

The Post-London Environment: Canadians' Evolving Outlook on Security

OVERVIEW

Wave 1 of the **Security Monitor** 2005-6 Study

September 2005

Overview

The first iteration of this year's Security Monitor provides some revealing insights regarding the relative force of "security" issues versus other public priorities and values.

In the aftermath of the London transit bombings, rising chaos in Iraq, gun violence in Toronto and unprecedented catastrophe from Hurricane Katrina, there has been a clear shift in the Canadian public's outlook on the safety and security landscape. This shift could be characterized as a return to clear dominance of what we have labelled the "security ethic" following a period of declining risk perception and rising concerns with related issues like civil liberties.

Perceived risks from every direction strengthening the security ethic

Once again, the sense of generalized fear pervades public outlook and an already security-focused public have become even more focussed on virtually every key tracking indicator. The sense of a more dangerous world now colours overall public perceptions. By a margin of 20 to one, the public are more likely to see the world is more, not less dangerous, and only three per cent believe the world is safer than it was five years ago. Yet, the longer term statistical evidence probably favours the thinly held view of a more benign world.

So what is conditioning these elevated concerns? Undoubtedly, media reports, popular culture, and an aging population are crucial forces. But the public also tells us that terrorism is a key driving factor (though evidence on terror concern is mixed). It would seem that the London transit episodes have once again shifted terrorism from the realm of the improbable to the

plausible – even imminent. The fact that the public is very aware of the fact that Canada has been named as a potential target by al Qaeda only adds to the sense of inevitability. London also appears to have focussed Canadian terror concerns on the transportation infrastructure, in particular airports and public transit (e.g., subways).

The sense of threat is certainly not restricted to Canada. The trend of sharp decline in public sense of risk to the United States has reversed, and it may be that concern for the U.S. is, in part, fuelling support for a stronger security agenda in Canada. Yet, this is contradicted by the fact that the public nevertheless feel little immediate sense of personal risk and remain quite ambiguous on the “war on terror”.

The trends on public concerns about crime, which, arguably, is an even greater source of perceived threat than terrorism, are also instructive to note. On some tracking indicators, we have seen a doubling of public perception that crime has been on the rise over the past several years. Statistical evidence, however, suggests that the opposite is true. High concerns about more frequent and intense threats from climate and health related emergencies have also become the norm. All of these coalesce to reinforce a burgeoning sense of risk, which is, in turn, strengthening the security ethic.

Despite the public’s concerns (and even the perceived inevitability of a terrorist attack on Canadian soil), there is little sense of citizen preparedness for a catastrophic event. Perhaps because Canadians have yet to experience many of these events first hand, most have not taken the opportunity to prepare for a disaster. Even compared to relatively scant levels of preparation/action by the American public, Canadians demonstrate a remarkable level of inactivity in terms of personal vigilance.

Fragility and reversal of the push back on civil liberties

Equally notable is the evidence of the fragility of the push back on the human rights and civil liberties front. Following a period of renewed concern with issues such as privacy and civil rights, we see that these trends have diminished in the face of the London transit attacks; an event in a foreign country which produced a fairly modest human toll compared to September 11th, the tsunami in Southeast Asia earlier this year, or the ongoing civilian death toll in Iraq. This seems to reinforce the robustness of the security ethic and the conclusion that, at least for the foreseeable future, security trumps most other social concerns.

Perhaps this is why we find an increasingly muddled and turbulent public outlook on immigration and diversity. Although the long term trend is to greater receptivity and tolerance, we now see highly mixed views on the balance of threat and opportunity associated with immigration. Indeed, the notion that Canada's policy of multiculturalism makes Canada less of a target for terrorism does not seem to be supported in the post-London environment. This is an unsettled area which will require further examination in the coming months.

Can the threats be managed?

Perhaps the greater allowances on the security front are intended to bolster to abilities of governments, security and law enforcement agencies to manage these threats. There has been a slight rebound in government performance and awareness of measures is higher than it has been in

months. Yet, it is also true that confidence in many of these agencies has been shaken as a result of recent events.

The one area where confidence has not declined is in the military. There is very high awareness and approval of what has been going on with the Canadian Forces (e.g., response to Katrina a top-of-mind mention). While Canadians are somewhat split on the preferred role in Afghanistan (peace-support vs. peacekeeping), there is a general lean to supporting whatever efforts are being made.

More and more, it appears that the new threat and security outlook, which emerged in North America following September 11, is not an ephemeral societal response but a relatively permanent reordering of societal priorities. It also appears that citizens are assigning principal responsibilities for threat management to government rather than individual citizens or other institutions. These new public expectations are producing broad pressures transforming some of the traditional role of the state.

