immediate request in Parliament for funds to investigate the feasibility of a naval militia, and then announced that two aging fisheries cruisers would indeed be replaced by "third-class cruisers...constructed on plans prepared by officers of the [Marine] Department."<sup>6</sup> These moves met no disapproval from the Opposition and were generally accepted as consistent with the scheme outlined in the *Globe* a few months earlier.

The vessels ordered were no ordinary fisheries cruisers, not with their ram bows and quick-firing guns. The Canadian Government Ship (CGS) *Canada* (200 feet long, 580 tons), was to be built in England, patterned after a successful series of torpedo gunboats built for the RN in the late 1880s (less the torpedo armament). The slightly smaller CGS *Vigilant* was to be purchased from the Poison Iron Works in Toronto, and has been described as "the first modern warship to be built in Canada."<sup>7</sup> Even accepting the need to modernize the fleet, these ships substantially increased the capabilities of the Department.



*Figure 3:* With the commissioning in 1905 of CGS *Canada* came a significant upgrade in the capabilities of the Fisheries Department.

*Source:* Courtesy of the Maritime Command Museum.

At the same time, Préfontaine and his officers *were* preparing a Naval Militia Bill to be presented to Parliament with Borden's revised Militia Bill early in the 1904 session.<sup>18</sup> The naval bill was actually patterned for the most part after similar clauses in the Militia Act, with certain semantic changes to reflect naval realities, essentially as advocated by Wickham's Navy League. The proposed force was a complement to the militia, but a separate Naval ministry was not envisaged: the Minister of Marine and Fisheries, aided by a Naval Militia Council, was to have control. There were to be permanent, active, and reserve components, but with an upper limit of 800 officers and men to be drawn mostly from the Fisheries Protection Service, the permanent force was not seen as more than a slightly expanded version of the FPS, which then employed about 500 officers and men. It was allowed that the naval militia, when called out for the defence of Canada, could be liable to "active service anywhere in Canada, and also beyond Canada...at any time when it appears advisable to do so." In wartime, it could be placed at the disposal of the Admiralty. Just how useful a small fleet of fisheries cruisers would be to the RN was not addressed.

The basic tenets of Laurier's naval policy could be discerned by the spring of 1904. A Canadian naval force was to be charged with protecting national interests. While it was to complement British efforts (meeting the aspirations of English Canadian imperialists), its actual ability to perform its role was strictly limited (allaying the fears of French Canadian nationalists). At a time when the might of the Royal Navy was as yet unquestioned, what the government had in mind was a naval militia acting not as a military force, but rather as a more effective policing mechanism. This was entirely consistent with the various tasks the permanent force of the militia had been assigned: its most recent action (excluding the Boer War, which did not involve permanent units) was the outfitting of the Yukon Field Force in 1898-1900 to supplement the North-West Mounted Police in maintaining law and order in the gold fields.<sup>19</sup>

Widespread Parliamentary support made it one of the few non-partisan issues of the session. Robert Borden, leader of the opposition, with the tentative support of his Quebec lieutenant, F.D. Monk, saw it as "likely to encounter less opposition in the province of Quebec than any other form of assistance to the naval defence of the Empire."<sup>20</sup> In what became a kind of a rallying cry, other Conservatives pressed that "the time has come when the Government should spend some money on the nucleus of a Canadian navy."<sup>21</sup>

In introducing his own Militia Bill in March 1904, Sir Frederick Borden frankly noted that it omitted all reference to a naval militia, as that would be provided in a separate act to be introduced by Préfontaine.<sup>22</sup> But this much-anticipated bill was never placed on the order paper, let alone circulated for public comment. Instead, the government suddenly seemed intent merely to continue to study the issue, proposing a minor sum in the Marine Department estimates for this purpose. But the opposition wanted more and insisted that the Minister could not spend money in such a fashion without a proper bill. When Colonel Sam Hughes, the defence critic, threatened to launch

a full inquiry into the proposed naval militia, Laurier ordered Préfontaine to "Let it drop."<sup>23</sup>

Why was the Naval Militia Bill not introduced? While Borden's Militia Act was generally popular, the concept of a Dominion naval militia was a fairly radical departure from the traditional imperial relationship, and reaction was as yet untested and potentially explosive. Even with wide-ranging non-partisan support, Laurier recognized that the rationale for the proposed force was a delicate form of logic liable to misinterpretation by any of the various factions on either side of the Atlantic. With an election imminent and as yet no clear issue against the government, Laurier preferred to avoid any public discussion of the naval question which could further excite passions already raised that spring by the Dundonald affair.<sup>24</sup> There was also the problem of financing the new venture, which threatened infra-Cabinet squabbling. The influential Minister of the Interior, Clifford Sifton, had declared his public opposition late in 1903 to an unneeded navy at a time that the government had to concentrate on settling and developing the west.<sup>25</sup>

