

Security and National Judgment: Institutional Recovery?

OVERVIEW

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Overview

Security as a key facet of national judgment

Security figured more prominently in the recent national election than might be obvious on initial inspection. Certainly concerns about threats such as crime and violence were prominent, but unlike the last American presidential election, security was not the most decisive factor that shaped the final outcome. It was, however, woven into the texture of the election, the final result, and the changing expectations of the public regarding government's role in managing security and threat.

Undoubtedly the salience of security and threat is much higher today than it was at the close of the last decade and issues related to public security are increasingly critical to the evaluation of broad government performance. Not only did security issues figure prominently in the decision-making of the Canadian electorate, they will be crucial yardsticks by which citizens will measure federal performance.

The broader outlook: a period of renewal?

Generally speaking, we see renewed confidence in both the direction of the country and the federal government. Whereas there has been a drastic positive turnaround in Alberta, there has been an across the board narrowing of the rapture between national and federal direction. Although not a blanket euphoria, there is something akin to broad comfort with the outcome, and what might be labelled a conditional honeymoon (the accent on the conditional is higher in the key regions of Ontario, British Columbia, and Quebec).

Importantly, there has also been a recovery of institutional confidence in key security agencies. For example, the RCMP's decision to investigate issues around the income trust announcement was the subject of close media focus during the campaign. It is important, therefore, to note that the public are according higher (and stronger) confidence to this federal agency than they were last fall (confidence was already positive). It is evident that this pattern of strengthened confidence in institutions and organizations devoted to public safety and security is broader based.

Confidence in the capacity of national defence also seems to be rising as a result of increasingly positive attitudes to the Armed Forces, coupled with a growing recognition that greater resources are being directed to this national priority. Correspondingly, the sense of urgency or priority on this issue has dropped, but this is probably based on comfort that government and the Armed Forces are hitting the public mark in terms of the new emphasis on renewal and refocusing. There is strong confidence in the Forces capacity to deal with domestic emergencies and security issues, but less robust confidence in capacity to handle foreign assignments (e.g., Afghanistan). Overall, however, there has been a profound transformation in public expectations and confidence in the role of national defence over the past couple of years and we expect continued evolution of public opinion here.

Growing threats: crime and the environment

Two dominant perceived threats to security are noteworthy. First of all, crime and justice is clearly a growing concern and there is a reverse relationship between a clear long-term decline in the national crime rate and the pervasive conviction that crime is on the rise. Concerns about violent crime have inflated the sense of a more dangerous Canada — particularly in Ontario in the aftermath of gun violence reporting. While citizens still recognize the more imminent risk of economic crimes, there is an egregious exaggeration of the risks of violent crime, particularly amongst older Canadians who are much less likely to experience these threats than they think. An increasing challenge for policy and communications will be to balance burgeoning fears in the boomer and senior cohorts with rational risk management strategies.

Less obvious, given current policy debate, is the continued, intense, and rising concerns about threats linked to climate and the environment. It is also

notable that these threats, which top the list of public concerns, received relatively less attention in recent months than other security risks. There is a virtual consensus that climate change and severe weather is a crucial problem, one that is quickly worsening. Broader concerns about environmental threats to health and safety eclipse all other threats for Canadians. The relative paucity of public policy narrative and action on these threats will undoubtedly place future pressures on federal government expectations. It is worth noting that, in the case of both defence and crime, these threats are more relevant to older Canada, whereas younger Canadians tend to accent the environment and climate change.

Borders, technology, and immigration: the security imperative

A few other more specific themes emerge from the recent research. The public consensus on security and borders has evolved in some interesting ways which bear careful attention. First of all, for Canadians (like Americans) the border is overwhelmingly all about security. Residual concerns such as sovereignty, economic advantage, and freedom of movement are increasingly eclipsed by security. While there is a clear acknowledgement of the nuisance and intrusiveness of the new security–border focus, this does not seem to engender rising resistance or opposition.

Further, there is high confidence in passports and little push–back on their increasing role as a security–identity tool. Despite remarkable recognition levels, we see little real public opposition to future passport requirements for Canadians. Moreover, we see a strengthening consensus that technology and biometrics are inextricably woven into the security future. Government would be well advised that the public are ahead of them on the crucial role of technology and biometrics in our security future.

A final note is required on the progressively more complex areas of multiculturalism and immigration. Although there is an overall lean to see these aspects of our society in increasingly positive terms, there are also deep reservations about the integrity of the “system” to select and screen immigrants and about the overall balance of costs and benefits of increased pluralism and diversity. While much less controversial among the under 45 population, these strains will produce important challenges to the federal government. It is also notable that the sense of danger and intrusiveness is significantly higher amongst Canada’s growing visible minority population.