

The Security Ethic and the Evolving Role of the State – The New Normal?

OVERVIEW

Wave 4 of the **Security Monitor** 2005–6 Study

Overview

Is the security ethic normalizing?

Perhaps the most striking feature of the latest update of the Security Monitor is the degree to which the new public emphasis on security and threat is evolving into the new status quo. Despite a sense that specific risks are neither imminent nor extreme, the level of familiarity and comfort with the new emphasis on security and threat management is strengthening. There is a rising sense that government is hitting the mark in the area of security (as well as balancing civil liberties properly). This is also producing a diminished sense that acceleration is necessary and a modest rise in confidence that Canada is better poised to adapt to the growing security pressures of what is seen as an increasingly frightening world. This is by no means a monolithic or fixed consensus, but a generalized (albeit tentative) trajectory. In fact, there is a fairly striking generational divide emerging with younger Canada less committed to the security ethic than older Canada.

As evidence of this trajectory, we note that Canadians continue to show broad confidence in the direction of both the country and the federal government (a rebound from several months ago). Perhaps more notably, the incidence of those who think there is national misdirection is much lower. Confidence in the broad management of security is strong and up, and the institutional recovery in key security agencies continues. The public seem to think the new government will place greater accent on threat and security, and this is producing resonance. Since the actual policy shifts (and delivery) are relatively scant given the newness of the government, these attitudes are based more on expectation than results. These are, however, quite significant and favourable shifts for the federal government.

Incipient thaw in U.S.-Canada cold snap?

One of the most important domains of Canadian public opinion is the area of Canada-U.S. relations. It is also, unfortunately, one of the most poorly

understood. This is because it is an area which is a) in flux, b) replete with major contradictory attitudes and strains, and c) emotionally charged for many Canadians. It is, however, crucially important (a rare point of consensus in the public), and one which is profoundly connected to issues of security, economic well-being and our role in the world.

The simple view is that there has been a precipitous decline in both Canadian outlook on the United States and the quality of relations between the two countries. This partially true interpretation (which has clear empirical support) is buttressed by extremely low public regard for the U.S. administration and its foreign policy, and a tendency in many circles to subscribe to the thesis that there are profound and widening value differences between the two countries. The net consequence of this analysis is the conclusion that Canadians show little interest in closer relations with the United States and that there is little political room for an ambitious recasting of the relationship.

While there are certainly some important limits to public receptivity on how to manage the relationship, there is considerably more latitude for innovation and repair than the preceding view suggests. For example, only five per cent of Canadians disagree that is not important to improve the relationship with the United States. The overall outlook measures on favourability and perceived quality of the relationship, while mixed, are showing upward movement. Most Canadians support strong coordination with the U.S. on borders and North American security. When asked how to improve security at the border (which is Canadians' salient concern with the border), better coordination with the U.S. was first choice eclipsing arming border officers by over three to one.

Further, Canadians still overwhelmingly select the U.S. as their best friend and value testing over the past several years suggests convergence is occurring, a point which most Canadians acknowledge (45 per cent say we

have become “more like the U.S.,” compared to 18 per cent who say “less like”). Although we may wish to accentuate differences, the fact is that the confluence of values and interests reinforced by exigencies of geography are providing an important opportunity to recast a more ambitious and mature relationship which does not appear to be threatening a strengthened sense of national identity in Canada.

Defence and foreign affairs: renewed salience

Another crucial and related issue is the new outlook on national defence and Canada’s role in Afghanistan. The cumulative indicators from the past year show that Canadians’ level of awareness and confidence in the renewal of the Canadian Forces (CF) has been strengthening. Whereas Canadians have typically been very favourably disposed to the personnel in our armed forces (only eight per cent have negative views), in recent history, this view was the only clear positive component of public opinion. There was a strong sense of indifference, little support for additional funding, and a sense that the Forces were an institution in decline with obsolete equipment and insufficient resources. Perhaps more troubling for the Department of National Defence (DND), this culture of apathy and scepticism towards the CF was not seen as particularly problematic by most Canadians.

