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Master Corporal Tom Jones of the Royal Canadian Regiment keeping a close watch on angry crowds in Mitrovica, Kosovo, February 2000.

SUPPORT FOR INTERNATIONAL INVOLVEMENT IN CANADIAN PUBLIC OPINION AFTER THE COLD WAR¹

by Dr. Pierre Martin and Dr. Michel Fortmann

Ideally, a democratic government should rest its foreign policy on a societal consensus that establishes the broad outlines of what is desirable or acceptable for its citizens.² This is all the more relevant in the current context, as the strategic imperatives that guided foreign policy during the Cold War have given way to normative considerations that relate more to the conscience of individuals and communities than to conventional notions of ‘national interest’.³

In part because of the so-called ‘CNN effect’, western publics have frequently exhorted their leaders to “do something” about shocking humanitarian tragedies. Moreover, in an environment lacking strategic signposts, it has become increasingly difficult to make decisions regarding international intervention without the support of the population. Although it would be imprudent to assume that the rules of power politics have become obsolete, it is not excessive to underscore the growing ‘domesticization’, and even democratization of foreign and security policies since the Cold War ended. In short, security affairs are no longer the exclusive purview of an élite few; more and more, they involve the public at large.

In the complex, turbulent and uncertain post-Cold War period, the problem of the stability and reliability of public opinion on foreign policy takes on a particular significance. Thus, the fundamental question becomes: Can public opinion constitute a firm basis to support, or even inspire, policy decisions regarding foreign intervention or peacekeeping operations, or should it be dis-

missed as an incoherent and thoughtless construct, reacting in a knee-jerk fashion to the crisis of the day?

Although this question is relevant for most democratic countries, the Canadian experience is interesting inasmuch as it can be associated with a political culture in which internationalism and humanitarianism have deep roots. As Kim Nossal and Stéphane Roussel write, “Canadian foreign policy is still strongly marked by the idealism of Lester B. Pearson. It is deeply based on respect for the Charter of the United Nations and the search for international stability.”⁴ At the core of this consensus lies Canada’s participation in UN peacekeeping, which is a key part of our analysis.

In the 1990s, Canada was abruptly confronted with the ‘second generation’ of peacekeeping as its soldiers were engulfed in the quagmires of Bosnia and Rwanda. Witnessing these crises and the seemingly intractable challenges that lay ahead for Canada’s peacekeepers, several commentators were quick to announce the death of Canadian internationalism. In their view, the public was retreating to its domestic concerns and turning its back on world problems. Explicitly or implicitly, their comments were tied to the commonly held belief that public opinion on matters of public policy, especially foreign policy, is incoherent and volatile and thus, in the end, irrelevant in the calculations of decision makers.

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Are these perceptions well founded? Is Canadian internationalism really falling apart? Is public opinion on foreign policy as brittle, timid, incoherent and volatile as some observers and members of the security

this question, we borrow the notion of dominant ideas from Kim Nossal. For Nossal, any political culture is characterized by ideologies, or “more or less systematic ways of thinking, both normatively and empirically,



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Canadian soldiers serving with UNPROFOR in Bosnia give a hand to refugees fleeing the fighting in 1994.

about social, economic and political relationships among humans in society.”⁶ A political culture, however, can also be structured around dominant ideas, which we interpret as explicit or implicit. These are generally coherent sets of principles and assumptions that tend to structure the opinions of individuals in a given area of policy activity. From this vantage point, the analysis of public opinion can be based upon the assumption that a large number of individuals in a society — perhaps even a solid majority — share a set of ‘dominant ideas’, and that these ideas are likely to shape their views and influence the way they perceive governmental actions in a given policy area.

This position is also related to the more specific debate over the place of public opinion in the conduct of foreign policy, which is centered on the so-called Almond-Lippmann consensus. In this debate, the conventional view, inspired by the writings of journalist Walter Lippmann and political scientist Gabriel Almond in the 1920s and 1950s, holds that public opinion on foreign

policy community like to portray? We address these questions by examining recent trends in Canadian public opinion. We find that, contrary to the common wisdom, there is little reason to point to public opinion as the source of a weakening of Canada’s commitment to internationalism.

We question the notion that the Canadian public is incapable of supporting constructive internationalism. First, we present the foundations of internationalism in Canadian public opinion. The next three sections present and analyze the evidence that leads us to conclude that public opinion is not the obstacle to an internationalist policy that many seem to believe. Neither should it be the scapegoat on which to pin the blame for the shortcomings of Canada’s foreign policy. Rather, we argue that the public must and can be treated as a full partner in the making and implementing of a constructive internationalist policy.

PUBLIC OPINION AND INTERNATIONALISM: A MOVING TARGET

In recent discussions of Canada’s foreign policy, it is common to hear that Canadians are less and less inclined to support international involvement.⁵ In this article, we take some distance from those who proclaim the end of internationalism. More specifically, our purpose is to examine where public opinion has stood in the last few years in relation to Canada’s role in international affairs.

What does internationalism represent for the public, and how can this be studied systematically? To answer

policy issues is highly volatile, incoherent and thus essentially irrelevant.⁷ More recently, however, a significant body of research has questioned the validity of the Almond-Lippmann consensus, noting that public opinion on foreign policy tends to be more stable, coherent and relevant than many assume.⁸ This does not mean that the public is perfectly informed about international events or that the opinion of each individual citizen always changes in the same rational way in response to the same events. What it does mean, however, is that the public as a whole tends to hold relatively stable opinions, and that these opinions can change in a reasonable and predictable fashion in response to real changes in the circumstances of foreign policy.⁹ One of the bases for the stability of opinion on foreign affairs is the fact that it tends to be founded — explicitly or implicitly — on a set of core values that allow most individuals to form reasonably coherent, albeit summary opinions about complex issues, even if they know remarkably little about the details of those issues.

