

Abstract

This analysis of public opinion towards foreign aid shows that Canadians are divided over internationalism. First, while most citizens agree that development assistance is important, their support often remains shallow, unmatched by a commitment to undertake concrete actions. Second, the attitudes Canadians hold toward development assistance indicate that there is a clear division in the country's public between liberal and conservative internationalists, a cleavage that is anchored in domestic ideological and partisan differences. In many ways comparable to what is found in other countries, the internationalism of Canadians does not appear as vigorous and as consensual as is often suggested.

DIVIDED OVER INTERNATIONALISM:

THE CANADIAN PUBLIC AND DEVELOPMENT ASSISTANCE

“A majority of Canadians,” notes Evan Potter in a recent paper, “continue to support a multilateralist, activist, social values-driven foreign policy” and supports peacekeeping and foreign aid as Canada’s “most positive contributions to the world.” This internationalism, however, may be changing, to become less altruistic and more anchored in interests, or “results-oriented” (Potter 2002, 6 and 14). With respect to development assistance, for instance, Canadians remain supportive, but many express worries that aid may make poor countries “too dependent” and prefer aid programs that assure “a clear benefit to Canada” (Potter 2002, 15-16).

Is this emphasis on results really new? Or are such worries about the effectiveness of aid a perennial feature of the public opinion landscape? How do we reconcile these expressed doubts with what appears to be an enduring support for development assistance, even when aid budgets were declining? For various methodological and political reasons, these questions have received little attention so far. Convinced that Canadians are strongly committed to internationalism, scholars have generally assumed a broad and relatively stable consensus on foreign policy matters (Munton 2002-03, 158-59). When considered closely, however, this consensus often seems weak or ambiguous, because it is a construct that integrates views and attitudes that do not always fit together very well. As they emphasized the Canadian

tradition of internationalism, most observers tended to overlook differences, and focused instead on a more or less coherent and widely shared vision of the country's role in world politics. The problem, as Don Munton and Tom Keating explain in a recent article on the question, is that "internationalism divides Canadians as well as binds them" (2001, 547). While there is a strong consensus on an active involvement in foreign affairs and on economic internationalism, important divergences remain regarding the country's relationships with the United States, development assistance and security issues. With respect to foreign aid and the arms race, for instance, Munton and Keating speak of "marked disagreement" and "even some polarization of views" (2001, 545). Unfortunately, we know little about these divisions and about their impact on policy. One may suspect that they are rooted in domestic politics, but the study of this link has been left largely unexplored (Munton and Keating 2001, 540).

This article uses the case of public support for foreign aid to probe further the nature of Canadian internationalism. Along with peacekeeping, development assistance has been a pillar of the Pearsonian internationalism that, for a long time, has defined Canada's external relations (Cooper, 1997, 210). This aspect of Canadian foreign policy, however, has generated contrasted views among the public. Strongly supported in principle, development assistance has not been endorsed without reservations and in a universal way by Canadians. Canadians are divided over internationalism, on at least two counts. First, they are divided in the sense that they seem to be of two minds, and hold ambivalent views about foreign aid. While most citizens

agree that development assistance is important, their support often remains shallow, unmatched by a commitment to undertake concrete actions. Second, the attitudes Canadians hold toward development assistance indicate that there is a clear division in the country's public between liberal and conservative internationalists, a cleavage that is anchored in domestic ideological and partisan differences. This division is similar to the American ideological cleavage described by Eugene Wittkopf and Ole Holsti, and is also compatible with a host of comparative findings on public support for foreign aid (Wittkopf 1990, 215; Holsti 1996, 134, 151-56, and 183; Lumsdaine 1993, 137-79; Thérien 2002). In many ways comparable to the attitudes found in other countries, the internationalism of Canadians does not appear as vigorous and as consensual as is often suggested.

