

Three in five say mission 'critical' for peace, poll finds

But support fractures along age, gender and language lines

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Despite mounting casualties, three in five Canadians believe the benefits to Afghans of Canada's military mission there justify the risk to our soldiers, according to a new poll. And nearly as many say they back the mission to the war-ravaged central Asian nation.

But the Canadian Defence and Foreign Affairs Institute (CDFAI) survey, conducted by Innovative Research Group using its 20/20 online panel, also found levels of support fracture along age, gender and language lines.

Overall, 61 per cent agree that Canadian troops are providing critical support to Afghans and are working to build a peaceful and democratic society. Only a quarter think Canada's military involvement in Afghanistan is putting Canadian lives unjustifiably at risk.

"The public's eyes are opening and the public is beginning to decide that this is a good thing for Canada to be doing," said David Bercuson, director of programs for the CDFAI, a Calgary-based think tank.

"A lot of the indecision that we saw earlier in the year is beginning to dissipate."

Mr. Bercuson credited "very effective" media coverage for solidifying support for the Afghanistan mission. "There isn't any secret about what's happening over there, and there isn't any secret about what we're doing."

But the apparent social consensus unravels somewhat once the data are broken down.

Those who say Canadian troops are providing critical assistance are predominantly male, English-speaking, over age 55 or from Atlantic Canada. By contrast, women and French-speaking Canadians are more likely than other groups to say the mission is not worth the risk to Canadian lives.

Asked directly whether they back Canada's mission to Afghanistan, 59 per cent say they support it and 36 per cent are opposed.

Once again, the same divisions are visible. While 70 per cent of men are in favour of the mission, only 49 per cent of women hold that view. Just 46 per cent of francophones are supportive, compared with 63 per cent of English speakers. And support rises steadily with age.

Mr. Bercuson wasn't surprised by the divergent opinions. Historically, he said, many

Quebecers have held isolationist views and "take a more insular view of world events than people in English-speaking Canada do."

Similarly, women "take a dimmer view of war" than men, he said. "They probably think of it ... as a very unnecessary evil."

And the idealism of youth explains lower levels of support from young Canadians, he said. "It's very hard for them to accept the fact that there are times when you really do need to go out and kill people."

The CDFAI poll also found that two-thirds of respondents think Canada should send troops to Africa and Asia to defend human rights or help rebuild failed states, even if Canada has no direct interest at stake.

But Mr. Bercuson said support for humanitarian missions reflects an unrealistic view of the world. However, he said, Canadians "profound ignorance" about global realities is being worn away by events like the arrests of 17 terrorism suspects in Toronto two weeks ago.

Toronto-based Innovative Research surveyed 2,333 Canadians from its online Canada 20/20 panel between June 19 and June 21. The poll has a margin of error of 2.03 percentage points, 19 times out of 20.

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