Perhaps more important, support from the militia, formerly the major proponent of the scheme, was wavering. With naval defence of the Great Lakes apparently excluded, planners could see no useful purpose in diverting funds to an expanded FPS. The recent decision to assume responsibility for the garrisons at Halifax and Esquimalt was proving one of the most costly operations ever undertaken by the Dominion militia, necessitating a forty percent increase in the Department's expenditure.<sup>26</sup> The *Canadian Military Gazette* observed knowingly that "we cannot have everything and that the assumption of these obligations will undoubtedly postpone the day when we may expect substantial Government assistance towards a navy."<sup>27</sup>

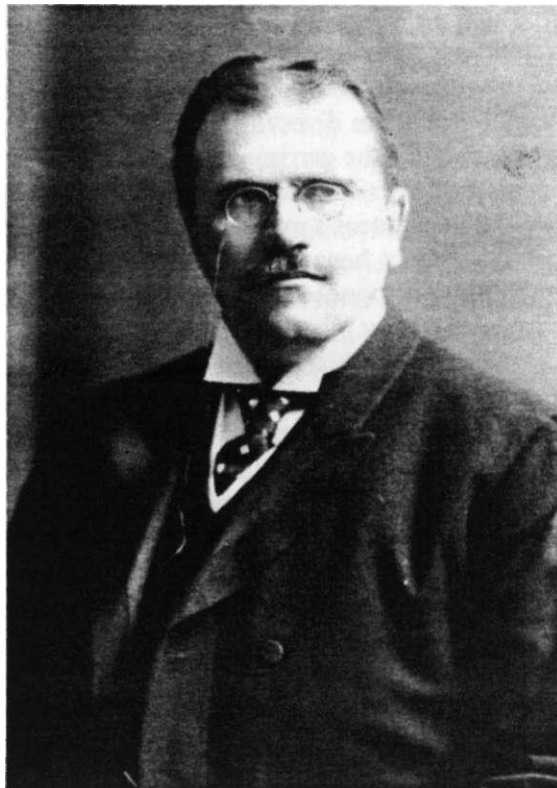
If Préfontaine could not have his Bill, he at least had his ships: *Canada* and *Vigilant* were ready for service by the end of 1904, and the minister still harboured great expectations for the little fleet. In the Department's Annual Report for 1904, reference was made to the fact that a Naval Militia Bill had been prepared, but "owing to this matter requiring a great deal of discussion, it was laid over till the next session of Parliament." Nonetheless, *Canada* was described as forming "the nucleus of the proposed Canadian Naval Militia."<sup>28</sup>

Practically from the moment of its arrival in Halifax, *Canada* was tasked with "naval" employment, much as Wickham had suggested. On 1 February 1905, the ship proceeded to sea for Bermuda and for three months cruised the Caribbean, making ports of call and delivering salutes as would a warship, while her crew conducted naval drills with units of the local British squadron. Quick-firing gun practise against a target while the ship was underway was noted as being particularly successful.<sup>29</sup>

Far from being downplayed, *Canada's* activities were proudly detailed in the Department's annual reports and were the underlying theme in the official history of the Department of Marine and Fisheries, published in November 1905. This volume claimed

that "Few, if any, of the works undertaken by the present administration of the Dominion, promise to be of greater national importance than the organization of a Naval Militia." A summary of the recent fleet expansion noted the "remarkable change which has been effected during the last couple of years in the character of the little squadron" by the addition of the "unmistakable warships...described... as the nucleus of Canada's Navy."<sup>30</sup>

Shortly thereafter, Préfontaine prepared to go to England to discuss matters with various imperial authorities. The list of topics approved by Laurier, to Préfontaine's disappointment, contained no specific reference to a naval militia.<sup>31</sup> But on the eve of his departure the *Canadian Military Gazette*, in a reversal of its previous stand, reported that the purpose of this "most active and progressive Minister...[was] to gather information to aid him in establishing the germ of a Canadian navy...Those who know him intimately are authority for the statement that he is very much in earnest with his naval militia scheme." The report was noted with approval by the press throughout the country.<sup>32</sup>



*Figure 4:* L.P. Brodeur was the Minister who oversaw the transformation of the Fisheries Protection Service into the Naval Service of Canada, 1906-1911

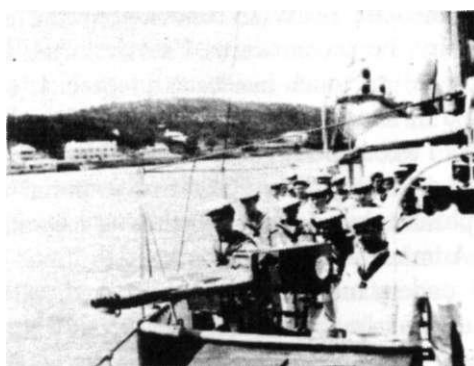
*Source:* NAC, PA-25992.