In short, even if every citizen is not an expert in international affairs, public opinion generally evolves in reasonable ways. Thus we can infer interesting lessons from a careful observation of its movements.

According to Nossal, the dominant ideas that underlie internationalism in Canada are articulated around a series of interrelated assumptions, which can be summarized as: the world is interdependent; Canada cannot avoid engagement; Canada has to play a part in helping manage conflicts and tackle global issues; multilateralism is preferable to unilateralism to maximize Canada’s

influence and serve its interests; and all the above are predicated on some degree of willingness to expend resources for the cause of world peace.¹⁰ This view of internationalism raises the next question mentioned at the outset: How do we observe the presence of these ideas and, more importantly, how can we assess their evolution in public opinion over time? To this end, we adopt the method proposed by Benjamin Page and Robert Shapiro in their study of US public opinion on foreign policy and other policy issues. This exercise is, of course, constrained by the relative paucity of survey items on foreign-policy issues that are routinely repeated over long periods of time.

INTERNATIONALISM AND CANADIAN OPINION IN THE 1990s

Although there is a fair amount of evidence that Canada's international involvement was widely supported by the public during the Cold War, consistent measures of this support are few and far between. At the most basic level, a good measure of internationalism in the general public would be whether the public purports to show any interest in international affairs. As Figure 1 shows, this measure suggests that there has been relatively little variation in the level of attention given to international affairs by the general public. Indeed, the level of interest has remained consistently high throughout this period. However, the question of whether this sustained interest can be directly related to a solid support for Canadian involvement in world affairs can only be answered tentatively.

A comprehensive poll conducted in April 1998 suggests not only that Canadians care deeply about international events,¹¹ but also that they still want their country to exercise more power and influence in order to make the world a better place. Fifty-five percent of the respondents in that survey felt proud of Canada's role in the world and 64 percent said they felt prouder than they did a decade ago, although the majority claim that the government has done a poor job in explaining its policies to the public.¹²

Remarkably, one of the reasons why Canadians remain interested in world events may be that many believe the planet has become more dangerous in recent years.¹³ Moreover, whether or not they believe the world has become more dangerous, virtually all believe that war remains a possibility: only 18 percent of Canadians agree that "war is no longer possible" in the present international environment.¹⁴

There are several signs that support for an active international role remained relatively strong in the pub-

lic during the Cold War, but the change in context makes comparisons with recent years difficult. For example, surveys taken both in the late 1960s and in the late 1980s showed strong support for the stationing of Canadian troops in Europe (about 70 percent approval),¹⁶ but this issue became moot when the government recalled the troops. Similarly, support for Canada's participation in NATO remained high through the 1980s although it declined slightly — from 90 percent approval in 1983 to about 78 percent in 1990 — with the gradual realization that the security environment was changing considerably.¹⁷ Although one could interpret this drop of 12 percentage points as a setback, it is consistent with the changing security context and support for NATO remains comfortably above the majority level. In 1997, a Goldfarb survey showed that 70 percent of Canadians believed Canada should place a very high (24 percent) or a fairly high (46 percent) priority on its role in NATO.¹⁸ In July 1999, after the bombings in Kosovo, the same pollster measured stronger figures: 73 percent believed Canada should place a very high (32 percent) or a fairly high (41 percent) priority on its role in NATO.¹⁹ In 1998, 67 percent of Canadians believed that NATO was the only alliance capable of standing up to an aggressor, against 35 percent that considered NATO outdated.²⁰

Support for other international organizations also has remained relatively high in the 1990s, particularly for the United Nations, although its actions have been consistently criticized in the media. Of all the organizations mentioned in the 1997 Goldfarb survey, Canadians give the highest priority to the UN (very high priority: 40 percent; fairly high priority: 48 percent).²¹ Again in 1999, Goldfarb finds that Canadians give an even higher level of priority to the UN (very high priority: 51 percent; fairly high priority: 36 percent).²²

Few repeated questions are available to compare support for multilateral organizations between the 1990s and the previous decades. In 1995, for example, Gallup asked the following question: "Is your respect for the United Nations Organization increasing, decreasing, or

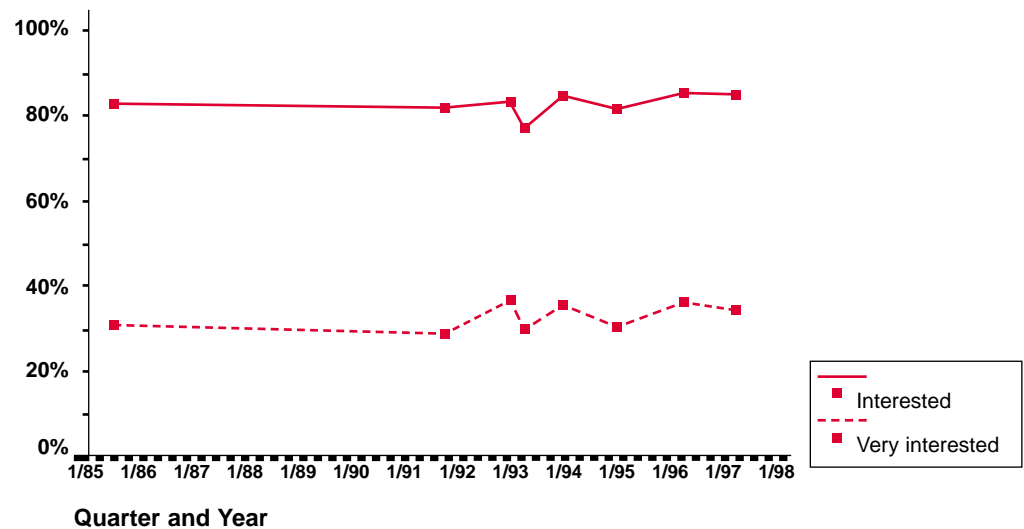


Figure 1: Interest in International Events, 1985-1997¹⁵

	Increasing	Decreasing	Same	No Opinion
1972	20	25	36	19
1980 (May)	18	42	28	13
1990 (September)	34	22	33	12
1995 (August)	9	39	42	10

Table 1: Respect for the United Nations, 1970-1995²³

remaining the same as the years go by?” In large part because of the difficulties encountered by UN peacekeeping troops in the former Yugoslavia, 39 percent said their respect was decreasing, in contrast to only 9 percent who said it was increasing, and 42 percent whose opinion remained the same. The UN, concluded Gallup analysts, was losing respect among Canadians.

