

End of Innocence?

OVERVIEW

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

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Overview

Catastrophic shocks to social systems can be both highly revealing and highly influential in redirecting societal trajectory. As time goes on, the societal impacts of September 11th are coming into sharper relief and it is increasingly clear that a profound generational transformation has occurred. The basic equilibrium of security and freedom and the public's balancing of hope and fears have been disrupted.

More modest shocks such as the London bombings of last year have also produced significant impacts on public attitudes, which are perhaps best characterized as a strengthening of the already entrenched security ethic and a corresponding weakening of contrary currents (e.g., civil liberties, pluralism, etc.). Occasionally, highly publicized abuses stemming from the "war on terror" such as torture of enemy combatants, civilian casualties in Iraq, and civil or privacy infringements such as the Maher Arar case have swung the pendulum in favour of human rights or other sides of the security fulcrum. Notably, however, these contrary movements have been smaller and more ephemeral than the consolidation of the security ethic. All of this seems to suggest that the new normal is for security to trump most other social, economic, and even political priorities.

The recent arrest of 17 alleged terrorists in Canada provides a vivid confirmation of these patterns and may well represent something of an epiphany for the Canadian public. The arrests garnered extremely high levels of attention from the public and the first in-depth sounding of a post-arrest Canada points to a profound transition in Canadian outlook on security and terror; one best characterized as nothing less than an end of innocence. Coupled with other emerging forces and trends, it appears that Canadians' outlook on security has entered a new phase. Whereas we always were strongly committed to dealing with security, the risk of terror was always seen as remote; at best, plausible, but not imminent. Concerns were much

higher about the risks for the United States and particularly Canadian export of terror to our southern neighbour. This is no longer the case. Canadians' sense of invulnerability to terror has evaporated.

There is also a growing sense that our foreign policies (notably the Afghanistan mission) and our policies on immigration and multiculturalism may be enlarging our exposure to these risks. The sense of rising risk is focussed much more at the national level than at the personal level. Importantly, this does not mean that Canadians are abandoning support for these policies. Since the arrests, support for the Afghanistan mission has actually strengthened slightly and although there has been some increase in opposition to immigration, Canadians remain relatively unique in the advanced Western world in their strengthening embrace of multiculturalism and diversity.

Yet the stability and future direction of these trends bears careful attention. For the first time in recent history we have witnessed a significant rise in opposition to visible minority immigration and rising wariness of the mixed societal impacts of multiculturalism. There are also widening fault lines on issues surrounding foreign and multiculturalism policies with stark generational divides and Quebec looking quite different from the rest of Canada. Younger Canada remains firmly committed to the net benefits of multiculturalism and diversity but there are growing doubts amongst older Canadians.

The apparent subordination of civil liberties and human rights to security has been a recurring theme of the Security Monitor. This latest shock has widened this gap. The diminution of freedom is not invisible to Canadians, nor is it welcome. Most express deep regret that these compromises are necessary and younger, more educated Canadians are considerably less supportive of these trade-offs.

One of the more striking findings, and perhaps the most damaging long-term cost of the “war on terror”, is the broad belief that freedoms and civil liberties will continue to be reduced for the next generation. Anecdotally, the finding is most pronounced among the aging boomer cohort who seem to feel that their economic and social gains will not be enjoyed by the next generation. The angst about their succession and a generalized unwillingness to see the next generation enjoying progress (let alone conservation) of their achievement is an unusual generational perspective.

These trends and forces are altering the prospects for Canada–U.S. relations in important and unexpected ways. Both countries have exhibited declining reciprocal outlooks in recent years fuelled by trade irritants, “tonal” issues, profound disagreements about foreign policy, and rising isolationism in the United States. Yet a variety of potent forces may actually be setting the stage for a period of closer relations between the two countries.

Recently, Canadians elected a conservative government and our most recent testing of ideological orientations in Canada and the United States shows a marked narrowing of erstwhile differences. In the U.S., there has been a sharp rise in those who eschew ideological labels (that is, those who prefer “neither” to either “small c” conservative or “small l” liberal). The neither choice has been the plurality position for Canadians for some time.

In the crucial realm of threat perception, the yawning gap between U.S. and Canadian outlook on terror-threat perception has narrowed dramatically. Canadians are also much closer now to Americans on perceptions of crime and violence, and show a rising preference for tougher penalties over prevention strategies.

Huge historical differences in U.S.–Canada public attitudes to defence are also narrowing. Several years ago, Canadians were largely indifferent to the decline of the Canadian military whereas Americans took great pride in their defence capabilities. Today, the Canadian military is arguably the most visible part of the federal government, there is growing confidence in the capabilities of the military, and there has been significant support for a major reinvestment to halt the atrophy (something that was of little concern 5 to 10 years ago). Meanwhile, Canadians are rapidly abandoning the traditional blue-helmet peacekeeping image of the Canadian Forces. Literacy of the harder “peace-support” role in Afghanistan is also quite high. This is linked to a broad recognition that the world is a more hostile and dangerous place with very different challenges for our military.

Meanwhile, as Canadians drift closer to some American positions, Americans have also drifted closer to many Canadian outlooks. Scepticism about Iraq has risen sharply, and moralism and conservatism are under pressure. There is near consensus in both countries that it is at least somewhat important to strengthen relations. This underlying search for a U.S.–Canada haven in the face of a more threatening external world may be an important future force. There may be a greater tendency to establish a more secure “North American haven” (if not fortress) as a shared response to the threats and challenges which are seen as an increasingly endemic and potentially intractable feature of the 21st Century. This tendency is by no means clear given the strains in recent U.S. Canada relations and the internal contradictions within both Canadian and American publics.