Laurier would have wanted any inquiries to be discreet. Préfontaine's sudden popularity in English Canada, coupled with the patronage empire he had built in Quebec, signalled a possible leadership challenge. The Prime Minister immediately cabled Préfontaine in London to warn him not to enter into any arrangements without prior approval. Préfontaine professed not to understand Laurier's attitude; he felt he was making significant progress with the Admiralty in exploring the transfer of the Halifax and Esquimalt dockyards to Canadian control, to complement the earlier move of the garrisons, and in getting advice on how best to establish a naval militia.<sup>33</sup>

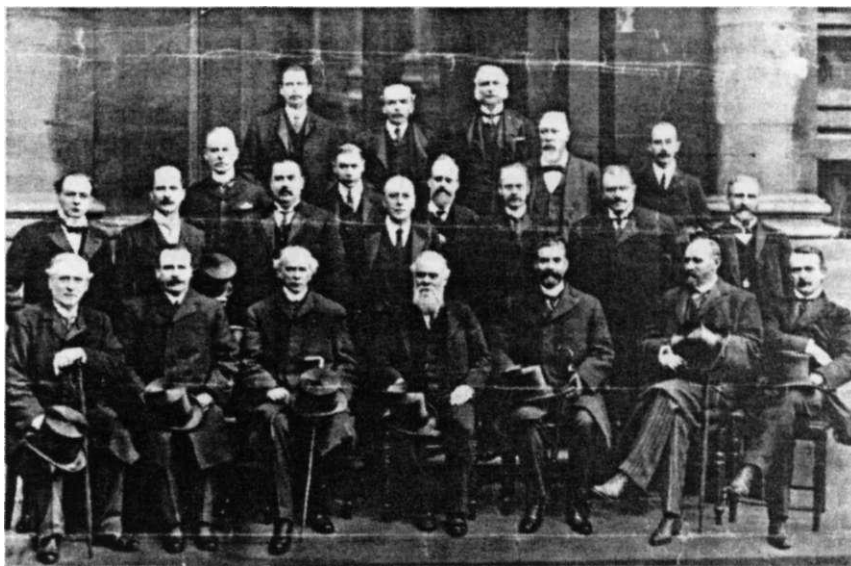
The anticipated showdown with Préfontaine was circumvented by the latter's death in his sleep on Christmas morning while staying with friends in Paris. With its major proponent gone, the timetable for implementation of the naval policy was once again altered. Although Laurier did allow the transfer of the dockyards to proceed — a significant act for, as the official historian points out, the implication was that the "ownership of bases suggests the advisability of owning warships as well"<sup>34</sup> — he was content to leave the Department of Marine and Fisheries with a Minister somewhat less ambitious politically than Préfontaine had been.

Indeed, Préfontaine had left behind such a web of patronage that it was not until after the physical transfer of the Halifax dockyard in January 1907 that the new Minister, Louis-Phillippe Brodeur, was finally able to rum his full attention to naval policy. The briefing prepared by Captain Spain, Commander of the Marine Service fleet, recounted the activities of *Canada*, but noted that "It was never proposed to have a Canadian Navy, out and out, but it was simply to improve, as far as possible, the existing organizations, rather than make direct contributions to the Royal Navy unaccompanied by constitutional representation." Attached were copies of the proposed Naval Militia Bill of 1904 and a further memorandum on a Canadian Naval Academy.<sup>35</sup>



*Figure 5:* CGS *Canada* participated in winter manoeuvres in the Caribbean commencing in February 1906. Here the Starboard Maxim Gun Crew conducts drills at anchor off Bermuda

*Source:* NAC, PA-123952.



*Figure 6:* The Colonial Conference of 1907 marked a shift in imperial naval defence. Pictured among the attendees are Laurier (front row, third from left) and Brodeur (second row, second from right); also a young Winston Churchill as Colonial Office Under-Secretary (second row, left end).

*Source:* NAC, C-8013.

Brodeur was an immediate convert. Unaware of the extent of Préfontaine's discussions with the Admiralty, he accompanied Laurier to the Colonial Conference of 1907 prepared to defend the policy which had been adopted. It was with some surprise, therefore, that Brodeur noted in the opening remarks a hint that the latest administration in the Admiralty (First Lord Tweedmouth and First Sea Lord Fisher, whom Préfontaine had consulted) was open to a looser interpretation of imperial naval defence than the previous strict "one navy" philosophy and was prepared to tolerate a measure of colonial participation, as long as Admiralty control was unquestioned.<sup>36</sup> A series of private discussions led to a new understanding. At the next general session, Tweedmouth observed that Canada was making "a very considerable contribution towards the general upkeep of our naval interests." For his part, Brodeur proposed that Canada was willing to proceed on naval matters "under the..advice of an Imperial officer, so far as it is consistent with self-government."<sup>37</sup>

Back in Canada the acting Prime Minister, W.S. Fielding, was already justifying some extraordinary Marine Department expenditures on *Canada* as necessary for the upkeep of the "flagship of the Canadian navy." Interestingly, this explanation met with

satisfaction, if not general approval, of both sides of the House.<sup>38</sup> The fact remained, however, that naval matters were still not high on the list of Canadian priorities. Other official business kept Brodeur in Europe so that nearly a further half-year elapsed without the naval issue receiving ministerial attention.