The long-term data shown in Table 1, however, suggests that responses to this question are sensitive to context and were as likely to change during the Cold War as they have been since 1990. In sum, there does not seem to be a linear trend away from the UN in Canadian public opinion. More recent surveys confirm that the UN remains a major focus of attention for the Canadian public.

A detailed picture of internationalism emerges from an April 1998 survey conducted by Compas for Southam newspapers. Three general observations were made by the survey’s authors. First, even though the general mood in foreign policy circles tended to be skeptical regarding the public’s commitment to an internationalist foreign policy, the survey finds that the opposite is true: “Far from being parochial or isolationist, Canadians appear to have convictions, often devoutly democratic, about almost everything in the international arena.”²⁴ Second, this internationalism is more likely to be driven by values rather than narrowly defined interests. This, for example, leads the public to be critical of policies that tend to place the interests of exporters ahead of the promotion of human rights and democracy. In an era marked by the imperatives of fiscal discipline, however, this ‘moralism’ is somewhat tempered by more general constraints on public spending. Third, the survey notes that while the public has been supportive of the orientations of Canadian governments in the 1990s, “[t]he public believes that the government has done a mediocre job of explaining or communicating its policies.”²⁵

On the whole, reports of the death of internationalism in Canadian opinion have been, to use a well-worn phrase, vastly exaggerated. Moreover, the public’s critical assessment of the government’s ability to explain and defend its policies suggests that internationalism persists as a core value of most ordinary Canadians in spite of, rather than because of, the government’s performance in communicating the values and priorities that still guide, willy-nilly, its foreign policy.

PUBLIC OPINION AND PEACEKEEPING

The participation of the Canadian Forces (CF) in UN peacekeeping operations was doubtless one of the

most visible dimensions of Canada’s foreign commitments in the 1990s. For several reasons, this policy area is a fitting test of the hypothesis that Canadian public opinion is abandoning its support of internationalism. First, the 1990s were a particularly inward-looking period in Canada’s political life, from the failure of Meech Lake in 1990 to the 1995 referendum in Quebec, to the post-referendum soul-searching — not to mention the rocky road to balancing the public account books. In this context, ordinary citizens might be excused for not paying much attention to foreign events, but they did continue to pay attention nevertheless, as Figure 1 shows. Second, the nature of peacekeeping itself has changed, and this activity now involves considerably more risk than it did in the past. Third, for the first time in decades, strong critical voices were heard against further commitments of Canadian troops to UN peacekeeping, precisely because of this increased risk. Indeed, this criticism came from politicians, the media, and even from the military, who repeatedly claimed that public opinion — whose feelings they claimed to share — had had enough of peacekeeping. Fifth, and certainly not least, the murder of a young Somali by a Canadian soldier and its cover-up by defence officials did little to foster sympathy toward peacekeeping in the general public.

Even if the Cold War was not always easy for peacekeepers, its passing signaled the start of a roller-coaster ride that would submit the public’s support for peacekeeping to a severe test. During the Gulf War in 1990-91, it was claimed that participation in a US-led operation would undermine Canada’s credibility as a peacekeeper, but this debate had little effect on the public. As Figure 2 shows, a December 1991 survey found a nearly unanimous approval for increasing (44 percent) or maintaining (48 percent) Canada’s contribution to UN peacekeeping. From that point, the public followed the unfolding stories of peacekeeping efforts in the former Yugoslavia, in Africa and in Haiti attentively. In May 1993, Decima asked respondents to identify which of the many “trouble spots around the world” concerned them the most, personally. Without the help of a list, 52 percent answered Yugoslavia or Bosnia; Somalia came a distant second, with 8 percent. In all, 63 percent said they were somewhat or very familiar with the involvement of Canadian peacekeeping troops in Bosnia-Herzegovina. In a May 1995 survey, a wide majority of 77 percent considered peacekeeping the most important international role of the Canadian Forces, far beyond Alliance participation, and 39 percent considered it the most important contribution Canada has made to the world, far above the second choice, foreign aid (13 percent).²⁶

In the beginning of Canada’s involvement in the Balkans, as Figure 2 shows, the public was enthusiastic. A majority of Canadians, shocked by the violence in the former Yugoslavia, offered their support for a strong Canadian presence. In fact, they showed more activism than ever before and, as the UN created new mission after new mission (14 between 1988 and 1993), Canada

joined all but one of them, most notably UNPROFOR, UNTAC (Cambodia) and UNOSOM. Moreover, Canadians wanted to do more. According to a Gallup poll taken in September 1992, 64 percent of Canadians accepted that Canadian Forces in Yugoslavia should use their weapons to enforce peace. Only 26 percent opposed such use.²⁷ This activist phase lasted two years (1992-1993), and — in the words of Andrew Cooper — reflected a “virtually unanimous backing for peacekeeping at the societal level”.²⁸