The picture is profoundly different today. About two-thirds of Canadians have heard something recently about defence (Afghanistan dominates recall). This means that DND is currently one of Canada’s most visible organizations, and its communications outreach exceeds virtually all other government departments and agencies (and probably by a fairly large margin). In addition to maintaining remarkably positive views of CF personnel, there is a growing recognition that the equipment and capabilities are improving. Moreover, there is a steady rise in awareness of the newer “peace-support” role of the Forces. So, in a fairly short period, the Forces has moved from being seen as an anachronistic, largely irrelevant and declining institution steeped in

images of 30-year old UN peace-keeping assignments, to a focal point for public attention undergoing intuitional renewal and profound role redefinition.

This recovery of public attention and confidence is rooted in a number of factors which, beyond policy decisions of governments of the day and the activities of DND, include the new public security ethic and greater public attention to Canada's inextricable linkages to a more complex, interdependent world replete with huge risks and opportunities. Other less visible factors may include concerns about the relationship with the United States and the shifting values and priorities of an aging population. This does not mean that it is all smooth sailing ahead. As public attention rises and focuses on the potential human costs of the Afghanistan exercise, there are signs of rising concern and opposition. It is also the case that there are significant generational and regional cleavages which will become clearer in the future.

Support for the exercise, however, is still around 70 per cent (down six per cent from September 2005). Clearly this is profoundly different from the Globe and Mail headline from February 24, 2006, which stated, "Majority opposed to Afghan mission". Our question described the activity in an accurate manner and asked Canadians whether they supported or opposed. Asking respondents what they might do if they were Members of Parliament is an interesting hypothetical exercise, but hardly constitutes a reasonable direct measure of public support or opposition. Having said this, we do believe that public opinion may be fairly turbulent and tentative in this area. Recall that the majority of Canadians supported going to Iraq two months before the war, and that now support is around 15 per cent.

We believe that that the Iraq example is profoundly different and Canadians will continue to support a well explained and well managed effort in

Afghanistan. Accomplishing this will undoubtedly place considerable pressures on the Government and the CF in the coming months.

Final thoughts

A few other areas bear attention.

There continues to be important illustrations of apparent contradictions in public risk perceptions. Apart from the clear evidence over the past several years that crime risk perception is both exaggerated and moving in an opposite trajectory (climbing) than the actual crime rate (declining), there is a paradox in perceptions of impacts of organized crime and youth gangs. Most assume that Canadians are affected by the activities of these illegal organizations, but few say they have personally been affected.

Both awareness and concerns about a pandemic and avian flu is rising sharply. This concern now rivals HIV/AIDS as the pinnacle concern for disease management. It is coupled with highly mixed measures of confidence in the “system” to deal with this rising threat. There is little question this elevated concern will be a feature of the public landscape for the foreseeable future.

The fraudulent use of identity documents continues to be seen as a serious problem, and one that will be important looking forward. While the public leans towards viewing various identity documents as having integrity, there is a small, but not insignificant minority (between 10 and 25 per cent), who express little or no confidence in the integrity of various government identity documents. In fact, a clear hierarchy emerges, with passports enjoying the most confidence and provincial health cards the least.

In Wave 3 we saw major tensions underlying attitudes to diversity and immigration. As values and principles, they are largely resonant, particularly with younger and more educated Canadians. Concerns with the immigration

system (notably its presumed porous nature) and articulation with Canadian interests are, however, quite high. In light of the world-wide cartoon controversy, it is notable that there is a slight decline in the view that multiculturalism is a boon to security. We may be seeing the development of a critical reappraisal of the progressive doctrine that tolerance and diversity produce social peace. This will bear careful attention in the future.

These are turbulent times and it may be that we are witnessing a profound transformation of the role of the state. Trends suggest that we are increasingly seeing Canadians placing less emphasis on the traditional role of the state (e.g., as an agent of wealth distribution, social and cultural policies) in favour of the state as “night watchman”/guardian-risk manager. While this transformation is not yet clear, we may have to reconsider the bases of national symbols and identity. As the traditional doctrines of fiscal federalism and social policy evolve, the role of agencies such as the RCMP and the CF may have to be reinforced as instruments of national identity.