All that changed in December 1907, as world attention was captured by the round-the-world cruise of the United States' entire Atlantic fleet of sixteen battleships, popularly known as the "Great White Fleet" (because of the ships' paint scheme). President Roosevelt had several reasons for ordering the cruise, but it was generally interpreted as a warning to Japan. While European governments and newspapers academically speculated on the chances of war between the US and Japan, Canadians assessed the strength of their own coastal defences. British Columbians felt particularly vulnerable, despite the provisions of the Anglo-Japanese Treaty, but the government saw the danger as not entirely oriental: when Roosevelt hinted that he would like the fleet to visit Vancouver and Victoria, the episode highlighted the ability of any foreign fleet to enter Canadian waters virtually at will. No less a person than Laurier's protege and Deputy Minister of Labour, William Lyon Mackenzie King, pointed the way in which official Liberal thinking was developing when he recorded in his diary that the "situation reveals to me...the necessity of our doing something in the way of having a navy of our own."<sup>39</sup>

The naval militia was finally elevated to the realm of serious consideration. Even as the American fleet prepared to weigh anchor for its historic voyage, Laurier had Brodeur conduct an urgent investigation into the status of Canada's naval militia. The report was ready early in 1908, but in the end it was decided to proceed slowly so as not to add to current international tensions.<sup>40</sup>

Nonetheless, events began to unfold quickly. A Civil Service Commission inquiry into several improprieties in the administration of the Marine Department providentially coincided with the easing of American-Japanese tensions to afford the opportunity for a shake-up of the Department and its re-institution along more naval lines. Brodeur himself survived the ordeal unscathed, but his Deputy Minister and the Commander of the Marine Services fleet both opted for early retirement.<sup>41</sup> The director of the government shipyard at Sorel, George Desbarats, was appointed Deputy Minister, but for someone with the experience to manage the department's sea-going operations it was necessary to look farther afield. A candidate with the necessary qualifications was actually enlisted with relative ease: Captain Charles E. Kingsmill, a Canadian serving in the Royal Navy, with whom Laurier had encouraged a fairly close professional and social relationship.<sup>42</sup> The suggestion met with the concurrence of the Admiralty, and the transfer was made effective 15 May 1908. To facilitate the appointment without provoking any constitutional problems as had accompanied militia General Officer Commanding (GOC) appointments, the Admiralty promoted Kingsmill to Rear-Admiral and immediately placed him on the retired list.



**Figure 7:** Rear-Admiral Sir Charles E. Kingsmill retired from the Royal Navy and returned to his native Canada in May 1908 to help establish a Naval Service

**Source:** NAC, PA-108013.

The efforts to place a Rear-Admiral in charge of the Canadian Marine Service indicated that a considerable upgrading of the force's status was in the offing. This was confirmed by the semi-official announcement of Kingsmill's appointment in the *Toronto Globe* under the banner headline: "Canada to Have Naval Militia. A Canadian Admiral has already Been Appointed." The paper further reported that "It is understood that his appointment presages an advance in the movement toward the development of a naval militia...[which] will be gradual, and will keep pace with the advance of public opinion in respect to assuming a large share in Imperial defence."<sup>43</sup>

"Public opinion" was courted with the arrival in July of the RN's Channel Squadron and elements of the American and French fleets in the St. Lawrence below

Quebec to help celebrate the city's tercentenary. The newly launched *Indomitable*, the first of Fisher's dreadnought battlecruisers, was the centre of attention, but prominent alongside it on several occasions was CGS *Canada*. In a photographic review, the *Globe* carried several shots of the ship taking part in various activities, including a front page photo of *Canada* in full ceremonial dressing under the headline "Canada's Army and Navy At Quebec."<sup>44</sup>



*Figure 8:* The Quebec tercentenary celebrations in July 1908 provided the anchorage backdrop for the ships of the British, French and American fleets, including the powerful new HMS *Indomitable* (centre).

*Source:* Courtesy of the P. Chapman Collection.

Reaction was not adverse, and throughout the fall of 1908 and early months of 1909 the naval issue was widely discussed in Canada, given impetus by the concurrent push for a colonial navy in Australia.<sup>45</sup> Significantly, there was no opposition in Quebec; the only voices differing with the government plan were a few elements of the Conservative-imperialist press, the Navy League Branch in Victoria (which had always advocated direct monetary contributions), and the *Canadian Military Gazette*, schizophrenically expressing concern that expenditure on the militia might suffer. That the naval militia was not debated in the general election of 1908 underlines the consensus.<sup>46</sup> Still, the Liberals were not anxious to do anything more than absolutely necessary to exert control over Canadian territorial waters. A proposal by the Chief of the General Staff to set up an Inter-Departmental Committee to coordinate aspects of the Dominion's defences between Militia and Defence and Marine and Fisheries met with Brodeur's brusque reply that "no immediate steps are likely to be taken by this Department in connection with naval defence."<sup>47</sup>

Such was the state of affairs when early in 1909 George Foster, Conservative MP for Toronto North, gave notice of a resolution calling for Canada to assume "her proper share of the responsibility and financial burden incident to the suitable protection of her exposed coast line and great seaports."<sup>48</sup> As it was, he was "obliged to delay [the motion's] introduction for two months because of opposition from F.D. Monk and others within his own Party."<sup>49</sup> This, however, allowed Kingsmill to submit a preliminary report on how "we should commence our work of assisting in the Defence of Our Coasts."