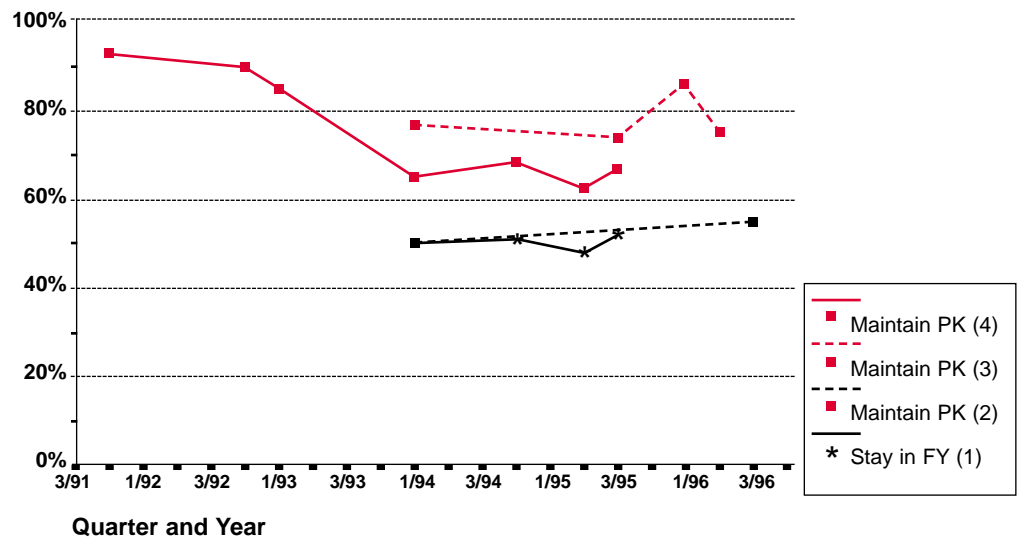
By the end of 1993, however, many critical voices were emerging. Chief among them was Major-General Lewis MacKenzie, who strongly criticized the poor showing of the UN in the Bosnian quagmire. Consequently, peacekeeping increasingly received a hard look from opinion leaders and the media. Specifically, in view of the obvious failure of the UN to meet the high expectations of the international community in Bosnia, Somalia and Rwanda, observers started to ask if the whole thing were worth the effort. Peacekeeping had become harder and riskier without becoming more efficient.

This crisis was occurring at a time when the Canadian military establishment was facing severe resource constraints. Canadian commitment to peacekeeping forces had increased from 2,000 to 4,500 troops in a short period. Ottawa's contribution, with respect to expenditures on international peacekeeping operations, increased from \$10-12 million in 1990-1991 to \$130 million in 1993-1994. At the same time, the defence budget was slashed from \$12.8 billion to \$10.5 billion.

At a general level, attitudes toward UN involvement in conflicts evolved during this period. The proportion of those willing to accept UN intervention in sovereign countries increased somewhat between 1991 and 1993, from 58 to 65 percent, while opposition dropped from 39 to 30 percent. In February 1994, Louis Harris asked a slightly different question and got similar results: 57 percent agreed that it was “time the UN took a more active role in working to end conflicts around the world”.

This suggests that support for the principle of UN activism in conflict resolution solidified through the crisis. In October 1995, Canadians, while maintaining their support for UN peacekeeping efforts, still indicated a clear willingness to accept a relatively high level of risk, including being involved in situations where the use of force would be required.²⁹

However, the most revealing series is the one that illustrates the movement of opinion on Canada's own commitment to UN peacekeeping missions, as regis-



The numbers in parentheses refer to the response options available in different questions on support for Canada's participation in UN peacekeeping. The figure is based on answers that favor maintaining or increasing peacekeeping commitments.

Maintain Peacekeeping (4): December 1991 and October 1992 (CROP/EnviroNics): “In the future, do you think Canada should participate in more, the same number of, fewer, or no peacekeeping missions around the world?”; March 1993 (average of two surveys) (Decima): “How about the future? Do you think that Canada should participate in more, the same number, fewer, or no peacekeeping missions around the world?”; (CROP/EnviroNics): same as above; January 1994, December 1994, June 1995, September 1995 (Gallup): “Do you believe that Canada's role in United Nations peacekeeping efforts around the world should increase, remain the same, decrease, or be eliminated altogether?”

Maintain Peacekeeping (3): February 1994 and July 1995 (Harris): “In terms of its future commitment to the UN peacekeeping forces in general, do you think Canada should increase its role, keep its role about the same as it is now, or reduce its role?”; February and April 1996 (Goldfarb): “Should Canada become more involved, less involved or maintain the same level of involvement in peacekeeping activities?”

Maintain Peacekeeping (2): January 1994 and July 1996 (Angus Reid): “Canada, along with other members of the UN, has participated in various United Nations peacekeeping efforts around the world — indeed, Canada has participated in more of these efforts than any other country. In your view, should Canada continue to play a leading role in UN peacekeeping efforts, or should we reduce our participation in these UN undertakings?”

Stay in Former Yugoslavia : January and December 1994, June and September 1995 (Gallup): “Do you believe that Canada's presence in the former Yugoslavia as part of the United Nations Peacekeeping forces should increase, remain the same, decrease, or be eliminated altogether?”

Figure 2: Evolution of Public Opinion about Peacekeeping, 1991-1996

tered in Figure 2. If surveys taken between 1991 and 1993 yielded impressive majorities in favor of increasing or maintaining Canada's commitment, support dropped sharply in January 1994. Can this shift be dismissed as a mood swing, as the conventional view of public opinion on foreign policy issues would have it? In fact, this series suggests a public opinion that is far from volatile. As the data suggest, there

was a readjustment, due to the increasing cost of peacekeeping involvement, followed by a relative stability, or even slight improvement on all indicators of support of involvement.

