

We support the war (for now)

Michael Adams

Published in *The Globe and Mail*

April 9, 2015

Recent surveys have found Canadians to be supportive of Canada's military deployment to Iraq and Syria to aid in the fight against ISIS. An Ipsos Reid survey found three-quarters of Canadians (74%) in favour of using Canadian fighter jets to strike ISIS targets in Iraq, while surveys from EKOS and the Angus Reid Institute have found smaller majorities of the public (60% and 54% respectively) supportive of the mission in general.

These numbers are clearly favourable to the current government's approach, and may help the Conservatives as they head toward an election in the fall. But if opinion on Canadian involvement in Afghanistan a decade ago is any indication, public support may well soften in the months ahead. Indeed the public may turn against the mission if things don't go well.

When Canadian troops were first deployed to Afghanistan, the public strongly endorsed the mission. In 2002, three quarters (75%) were supportive, 38% strongly so in Environics' Focus Canada tracking surveys. In 2004 support was down to six in ten (61%), and from 2006 through 2008 it fluctuated around half (within six points on either side of 50%).

In March of 2008, when Canadian troops had been on the ground in Afghanistan for six years, we asked the 54% in our sample who did not support the Afghan mission why they held that position. The most common answers were that too many Canadian soldiers were dying; that the mission's objectives were unclear; and that problems in that region were not Canada's business. The current deployment is vulnerable to all the same concerns. As missions drag on and become more painful, more ambiguous, and more expensive, the sense of enthusiasm and purpose that drove them at first tends to diminish; when the endgame seems endless, and people want out.

Generally speaking, since the second World War Canadians have had a fairly clear view of why and how they are willing to see their military deployed. First, it is important to note that the armed forces have consistently been the most trusted institution in Canada; eight in ten Canadians express great faith in their military (the Supreme Court comes in second), so any objection to specific missions is an objection to government decisions and not a reflection on public sentiment toward our men and women in uniform.

Historically, the public has taken great pride in Canadian peacekeeping efforts, and in Lester Pearson's role in the development of modern peacekeeping. Even after Canada's actual peacekeeping activity declined to almost nothing, a plurality of the public has continued to see peacekeeping as their country's most positive contribution to the world. In 1993, 40 percent of Canadians saw peacekeeping as their top contribution, the most popular answer by far. Foreign aid came in second at 19%. By 2011, just 18 percent of Canadians named peacekeeping as Canada's best contribution to the world, a substantially smaller proportion but still the top answer. Foreign aid still came in second (13%).

When combat has been necessary, Canadians have tended to favour multilateralism, preferring to work under UN auspices, instead of as an unquestioning sidekick to the United States. This preference is clear when we look back at the US mission to Iraq in 2003. In March of 2003, when the United States invaded Iraq, about a third of Canadians (34%) agreed with Stephen Harper (then leader of the opposition) that Canada should be marching to war alongside the Americans.

Sixty-five percent of Canadians disapproved of Canadian participation in a unilateral U.S. intervention, 49 percent strongly so—and in Quebec strong disapproval was seven in ten (69%). Under then-PM Jean Chretien’s leadership, Canada was bravely unwilling to join the “coalition of the willing.”

Although the public was unsupportive of the idea of “going it alone” with George W. Bush and then-British PM Tony Blair, they were open to a mission with broad international support. In March of ’03 (the same month just a third supported the US invasion) a strong majority of Canadians—seven in ten—said they would approve of Canada’s participation in the Iraq mission if it were sanctioned by the United Nations.

Why would a society that has generally been favourably disposed to peacekeeping and multilateralism be supportive today of a US-led action in a region whose problems seem so intractable? Support for military interventions is usually strongest at the outset. Governments are actively persuading the public of the importance and urgency of the mission, so the up-side is in plain view. The down-side is typically not yet evident, since nothing has yet gone wrong (although in this case Canada has already suffered a casualty: Sgt. Andrew Doiron sadly an apparent victim of “friendly fire.”) Opponents of military action struggle to make potential negative consequences as vivid in the public imagination as the threat military action would seek to combat—and in the case of ISIS, the brutality at work is very vivid indeed. Finally, the public tends to be less well informed about foreign policy issues than about domestic issues that affect them more directly, and so people are often willing to give elected leaders the benefit of the doubt, until and unless they see compelling evidence that the government is wrong.

In the months ahead, Canadians will follow the headlines and make evolving judgments about whether their government is right or wrong to be in Syria and Iraq. Canadians are supportive for now, but recent history suggests that unless things go astonishingly well, the feeling may not last as long as the mission—and indeed it may not even last until October.