Sensitive to the government's political agenda, he counselled against embarking upon too ambitious a project which might "seriously injure [the] internal economy...[of] a young and partially developed Country." The Admiral also noted that "to spend money on partial defence or rather inadequate defence is to waste it." He proposed starting a training establishment at Halifax from which sufficient officers and men could be trained to man an additional ship each year; in his opinion, the proposed defence should "be confined to Destroyers and Scouts [small cruisers] for many a long day."<sup>50</sup>

It was during this delay that the Dreadnought Crisis developed. In the course of a budgetary debate in the British Parliament on 16 March 1909, the First Lord of the Admiralty, Reginald McKenna, ignited British fears that an acceleration in German shipbuilding would leave the RN outnumbered in dreadnoughts by 1912. Throughout the ensuing "crisis," which was meant to be a domestic British affair, the Royal Navy's ability to remain ahead of its rival was never seriously doubted. Rather, the debate centred around the degree to which the lead should be maintained.<sup>51</sup>

In Canada, the initial effect of this news was to focus attention on Foster's resolution, set for debate on 29 March.<sup>52</sup> But the coincidental timing of the debate at the height of the British crisis has given rise to an error which continues to plague Canadian naval historiography: the perpetuation in studies of the formation of the Canadian Navy of a direct causal relationship between the two events, highlighting the imperial and therefore overshadowing the Canadian rationale for initiating a Dominion naval force. While the German challenge was important in intensifying public awareness of naval matters, a close reading of the actual Parliamentary debate reveals that while the speakers were driven by a desire to reduce the defence burden on the mother country, they also were aware of the state of Canadian thinking. The speeches were invariably patriotic: while some members were willing to consider a contribution should a serious emergency arise (the present situation apparently was not deemed serious!), the majority wanted a Canadian navy. Laurier summarized the mood when he insisted that "we are not to be stampeded from what has been the settled policy and deliberate course which we have laid down, by any hasty, feverish action, however spectacular such action may be."<sup>53</sup>

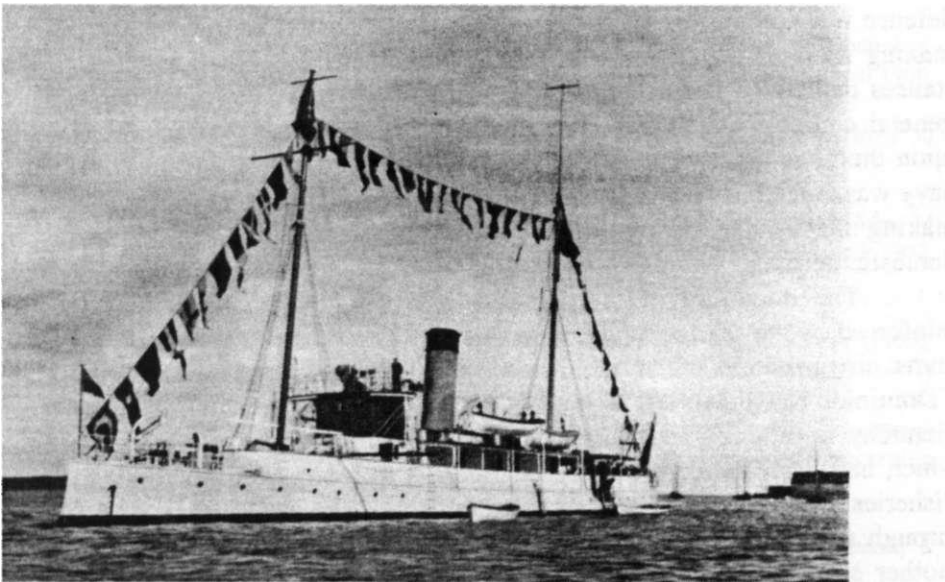
During the debate Laurier introduced a lengthy amendment which effectively rewrote Foster's resolution to resemble a summary of the government's naval policy. In finally giving it official expression, the Prime Minister called for "the speedy organization of a Canadian naval service in co-operation with and in close relation to the Imperial Navy, along the lines suggested by the Admiralty at the last Imperial Conference." The amendment was adopted unanimously, such support ensured by the climate of controlled urgency fostered by the Dreadnought Crisis.