Considering the growing controversies that surrounded the presence of Canadian contingents in Somalia throughout 1993, and in Bosnia in December 1993 and January 1994, this drop can reasonably be explained. Events in Bosnia, in particular, caused a commotion. The episode of the kidnaping and 'mock execution' of eleven Canadian soldiers by a group of Bosnian Serbs received widespread coverage during the whole holiday period. On 4 January, just days before Gallup made its survey, Prime Minister Chrétien presented a confused picture of his government's stand on Bosnia when he declared that he was seriously considering the removal of Canada's peacekeeping troops. From that moment, as the parallel evolution tracked by Gallup suggests, peacekeeping was closely intertwined in the public's mind with the particularly difficult Bosnian situation, and perhaps also with the government's hesitation. After that initial shock, however, Gallup registered only little movement in two years, within the narrow band of 48 percent to 52 percent for opinion about involvement in the former Yugoslavia, and between 63 percent and 68 percent for peacekeeping operations in general. In these polls, the proportion of those wishing to eliminate peacekeeping involvement altogether never exceeded 17 percent (figures based upon respondents expressing an opinion).

Does this mean that the Canadian public's long-standing support for peacekeeping is starting a long-term downward slide? The results of subsequent polls suggest, to the contrary, that Canadian support for peacekeeping missions was resilient enough to weather such a storm. When the government decided on 9 March 1994 to agree to a six-month extension of its UN commitment in Bosnia, a poll taken immediately after showed that 52 percent approved of the further involvement of Canadian troops (41 percent disapproved).³⁰ Subsequently, the proportion of respondents in favor of maintaining Canada's commitment in Yugoslavia went up again at the time of the Dayton Accord. Although the Somalia inquiry was in full swing at the time, eroding some of the public's confidence in the military élite, 59 percent of Canadians favored participating in IFOR. This level of support gives a measure of the strength of the public's support for involvement in international peace efforts. Moreover, this did not reflect blind optimism. In fact, respondents in the same survey were pessimistic — or perhaps lucid — about the prospects of lasting peace in the former Yugoslavia: 61 percent thought lasting peace was unlikely.³¹ Finally, a survey conducted in the midst of the air war over Kosovo showed that, in spite of the prevailing mood of pessimism at the time regarding the capacity of the UN to fulfill its peacekeeping mission in the former Yugoslavia and elsewhere, Canadian participation in UN peacekeeping remained at the top of the list of their country's accomplishments on the world scene that made them the proudest. The same survey also found that the public thought Canada should give the UN a higher degree of priority than NATO in its foreign policy.³²

Critics of opinion surveys sometimes note that the public seems to hold opposite views on some issues. In the case of peacekeeping in the 1990s, this critique appears founded.

The public has strongly supported the principle of UN peacekeeping but, at the same time, it has had persistent doubts about intervention in the former Yugoslavia and about Canadian involvement in that dangerous context. In short, although a large majority approves of UN peacekeeping operations, their support is sensitive to risk and cost — all the more so when the costs and the risks are closer to home. In this context, does the drop in support indicate a fundamental shift in values? In our view, this conclusion misses the mark completely. A simple economic analogy can illustrate the point: if the price of a product goes up and the volume of sales go down, can we immediately conclude that the demand for the product is weaker? Naturally, the answer is no, and the same reasoning applies for political support. When support for a policy option goes down as the 'price' of that option goes up, we cannot conclude that the values that are at the foundation of this support are weakening.

In sum, because the level of risk and complexity associated with the new type of 'peace-building' missions is higher than it was for 'traditional' peacekeeping, it is not surprising that the public is significantly more cautious. One cannot, however, jump to the conclusion that the public has abandoned its long-standing support for Canada's active involvement in UN peacekeeping. A strong case can be made that the public learned something from the turbulent experiences of the 1990s. Participants in focus groups held across the country in September and October 1997 expressed the feeling that peacekeeping should be maintained. They did feel that the government should make sure its troops have a "clear mandate", that Canada sends "people who are trained in peacekeeping and not in hostile actions", and that "if we are going to do it, we should do it properly". Participants also voiced concerns about the fact that Canada has limited resources and should be careful about allocating them outside the country.³³ Nevertheless, the 1998 Compass survey shows that one of the reasons the public would be ready to support an increase in the defence budget is to ensure that "our troops are well equipped and don't risk their lives needlessly in overseas conflict".³⁴

These attitudes are coherent and compatible with the expression of a cautious internationalism. Even if the public is not familiar with terms like peace building and peace enforcement, surveys show that the average Canadian differentiates between peacekeeping *per se* and the larger task of promoting international peace. In fact, surveys show a clear preference for the latter, which seems to indicate an open mind as to alternative ways and means to promote peace and conflict resolution.

There is little doubt that the debate over the place of peacekeeping in Canadian security policy will continue in the future, and public opinion will be called upon as a witness for both the prosecution and

the defence. What is even more likely, however, is that participants in this debate will invoke the kinds of misconceptions about the instability and incoherence of public opinion that are so common in expert comments about foreign policy. By contrast, we observe that public opinion on peacekeeping tends to be stable over time and reacts in reasonable ways to external events.

THE TEST OF WAR: PUBLIC OPINION AND THE KOSOVO CRISIS

Changes in the nature of peacekeeping operations and the sustained salience of the Canadian Forces presence in the Balkans through the 1990s has tested the Canadian public's support for military interventionism abroad. Another test of this support came in the spring of 1999, as Canada found itself enmeshed in a shooting war against the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia over the fate of the little-known, predominantly Albanian province of Kosovo. Of course, Canada was not responsible for, and only very marginally involved in, the chain of events that led NATO to wage war against Serbia. Nonetheless, when the Milosevic regime intensified its offensive against the Kosovar Albanians, openly defying the ultimatum imposed upon Serbia by the western powers at Rambouillet, the United States and NATO had little choice but to resort to force. Although the UN Security Council had passed resolutions condemning Yugoslav actions in Kosovo, it was generally understood that Russia and China would have vetoed any resolution calling for the use of force against Yugoslavia. Absent the legitimacy conferred by a UN mandate, NATO leaders saw themselves as having the choice between acting alone or letting Milosevic's policy of ethnic cleansing run its course in Kosovo. For the United States and the major Western European powers, the immediate goal was to stop the violence against Kosovar Albanians, but the credibility of NATO was also at stake. The Alliance chose to strike.³⁵

