

The world Canadians see

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It's the start of 2008. Do you know where Canada's international priorities are?

When the Harper government took office in 2006, although its famous "five priorities" were all domestic, one of the goals that hovered around the edges of the Conservative agenda was to beef up Canada's role in the world. Conservatives saw the Liberal approach of the foregoing years as, at best, wishy-washy and, at worst, downright devious - under the Liberals, Canada had assumed the familiar posture of enjoying the protection of U.S. muscle, but often criticizing the flexing of that muscle.

As for non-military activity, Liberal talk about "soft power" and "honest brokering" struck many Conservatives as vacant.

Over the past year, the federal Conservatives engaged in three major activities on the international stage: moves to assert Canadian sovereignty in the Arctic; continued military activity in Afghanistan; and, most recently, an aggressive embrace of U.S. and Japanese contrarianism on the environment. A major international study conducted by the Pew Center sheds light on whether Canadians are likely to see Mr. Harper's foreign activities in 2007 as naughty or nice.

For starters, the Pew survey indicates strongly that the people of this country are watching events carefully: Seven in 10 Canadians (70 per cent) say they follow international news closely most of the time, while just three in 10 (30 per cent) say they only follow world news "when something big is happening." (Canadians were among the top five most internationally engaged publics of the 47 countries Pew surveyed.) This strong engagement with the world may speak of a generalized curiosity among Canadians - but it is also likely driven in part by this country's recent history of migration. Three-quarters of Torontonians, for example, are either first- or second-generation Canadians; you can bet these people are paying attention at least to what is happening in their home country or region, if not around the entire globe.

Along with this interest in the world, Canadians express respect for international bodies that provide mechanisms for dialogue and co-operation. About two-thirds of Canadians (64 per cent) say they view the United Nations favourably, and about three-quarters (73 per cent) look favourably on the European Union. This contrasts with attitudes in the less multilaterally minded United States, where only 48 per cent are positive about the UN and 47 per cent are positive about the EU.

As he seeks to boost Canada's assertiveness on the world stage, Mr. Harper should bear in mind that Canadians will favour a certain amount of swagger on issues such as the Arctic, but will remain committed to international institutions that facilitate dialogue on such matters (and they

have a low tolerance for macho brashness). At the North Pole, reasoned resoluteness will float, but cocky nose-thumbing will meet an icy reception.

As for Afghanistan, recent Environics surveys find Canadians deeply conflicted about their country's involvement there: Many are horrified at the thought of Canadian lives being sacrificed in an intractable conflict with uncertain objectives, but nor do they want to abandon Afghans to terror, repression and poverty.

The Pew study does not probe opinions on Afghanistan specifically, but reveals related attitudes that may prove heartening to the Conservatives. First, Pew finds overwhelming confidence in the Canadian military: Seven in 10 Canadians (72 per cent) believe the military has a positive influence on Canada. The military scores higher than the media (60 per cent), the national government (56 per cent) or religious leaders (49 per cent) in being good for the country. With these levels of confidence, Canadians clearly trust their uniformed men and women to do the right thing in Afghanistan, at least to the extent they can figure out what the right thing is.

Still, as the Harper Conservatives seem to have figured out, if Canadians are to support the Afghan campaign, they must see it as a mission to help improve the difficult lives of a long-abused people - not merely as a front in the U.S. war on terror. First of all, just 24 per cent of Canadians now see terrorism as a very big problem, as compared to 44 per cent of Americans. Perhaps more importantly, Pew finds Canadian confidence in U.S. foreign policy to be remarkably low: Just 28 per cent of Canadians say they have confidence in George W. Bush on foreign affairs - this is even lower than Canadian confidence in czar-like Russian President Vladimir Putin (36 per cent).

The most recent international issue on which the Harper Conservatives made headlines was the Bali climate-change conference, where Canada noisily resisted international targets for emissions reduction, standing alongside the United States and Japan in the rejection of ambitious environmental goals for wealthy countries. The fact that Canada ultimately signed on to reduce the national carbon footprint in the coming years will prove a wise move if Mr. Harper has any interest in forming a majority government.

Canadians increasingly see environmental issues as the top concern facing their country and the globe. Pew finds 77 per cent of Canadians saying that countries should do all they can to protect the environment, even if it slows economic growth and costs jobs. Why are Canadians willing to pay such a high price to protect the blue orb they call home? They see it as a matter of life and death: A majority of Canadians (54 per cent) see environmental damage as the most dire threat to humanity.

In this opinion, Canadians diverge markedly from the population that U.S. politicians are wooing - just 37 per cent of Americans see environmental issues as the top threat. Americans are more concerned about nuclear weapons (45 per cent) than about climate change, while for Canadians, hypothetical nukes (32 per cent) pale in comparison to real rising temperatures and drowning polar bears. For much of the Bali conference, it seemed Canada's representatives were singing from the American hymn book, but the Pew findings suggest that being perceived as toeing the line with the Bush White House will not prove too popular in Canada.

Some of Canadians' passion about the environment is likely underpinned by the current mood of affluence and security - 71 per cent of Canadians say they are satisfied with their own lives and 80 per cent are positive about the national economic scene. It's easier to say the environment should trump jobs when you yourself have a job. But not all of the attitudes the Pew survey reveals are contingent on high times: Canadians have, for many years, placed their faith in international co-operation and responsible global citizenship. And the tide of environmental anxiety in this country is rising even faster than sea levels.

As Stephen Harper and his team aim to steer Canada in a new direction for this year and beyond, they would do well to remember that Canadians' ideas about how to engage with a small, interdependent, and threatened world are not always expressed in loud street demonstrations - but they run deep.

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