With Parliamentary authorization, Kingsmill began to sketch the details for a naval militia, presenting his plan to Brodeur on 19 April. It once again recognized the importance of starting small, recommending that the defences and equipment in Halifax and Esquimalt be put in good order and that naval training should begin immediately on both coasts. Completely in sympathy with the political intentions of the government, he

foresaw building a fleet of destroyers and training cruisers suited for local needs. To best use available funds, he recommended that "we must use the newly started Naval Service for the Protection of our Fisheries, in fact, that Fisheries Protection and Training go hand in hand" while developing the defences of the coasts.<sup>54</sup>

Brodeur, Borden and their respective advisors went to London in the summer of 1909 to negotiate the inclusion of the newly sanctioned Canadian naval and existing land militias into Empire defence.<sup>55</sup> The Admiralty, however, recognized an opportunity to press for a major revamping of imperial naval defence; instead of conducting private talks with the Canadians, the British convened a special Imperial Conference on the naval and military defence of the Empire involving all the colonies.

Buoyed by the weight of anxious public opinion, Fisher and McKenna presented two options: substantial monetary contributions or the establishment of local naval forces which in wartime could contribute "immediately and materially to the requirements of Imperial defence."<sup>56</sup> The "fleet unit" they advocated (a clearly offensive force of a dreadnought battlecruiser supported by three cruisers, six destroyers and three submarines) was a new strategic concept, well beyond that discussed in 1907, as Laurier immediately recognized.<sup>57</sup> The compromise fleet of cruisers and destroyers finally agreed after protracted negotiations was an attempt by Canadian ministers to keep the fleet unit concept within the strict limitations of accepted naval policy.<sup>58</sup>



*Figure 9: CGS Canada "showing the flag" in Shelbourne, NS, probably summer 1909.*

*Source:* NAC, PA-42011.

But ocean-going cruisers and destroyers could not be characterized as a naval "militia," and the government was forced to introduce a bill in the spring of 1910 calling for the establishment of a Canadian Navy. Although the Naval Service Act was given assent on 4 May, the issue was extremely partisan and sparked one of the hottest debates in Canadian history, just as Laurier had feared. The PM was in a no-win situation; although his government had been forced to undertake a more substantial commitment than planned, he still clung to the old policy in the hope that moderation and "Canadian" interests would prevail. For a while the compromise seemed to work: the primary duty of the first ships obtained, HMC Ships *Niobe* and *Rainbow*, was fishery patrol, interspersed with some naval training.<sup>59</sup> Without a support infrastructure, however, Kingsmill was forced to man them with officers and sailors seconded from the RN. The force was further criticized by imperialists as inadequate to assist the RN, which wanted dreadnoughts, and by nationalists (especially French-Canadians) who saw their naval force being subverted to imperial purposes. In the end, the "tin-pot" fleet was one which no one wanted.

The Royal Canadian Navy failed to capture wide public support because it was seen as an "imperial" rather than a national institution. The decision in March 1909 to embark upon a Canadian Naval Service, however, had not been precipitous, but rather was a deliberate undertaking, based on years of preparation. Although the government had an unfortunate predilection to postpone any outright action, it was only because naval defence was accepted as the purview of the Royal Navy; Laurier saw no political gain in making an issue out of something akin to motherhood. When in March 1909 circumstances demanded positive steps, the institutional framework already in place and the general commitment to the concept enabled Canadians to feel confident in embarking upon the establishment of their own naval service. The subsequent step from militia to navy was crucial: it meant the subordination of Dominion maritime concerns to imperial, making the service the unfortunate subject of intense but not necessarily productive domestic debate.

The durability of the imperial interpretation of the origins of the RCN is reinforced by the service's subsequent history. The Conservatives came to power in 1911, under circumstances which included Robert Borden's repudiation of earlier support for a Dominion Naval Service. By the end of the Great War, the desire of the Canadian naval hierarchy to establish a balanced fleet made them only too willing to abandon the FPS, which had been the core of the war effort,<sup>60</sup> to a separate Department of Marine and Fisheries. Canadian naval officers, who undertook the bulk of their training with the RN through until the 1950s, were only too willing to accept the direct antecedence of the mother service. By then, the tradition was securely established, and it was within this context that the official history of the Naval Service appeared in 1952. A more balanced account, however belated, gives hope that the Canadian Navy will someday take its place, as foreseen by its original proponents, as an unquestioned national institution.



NOTES

\* Richard H. Gimblett is a serving officer in the Canadian Navy. His current appointment is with the Directorate of History in Ottawa, where he is collaborating on a history of the Canadian Forces' operations in the Persian Gulf, 1990-1991.