As a relatively minor partner in the Atlantic Alliance, Canada was more or less presented with a *fait accompli*. Given that NATO is the cornerstone of Canada's security policy, the option of opposing the use of force outright was perhaps unrealistic for the Canadian government. There was a choice to make nonetheless, between 'non-opposition' and active participation, and Canada chose the

latter. The Canadian contribution to the Kosovo air campaign — eighteen CF-18 aircraft took an active part in the bombing — was small when compared to the massive US deployment. Nonetheless, Canada's contribution was larger than that of several other NATO members of similar size, and the interoperability of the Canadian contingent with its US counterpart made its contribution relatively substantial. On the diplomatic front, in addition, Canadian officials at times seemed to be willing (if not necessarily eager) to join the 'humanitarian hawks' who, led by British Prime Minister Tony Blair, advocated preparation for a ground invasion. Why did Canada choose to play an active role rather than take a free ride? External factors provide only a limited explanation. The notion of 'alliance entrapment' perhaps explains the absence of opposition, but not more. That Canada would have acted out of a clear sense of threat to its national security, in the traditional sense, also seems far-fetched.³⁶

To explain Canada's action, we must turn to internal factors, including public opinion. Opinion, we argue, did not act as a constraint, but neither was it the driving force. Interestingly, while public support for interna-



Troops of the 2nd Battalion, Royal Canadian Regiment on patrol near the village of Senafe, Eritrea, May 2001.

tional intervention often depends upon a demonstration of strong leadership on the part of policy makers, we do not find evidence that opinion actually followed the leaders in this case. Why, then, did public opinion hold firm? To answer this question, we must first show that public support for the NATO air strikes was in no way a foregone conclusion.

Several factors indicate that public opinion about the NATO air campaign over Kosovo, and about Canada's participation, could have been a great deal more skeptical. First, the operation was presented to Canadian policy makers as a *fait accompli*, and the feeling of being pushed around by their powerful neighbor is a historic source of irritation for the Canadian public. The lack of a UN mandate to legitimize the NATO strikes also might have been expected to fuel public opposition, but few critics made it a central part of their argument. The absence of an open parliamentary debate about Canadian participation in the war, and the Liberal government's questionable decision not to delay a House recess to debate the Canadian Forces' involvement the day after the bombing started, also generated a fair amount of criticism in the press and among opinion shapers. The government held hearings and public forums later in the course of the conflict, but that seemed almost an afterthought. Finally, the conduct of the war itself gave plenty of opportunities for opponents to raise major concerns, and several critical voices were heard in virtually all media outlets. As days of bombing turned into weeks and then months, and as the mishaps and collateral damage accumulated, there was increasing concern in Canada, as elsewhere, over the moral justification for NATO's action. Moreover, as the strikes initially led to an intensification of Serbian violence against ethnic Albanians in Kosovo, several commentators worried publicly that the NATO strategy was not only morally questionable, but also counterproductive.

In this context, there was no foolproof guarantee that public opinion would necessarily hold firm, but it did. In early April, when it had already become evident that there would be no quick and easy resolution to the Kosovo issue, a sizable majority of the Canadian public approved both NATO's actions and Canada's involvement. A Compas poll conducted for the *National Post* showed 79 percent support for NATO's actions and 72 percent approval of Canadian involvement in the bombing. As many as 57 percent favored sending in ground troops if that became necessary.³⁷ Another survey, conducted between 8 and 10 April by the Angus Reid Group, found that two-thirds of the respondents approved both NATO's actions and Canada's part in them. A slightly lower proportion (60 percent) approved the resort to ground forces, including Canadian soldiers, if that became necessary. The same poll showed high levels of sympathy for Kosovar refugees and a professed "moral obligation" for Canada to help them.³⁸

Even after the conflict had dragged on for several more weeks, the level of support for the intervention remained relatively high. An Environics Group poll, conducted between 17 and 30 May found that 57 percent approved of Canada's participation in the air strikes against Yugoslavia (31 percent disapproved). Interestingly, a sizable majority claimed to have followed the conflict somewhat or very attentively.³⁹

In the level of its support for the NATO intervention in Yugoslavia, the Canadian public ranked among the

highest of all the NATO members, even though Canada was perhaps one of the least affected by the conflict in terms of its geostrategic interests. Indeed, among NATO countries, there seemed to be a negative correlation (albeit far from perfect) between the level of public support for NATO's Operation "Allied Force" and the geostrategic stakes of the country, the latter being defined in terms of proximity to the war zone and/or need of NATO as security guarantor against a clear external threat. Support was high in the US and Britain, but it was also strong in Canada, and even stronger in Norway and Denmark. In these smaller countries, support was arguably driven more by the professed humanitarian goals of the intervention than by its potential impact on these countries' physical integrity, or even their credibility or reputation in the 'power game'. In countries such as Greece and the Czech Republic, however, the public was strongly opposed to NATO's war, but it was strategic necessity that compelled them to agree grudgingly not to deviate too much from the Alliance's line.

As Mark Brawley and Pierre Martin conclude in their overview of Alliance politics in the Kosovo war, it was a "combination of strategic necessity and moral obligation that allowed the allies to hold together".⁴⁰ In that war, strategic interests and values were inescapably intertwined. For Canada, however, it is clear that the latter provided the bulk of the motivation, both for the government's policy response and for the public's support. What is also clear is that public support was not a by-product of strong leadership on the part of the Canadian policy makers. As Canada was called into war by virtue of its Alliance obligations, its choices were more or less dictated by the internal logic of its security policy, in which humanitarian considerations loom large. The public came to the same conclusions on its own and gave its support, even though its leaders were severely criticized for their slowness in engaging a public debate on the intervention. The war itself was short, and its cost for Canadians was low, so there was no real need for strong leadership to retain public support. Nonetheless, there is no guarantee that such a test might not come in the future.

