

Sacrifice civil liberties for security, Canadians say

Many also fear they will be victims of terror, poll finds

Don Butler

The Ottawa Citizen

Saturday, June 24, 2006

Many Canadians think preserving national security is more important than protecting civil liberties, suggests a new poll on attitudes toward terrorism, which also found the feeling is strongest among the sizeable minority who fear they could be victims of terrorism.

The Canadian Defence and Foreign Affairs Institute (CDFAI) survey, conducted by Innovative Research Group using its Canada 20/20 online panel, comes on the heels of Thursday's arrest in Miami of seven men accused of plotting to blow up targets in the U.S., including Chicago's Sears Tower.

It was the second major arrest this month in North America involving alleged "homegrown terrorists." Earlier this month, authorities picked up 17 Toronto-area men, charging them with plotting to bomb buildings on Parliament Hill and in Toronto.

According to the CDFAI poll, Canadians are divided on whether the federal government has struck the right balance between national security and civil liberties in its counterterrorism laws.

Though 37 per cent say the balance is about right, 23 per cent think the government has gone too far in protecting national security, while 18 per cent think it has tilted excessively in the direction of safeguarding civil liberties.

But civil liberties appear to lose out to national security in some other questions.

While a slim majority say we are "letting the terrorists win" if we erode civil liberties when dealing with accused terrorists, nearly four in ten disagree.

More tellingly, 62 per cent agree strongly or somewhat with the view that without national security, all other individual rights become theoretical. It was the same argument made last week by federal lawyer Bernard Laprade during a Supreme Court hearing on the constitutionality of federal security certificates, which enable the government to detain suspected terrorists indefinitely without charges while a judge decides, based on secret evidence, whether they should be deported, possibly to countries that use torture.

Mr. Laprade's argument drew a sharp rejoinder from Supreme Court Justice Louis LeBel, who said Canada would be no better than North Korea if it allowed national security concerns to supercede individual rights.

While only 19 per cent of Canadians "strongly agree" that other rights are theoretical in the absence of national security, that figure rises to 45 per cent among those who are

most concerned about being victims of terrorist attacks in Canada.

About one in three Canadians worries that they, a relative or a friend could be victims of a future terrorist attack. And almost one in four feels that they or someone close to them could have been hurt or killed by the alleged "Toronto 17" terror plot.

"There is a growing fear factor," says David Bercuson, director of programs for CDFAI, a Calgary-based think tank. "I think people were shocked by the Toronto 17 situation. So I'm not surprised that you're beginning to see a bit of a swing, but I am gratified that the swing hasn't gone too far."

Mr. Bercuson was surprised so many Canadians fear they could be personally victimized by terrorism. "The reality is you're far more likely to be killed (driving) on the QEW than you are ever to be affected by a terrorist attack."

At the same time, he worries about the growing willingness to allow national security to trump individual rights. "I've got an inherent mistrust of government. You worry as to how far it's going to go."

Civil liberties have often been sacrificed to security concerns in times of real or perceived crisis, he notes.

"In the early stages of the Cold War, we basically overrode people's civil liberties willy-nilly." And during the October Crisis in 1970, "the vast majority of Canadians sided with Trudeau's calling in the military and invoking the War Measures Act."

Finding the right balance is a difficult issue for all western nations, he says.

"We're being challenged by 9/11. Al-Qaeda and the al-Qaeda-like organizations that exist in various countries are fully aware that their actions put our kind of civil society in a dilemma. And I think they want us to be in that dilemma."

The poll has a margin of error of plus or minus 2.03 per cent, 19 times out of 20. Respondents were recruited from Innovative Research's online panel, with analysis based on those who responded to e-mail invitations.

© The Ottawa Citizen 2006

CLOSE WINDOW