1. G.N. Tucker, *The Naval Service of Canada: Its Official History* (2 vols., Ottawa, 1952).

2. Concurrent but separate studies a decade ago led to an explosion in early Canadian naval research: N.D. Brodeur, "L.P. Brodeur and the Origins of the Royal Canadian Navy," in J.A. Boutillier (ed.), *The RCN in Retrospect, 1910-1968* (Vancouver, 1982); T.R. Melville, "Canada and Sea Power: Canadian Naval Thought and Policy, 1860-1910" (Unpublished PhD thesis, Duke University, 1981); Roger Flynn Sarty, "Silent Sentry: A Military and Political History of Canadian Coast Defence, 1860-1945" (Unpublished PhD thesis, University of Toronto, 1982); and R.H. Gimblett, "Tin-Pots' or Dreadnoughts? The Evolution of the Naval Policy of the Laurier Administration" (Unpublished MA thesis, Trent University, 1981). This article is a revised version of some of the material in the latter work. It was presented in modified form to the Maritime Command Historical Conference in Halifax, NS, in November 1990.

3. W. A. B. Douglas, "Canadian Naval Historiography," *Mariner's Mirror*, LXX, No. 4 (November 1984), 352-354; Michael L. Hadley and Roger Sarty, *Tin-Pots and Pirate Ships: Canadian Naval Forces and German Sea Raiders, 1880-1918* (Montreal, 1991). Tony German, *The Sea is at Our Gates: The History of the Royal Canadian Navy* (Toronto, 1990), the first of the popular histories to acknowledge, however briefly, this important era, still holds to the traditional interpretation.

4. A.J. Marder, *The Anatomy of British Sea Power: A History of British Naval Policy in the Pre-Dreadnought Era, 1880-1905* (New York, 1940), 255-256, 449-450.

5. See R.A. Preston, *Canada and 'Imperial Defense': A Study of the Origins of the British Commonwealth's Defense Organization, 1867-1919* (Durham, NC, 1967).

6. *Toronto Globe*, 20 June 1896.

7. Canada, Parliament, House of Commons, Sessional Paper No. 19 (1899), "Report of the Major-General," 40.

8. National Archives of Canada (NAC), Record Group (RG) 24/D1/6197/1005-3-1, Col. Lake to Maj-Gen. Gascoigne, Government of Canada (GOC) and Frederick Borden, 24 February 1898, "Inland Waterways — Lakes and Canals, Naval Control on the Great Lakes."

9. Birmingham University Library, Joseph Chamberlain Papers, Davies to Chamberlain, 29 September 1899.

10. Canada, Parliament, House of Commons, *Debates* (hereafter *Debates*), 1 and 7 March 1900.

11. Desmond Morton, *A Military History of Canada* (Edmonton, 1985), 116-119.

12. *Debates*, 25 March 1902; *Toronto Globe*, 14 February 1901; *Halifax Chronicle*, 26 March 1902; *London Advertiser*, 6 June 1902.

13. Great Britain, Public Record Office (PRO), Colonial Office CO 885/8, No. 144, *Minutes of Proceedings and Papers Laid Before the [1902 Colonial] Conference*, Appendix VII, "Memorandum by the Canadian Ministers Concerning Defence," 261-262.

14. *Toronto Globe*, 2 April 1903; *Debates*, 3 April and 23 June 1903.

15. Preston, *Defence of the Undefended Border*, 173-74.

16. *Debates*, 9 and 10 October 1903.
17. T.E. Appleton, *Usque Ad Mare: A History of the Canadian Coast Guard and Marine Services* (Ottawa, 1968), 80.
18. NAC, L.P. Brodeur Papers, *An Act Constituting the Naval Militia of Canada* (Ottawa, 1904). This was the draft referred to at the outset of the essay.
19. B. Greenhous and W.J. McAndrew, "The Canadian Military Marches North: The Yukon Field Force 1898-1900," *Canadian Defence Quarterly*, X, No. 4 (Spring 1981), 30-41.
20. H.B. Neatby, *Laurier and a Liberal Quebec: A Study in Political Management* (Toronto, 1972), 183-184; *Toronto Globe*, 15 February 1901.
21. *Debates*, 21 June 1904.
22. *Ibid.*, 22 March 1904.
23. *Ibid.*, 21 June and 9 August 1904.
24. J.G. Armstrong, "The Dundonald Affair," *Canadian Defence Quarterly*, XI, No. 2 (Autumn 1981), 39-45.
25. *Canadian Annual Review of Public Affairs, 1903*, 274.
26. Canada, Parliament, House of Commons, Sessional Paper No. 130 (1905), "Memorandum From the Militia Council," 14 June 1905, 8; Sarty, "Silent Sentry," chapters 2-3.
27. *Canadian Military Gazette*, 6 June 1905.
28. Canada, Parliament, House of Commons, Sessional Paper No. 21 (1905), "Report of the Officer Commanding Marine Services," 97-98.
29. *Ibid.* (1906), "Report of the Commander of the Cruiser C.G.S. *Canada*," 27 December 1905, 311-313.
30. Ernest J. Chambers, *The Canadian Marine: A History of the Department of Marine and Fisheries* (Toronto, 1905), 72 and 85.
31. NAC, Laurier Papers, 103354-356, Gourdeau (Deputy Minister Marine and Fisheries) to Préfontaine, 13 November 1905.
32. *Canadian Military Gazette*, 28 November 1905; *Canadian Annual Review of Public Affairs, 1905*, 502.
33. NAC, Laurier Papers, 103995, Laurier to Préfontaine, 5 December 1905; 104518-519, Préfontaine to Gourdeau, 20 December 1905; and 104544, Préfontaine to Laurier, 21 December 1905.
34. Tucker, *The Naval Service, I*, 162.
35. NAC, Brodeur Papers, Spain to Gourdeau, 28 January 1907, "Memorandum for the Deputy Reference Canadian Naval Militia."
36. Canada, Parliament, House of Commons, Sessional Paper No. 58 (1908), "Proceedings of the Colonial Conference, 1907," Fifth Day, 23 April 1907, 129-131.
37. *Ibid.*, Thirteenth Day, 8 May 1907, 476 and 488.
38. *Debates*, 5 April 1907.
39. NAC, W.L.M. King Papers, Private Diary, 27 February 1908.
40. NAC, Laurier Papers, 122681, Lemaire (Laurier's Private Secretary) to Brodeur, 14 December 1907; 134422, Brodeur to Laurier, 31 décembre 1907; *Debates*, 14 February 1908.
41. See Gimblett, "'Tin-Pots' or Dreadnoughts?" 130-134.
42. NAC, Lord Grey Papers, 3-291, 866, Grey to Laurier, 1 May 1908. On Laurier's relationship with Kingsmill, see Gimblett, "'Tin-Pots' or Dreadnoughts?" 100-102, 118-119.