CONCLUSIONS

This article has discussed some of the underlying issues concerning the role of public opinion in the alleged retrenchment from Canada's tradition of internationalism in the 1990s. In general, we find public opinion to be resilient in its internationalism. This was particularly true in the case of support for Canada's participation in UN peacekeeping operations and support for joining NATO in Operation "Allied Force". Of course, we do not argue that the Canadian public will cling to internationalism regardless of cost. Indeed, when survey questions highlight the costs and risks of international involvement, the public tends to drape its internationalist inclinations in considerable nuance and caution. The same, however, could be said of public opinion in most area of government activity and — more to the point — of public opinion on foreign policy before the 1990s.

It can be argued that because of a tendency for the public to be increasingly wary of its political leaders, and less deferential to their authority, an activist or an internationalist foreign policy may be difficult to sustain. In practice, however, when political leaders demonstrate conviction in pursuing their policy objectives, and when they take the time to explain why the difficult choices that they make are necessary to pursue the values and principles shared by most of their constituents, public opinion rarely poses itself as an obstacle to a constructive foreign policy. When leaders are wavering in their commitments or compromising on the principles that underpin the citizens' belief in internationalism, one should not be surprised if a warier and less deferential public reserves its judgment, or even withdraws its support.

In sum, we do not deny that there have been signs of retrenchment in Canadian internationalism. We agree that this trend can only be partly explained by changes in the international context, and that it also has domes-

tic causes. Nonetheless, our reading of the available evidence leads us to conclude that, although public opinion is a convenient scapegoat for the apparent lack of political will to commit the appropriate resources in support of a constructive internationalist policy, the real obstacles lie elsewhere.

When the public is treated as a legitimate partner in the elaboration and conduct of foreign policy, even when choices become difficult and costly, there is no reason to assume that public opinion will pose an obstacle. The silent internationalist majority is entitled to expect political skill and courage from its leaders in defence of common values, but unless the public can be treated as a full partner in the foreign-policy process, it is more likely to remain a scapegoat.



NOTES

1. An earlier version of this article was presented to the conference "Challenges to Governance: Military Interventions Abroad and Consensus at Home", organized by the Institute for Research on Public Policy (IRPP), Montréal, 17-18 November 2000. An abridged version was published in *Policy Options / Options politiques*.
2. As Kim Richard Nossal puts it, "Those who decide on a country's course in world politics cannot divorce themselves from the interplay of undercurrents, of mood, tone or of milieu, of a climate of feeling that almost imperceptibly insinuates itself into concrete ideas and actions." Nossal, *The Politics of Canadian Foreign Policy*, 3rd Ed. (Scarborough, Ont.: Prentice-Hall, 1997), p. 138.
3. Lawrence Freedman, "Victims and Victors: Reflections on the Kosovo War", *Review of International Studies* 26 (July 2000), pp. 335-358.
4. Kim Nossal and Stéphane Roussel, "Canada and the Kosovo War: The Happy Follower", in Pierre Martin and Mark R. Brawley, eds., *Alliance Politics, Kosovo, and NATO's War: Allied Force or Forced Allies?* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2001), p. 192.
5. See Jean-François Rioux and Robin Hay, "Canadian Foreign Policy: From Internationalism to Isolationism?" *International Journal* 54 (Winter 1998-1999), pp. 57-75. See also other contributions in the same issue of *International Journal* by Jocelyn Coulon, Robert Bothwell, Douglas Alan Ross and Douglas Bland.
6. Nossal, *The Politics of Canadian Foreign Policy*, p. 138.
7. Analyzed in Ole R. Holsti, "Public Opinion and Foreign Policy: Challenges to the Almond-Lippmann Consensus", *International Studies Quarterly* 36 (December 1992), pp. 439-66.
8. Benjamin I. Page and Robert Y. Shapiro, *The Rational Public: Fifty Years of Trends in American Policy Preferences* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).
9. For an empirical application to the Canadian context which tends to support this hypothesis, see Anne-Marie Boissonault and Pierre Martin, "La stabilité et la cohérence de l'opinion publique canadienne sur les enjeux de sécurité", paper presented to the annual meeting of the Canadian Political Science Association, St. John's, Newfoundland, 8-10 June 1997.
10. Nossal, *The Politics of Canadian Foreign Policy*, 154-58.
11. The wish of Canadians to see their government devote more attention to foreign affairs emerges strongly from the Compass/Southam/IISS survey. Respondents were asked twice about how much attention should be devoted to the subject. Those wanting more attention devoted to foreign affairs outnumbered those wanting less by at least 2:1 (Second Article in the Southam News/Canadian National Committee of the IISS Poll on Foreign Policy, Friday 24 April 1998).
12. First Article in the Southam News/Canadian National Committee of the IISS Poll on Foreign Policy.
13. According to a 1998 poll, 48 percent Canadians agree that, compared to a decade ago, the world is more dangerous, 37 percent believe it is less and 7 percent think the level of danger is unchanged. Giles Gherson, 'Canadians are Activists at heart', *New Poll Finds, Ottawa Citizen*, 24 April 1998.
14. Fifth Article in the Southam News/Canadian National Committee of the IISS Poll on Foreign Policy.
15. Sources: 1985 and 1991, Decima Research: "How interested would you say you are with events or issues on the international scene? Would you say you are ... very interested, somewhat interested, not too interested, or not at all interested?" 1993-1997, Goldfarb Report: "How interested would you say you are with events or issues on the international scene? Would you say you are ... very interested, somewhat interested, not very interested, or not at all interested?"
16. *Gallup Report*, April 1968, 24 August 1987, 26 February 1990.
17. Data from the *Decima Quarterly* polls No.16 (1983); No. 31 (1987), No. 42 (1990), Question No. R761. The data were made available by the Centre for the Study of Democracy at Queen's University, Kingston, Ontario.
18. The Goldfarb Report 1997, Question S.6 Q19b-7.
19. Department of National Defence news release, "Les Canadiens et la défense: les Canadiens appuient les FC au Kosovo", June 1999.
20. Fifth Article in the Southam News/Canadian National Committee of the IISS Poll on Foreign Policy.
21. The Goldfarb Report 1997, Questions S.6 Q19b-1 to S.6 Q19b-7. Indeed, of all organizations mentioned in the Goldfarb survey in 1997, only the Organization of American States (OAS) and the Francophonie were not considered a high priority by a majority of Canadians, although the latter was considered a high priority by a solid majority of Quebecers.
22. DND news release, "Les Canadiens et la défense: les Canadiens appuient les FC au Kosovo", June 1999.
23. *Gallup Poll*, 7 September 1995.
24. "Megaphone Moralism and Tax Fatigue: Twin Pillars of a Multi-Faceted Public Opinion", Summary of the Compas survey (http://www.compas.ca/html/archives/southampoll_surv.htm), April 24, 1998.
25. "Federal Government Performance: High Pride and Middling Confidence", http://www.compas.ca/html/archives/fedgovperf_surv.htm.
26. Insight Canada Research, *Canada and the World: Public Attitudes Regarding Foreign and Defence Policy* (Toronto, 1995).
27. *Gallup Report*, October 26, 1992.
28. Cooper, *Canadian Foreign Policy*, p. 188.
29. Environics Research (October 1995). Question: "In recent years, the United Nations has become more active in trying to stop conflicts in areas that require the use of much more force than in the past. Do you think Canadian troops should or should not continue to participate in these United Nations operations?"
30. Environics, March 1994, as reported in *Canadians on Defence: 1994-1995 Yearbook* (Ottawa: Department of National Defence, 1995), p. 2.
31. Goldfarb Report, April 1996. S.6 Q.19b: "In light of recent American and European efforts to negotiate a ceasefire and peace agreement in Bosnia, how likely is it that lasting peace will be achieved there?"
32. When asked to choose two or three roles about which they felt proudest from a long list, 53 percent mentioned participation in peacekeeping, ahead of all other choices. The poll was conducted by Goldfarb in June 1999 and reported in "Les

