

NATIONAL POST

Monday, January 11, 2010

Presented by

Canadians say climate change a bigger threat than terrorism: poll

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Ray Stubblebine/Reuters

OTTAWA -- 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, 2009, and Jan. 4, 2010.

Canadians were asked about their "threat perceptions" on a number of issues. While fears about climate change remained relatively stable, falling 3% from 52% in 2004 to 49% in 2010, international terrorism tumbled from 49% in 2004 to 28% in 2010.

Lt.-Gen Michael Jeffery, a senior research fellow for the institute, said the reason for the shift is that the threat of terrorism is not on the front burner for many Canadians. Lt.-Gen Jeffery, the former chief of the 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.

"Canadians are blessed by living in a secure environment. They have been for a couple of centuries. All of the major threats have been on other people's shores, not here, and that's great," Lt.-Gen Jeffery said.

"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."

Lt.-Gen Jeffery said that 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 would 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," Lt.-Gen 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."

Lt.-Gen 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% in 2004 to 27% in 2010. Other categories were on the decline, with globalization falling from 28% to 19%, and potential epidemics such as AIDS and flu plummeting from 60% in 2004 to 16% this year. Lt.-Gen 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 from a wide variety of sources that 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.