

We consider climate change a bigger threat than terrorism: poll

But extremist Islamic groups' growing hatred is an increasing threat, not a muted one, as the survey suggests: expert

BY LAURA STONE, CANWEST NEWS SERVICE JANUARY 11, 2010

Canadians believe climate change poses a significantly bigger threat to the "vital interests" of this country over the next decade than international terrorism, a new poll suggests.

While nearly half of those surveyed said climate change is a "critical threat," only about one in four people said the same about international terrorism. A similar poll conducted in 2004 showed Canadians believed the two threats were about equal.

The results come from a survey commissioned by the Canadian Defence and Foreign Affairs Institute and conducted by the Innovative Research Group, Inc. between Dec. 22 and Jan. 4.

Canadians were asked about their "threat perceptions" on a number of issues. While fears about climate change remained relatively stable, falling three per cent from 52 per cent in 2004, to 49 per cent in 2010, international terrorism fell from 49 per cent in 2004, to 28 per cent in 2010.

Lt.-Gen. Michael Jeffery, senior research fellow at the institute, said the reason for the shift is the threat of terrorism is not on the front burner for many Canadians. Jeffery, former chief of land staff with the Canadian Forces, said that is a "dangerous perception."

He said that while the events of 9-11 were relatively fresh in the minds of citizens in 2004, almost a decade later, they have been buried by other concerns.

"All of the major threats have been on other people's shores, not here, and that's great," said Jeffery. "We are not aware that the world around us has changed and is continuing to change, and emerging from that very, very different world are increasing threats to Canada, Canadians and our way of life."

Jeffery said growing hatred and violence from extremist Islamic groups toward the West presents an uphill battle for Canada's leaders -- and not a muted threat as the survey might suggest.

"The reality is that the extremist elements of certain cultures are exporting their value systems around the world," he said. "They are going to use whatever means, and whatever violence necessary, to see their value system in place. I really believe that's what we're facing."

He added that he didn't want to incite fear or panic, but rather to address underlying issues and begin a process of international development and change.

"It really is up to the leadership, political or otherwise, to educate society about what those risks are, and to move to policies -- both domestically and internationally -- that start to deal with the underlying root causes," Jeffery said.

"What we want is a society that is aware, that knows these threats are there and sees them for what they are, and is prepared to support a government in dealing with those threats in a logical fashion."

Jeffery also said the government should take a more dominant role in combating climate change, through environmental policies and international trade agreements.

The poll also found an increasing concern about immigration. The percentage of Canadians who believe large numbers of immigrants and refugees pose a critical threat rose slightly, from 21 per cent in 2004, to 27 per cent in 2010. Other categories were on the decline, with globalization falling to 19 per cent, from 28 per cent, and potential epidemics such as AIDS and flu plummeting from 60 per cent in 2004, to 16 per cent this year. Jeffery said the perception in the recent survey, as opposed to 2004 after the SARS era, was that the government was more prepared to deal with epidemics.

The online survey was conducted among current members of Innovative's Canada 20/20 panel, recruited to represent Canadians by age, sex, region and language. The sample included 1,229 responses, with a margin of error of 2.8 percentage points, 19 times out of 20.

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