Canadiens et la défense”, Department of National Defence press release, July 1999.

33. Pollara, *Views of Canadians on Foreign Affairs and International Trade: September 29th-October 2nd, 1997* (Toronto: Pollara Strategic Public Opinion & Marketing Research, 1997), pp. 7-8.

34. Fifth Article in the Southam News/Canadian National Committee of the IISS Poll on Foreign Policy, 24 April 1998.

35. Ivo H. Daalder and Michael E. O’Hanlon, *Winning Ugly: NATO’s War to Save Kosovo* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2000); and the contributions in Pierre Martin and Mark R. Brawley, eds., *Alliance Politics, Kosovo, and NATO’s War: Allied Force or Forced Allies?* (New York: Palgrave, 2001).

36. For a case study of Canada’s decision to participate in the war over Kosovo, see Kim Richard Nossal and Stéphane Roussel, “Canada and the Kosovo War: The Happy Follower”, in Martin and Brawley, *Alliance Politics*.

37. Robert Fife and Joël-Denis Bellavance, “57 percent of Canadians favour sending combat

troops”, *National Post*, 11 April 1999, p. 1.

38. Angus Reid Group, “News Release”, Angus Reid/CTV/Globe and Mail Poll, 11 April 1999. The questions and response distribution were as follows. “NATO air forces are currently bombing targets throughout Yugoslavia. Overall, do you support or oppose the decision of NATO to attack Yugoslavia?” (Strongly support: 36 percent; Somewhat support: 30 percent; Somewhat oppose: 14 percent; Strongly oppose: 17 percent); “And do you support or oppose Canada’s decision to be a part of the NATO air attacks on Yugoslavia?” (Strongly support: 40 percent; Somewhat support: 29 percent; Somewhat oppose: 12 percent; Strongly oppose: 18 percent); “Some observers believe the only way to stop what is happening in Kosovo is to send in NATO ground troops. Would you support or oppose sending ground troops into Kosovo?” (Strongly support: 31 percent; Somewhat support: 28 percent; Somewhat oppose: 15 percent; Strongly oppose: 23 percent); “And would you support including Canadian troops with the NATO ground troops which go into Kosovo?”

(Strongly support: 31 percent; Somewhat support: 30 percent; Somewhat oppose: 11 percent; Strongly oppose: 27 percent).

39. DND news release, “Les Canadiens et la défense: les Canadiens appuient les FC au Kosovo”, June 1999. In the French version of the questionnaire, the first two questions were: “Comme vous le savez peut-être, le Canada fait actuellement partie de la force de l’OTAN qui mène des frappes aériennes contre la Yougoslavie. Suivez-vous cette campagne très attentivement (27 percent), assez attentivement (47 percent), pas très attentivement (18 percent), pas du tout (8 percent)?” “Êtes-vous d’accord ou pas d’accord avec la participation de troupes canadiennes à ces frappes aériennes?” (D’accord: 57 percent; Pas d’accord: 31 percent; Pas d’opinion: 12 percent).

40. Mark Brawley and Pierre Martin, “Balancing Acts: NATO’s Unity and the Lessons to Learn”, in Martin and Brawley, eds., *Alliance Politics*.



3 PPCLI soldier having a look at Slovakian Army weapons during a Partnership for Peace Exercise in Austria, 11 September 2001.

DGPA Combat Camera Photo by MCpl Danielle Bernier, ISD01-0148