43. Toronto *Globe*, 18 May 1908.
44. *Ibid.*, 25 July and 8 August 1908.
45. Although beyond the scope of this paper, the ultimately successful Australian developments were followed from Canada and provide an interesting contrast. See Roger Sarty, "The Origins of the Royal Canadian Navy: The Australian Connection," in T.R. Frame, J.V.P. Goldrick and P.D. Jones (eds.), *Reflections on the Royal Australian Navy* (Kenthurst, NSW, 1991), 74-105.
46. For a synopsis of public opinion, see *Canadian Annual Review of Public Affairs, 1908*, 605-607, and *1909*, 50; *Canadian Military Gazette*, 22 September 1908.
47. NAC, RG 24/HQC 365-11, reel C-5052, Deputy Minister Marine and Fisheries to Deputy Minister Militia and Defence, 10 December 1908.
48. *Canadian Annual Review of Public Affairs, 1909*, 192.
49. Tucker, *The Naval Service*, I, 122.
50. NAC, Brodeur Papers, Docket No. 5, "Memorandum on Coast Defence," 1 February 1909; and Kingsmill to Brodeur, 1 February 1909. It must be remembered that the early "torpedo-boat destroyers" are in no way comparable to their modern namesakes.
51. A.J. Marder, *From the Dreadnought to Scapa Flow: The Royal Navy in the Fisher Era, 1904-1919*. Vol. I: *The Road to War, 1904-1914* (Oxford, 1961), 151-185.
52. Toronto *Globe*, 24 March 1909. See also *Canadian Annual Review of Public Affairs, 1909*, 40-55.
53. *Debates*, 29 March 1909. For synopses, see Tucker, *The Naval Service*, I, 122-128; and *Canadian Annual Review of Public Affairs, 1909*, 55-60.
54. NAC, RG 24/D1, vol. 3840, NSC 1017-1-1 (vol. 1), Kingsmill to Brodeur, 19 April 1909, "Defence of Coasts Generally, 1909-1939."
55. *Debates*, 15 April and 15 May 1909.
56. NAC, Brodeur Papers, *Confidential Papers Laid Before the Imperial Conference 1909*, "Admiralty Memorandum on Naval Defence," 30.
57. NAC, Laurier Papers, 159202, Laurier a Brodeur, 4 septembre 1909; Gimblett, "'Tin-Pots' or Dreadnoughts?" 162 ff; and Brodeur, "L.P. Brodeur," 25-28. Modern scholars also have come to recognize Fisher's ideas for battlecruiser (as opposed to dreadnought battleship) fleet units as radical, proving that the otherwise unorthodox proposal to the defence conference was a natural continuation of the First Sea Lord's strategic thought. See Jon Tetsuro Sumida, *In Defence of Naval Supremacy: Finance, Technology, and British Naval Policy, 1889-1914* (Boston, 1989).
58. See Gimblett, "'Tin-Pots' or Dreadnoughts," 169 ff., for a detailed examination of the negotiations. A good summary can be found in Roger Sarty, "Canadian Maritime Defence, 1892-1914," *Canadian Historical Review* (LXXI, 4, 1990), 483.
59. Canada, Parliament, House of Commons, Sessional Paper No. 38 (1912), "Report of the Department of the Naval Service for 1910-11," 19.
60. Sarty, "Hard Luck Flotilla: The RCN's Atlantic Coast Patrol, 1914-1918," in W.A.B. Douglas (ed.) *The RCN in Transition* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1988), 103-25.