The article begins with a presentation of the evolution of Canadian development assistance policy, to underline the contrast between an official discourse that has remained generous and financial commitments that have declined significantly over the years. The second section surveys public support for foreign aid in Canada, to see how it compares to the situation in other donor countries, how it has evolved over time, and how it relates to public attitudes about other domestic and international policies. This section confirms the image of a supportive but ambiguous citizenry. To explain this apparent ambivalence, the third section establishes that Canadian public opinion on development assistance is defined by a left-right split, which separates a favorable public, with liberal political and ideological orientations, and a more reluctant one, with conservative preferences and ideas.¹ The

conclusion suggests rethinking development assistance, and more broadly internationalism, in the context of a closing gap between domestic and foreign policy (Potter 2002, 3). For most citizens, politics at home and politics abroad are far from being watertight compartments. Attitudes on foreign affairs basically reflect the same values that shape domestic politics. Public opinion should thus be understood from a perspective that accounts for this interconnection (Noël and Thérien 2002).

Canadian Development Assistance:

Ambitious Discourse, Modest Achievements

Because Canada is a prosperous middle power with no colonial past, aid has sometimes been presented as a “Canadian vocation” (Canada 1986, 88). For the past few years, however, this perception has had at best a remote relationship with reality. In this area as in many others, Canada has increasingly taken on the appearance of a “fading power” (Hillmer and Molot 2002).

Originally, as was the case elsewhere in the developed world, Canadian foreign aid arose in response to a broad spectrum of needs and social forces (Morrison 1998). It should first be recalled that aid was invented at the beginning of the Cold War more as a tool in the struggle against communism than as an instrument to fight poverty. Before anything else, Canada’s development assistance policy thus served to strengthen the geo-strategic and economic bases of the liberal order established in the postwar

period. Beyond this objective, shared by all advanced capitalist countries, foreign aid could also facilitate the promotion of specifically Canadian interests. Development assistance came to be seen, in particular, as an effective means to rectify the almost total absence of relations between Canada and the Third World, and to affirm the country's foreign policy autonomy vis-à-vis the United States. Canadian aid was also clearly shaped by the evolution of the country's political values and institutions, especially those related to the development of the welfare state. In many respects, Canadian aid policy can be understood as an outward projection of the principles underlying domestic social policies (Thérien and Noël 1994). Cranford Pratt aptly summarized this defining tension between interests and principles when he described Canadian aid policy as consistently torn between the two competing rationales of "international realism" and "humane internationalism" (Pratt 1989, 13-22; Pratt 2000, 37-59).

**Figure 1. Aid as a percentage of GNP
(1950-2000)**



Sources: CIDA 2002a, 1; OECD, various years.

Note: The Development Assistance Committee (DAC) includes Australia, Austria, Belgium, Canada, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Japan, Luxembourg, Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, the United Kingdom and the United States. In 2000, the concept of Gross National Product (GNP) was replaced by the concept of Gross National Income (GNI).

For many years, Canada had a reputation of generosity toward the developing world. In the record year of 1975, for instance, Canada devoted 0.53% of its GNP to international co-operation (see Figure 1). This performance remained short of the government's repeated promise to reach the 0.7% target set by the United Nations in 1970, but it placed Canada

among the front-runners of the donor community. Until the late 1980s, the country's aid policy remained about half way between the conservative policies of the G7 countries and the far more progressive policies of the North European countries (Thérien 1996). Two characteristics also helped give Canadian aid programs an identity of their own: a bias in favour of the multilateral system and a very widespread distribution of funds. Through its solid support for international development organizations such as the United Nations Development Programme and the World Bank, Canada wanted to demonstrate that it was not as preoccupied as other countries by the promotion of its own national interests. In addition, as a country of the Americas, and a member of both the Commonwealth and the *Francophonie*, Canada has always felt the need to assert its presence in every corner of the Third World. Canadian aid policy, wrote Jim Freedman, "has sought (...) to be everything to everyone" (2000, 13). Despite the inherent impossibility of such an objective, the fact remains that, for more than a generation, aid allowed Canada to stand as a "Samaritan state" (Spicer 1966) and to express the "bright side of [the country's] national character" (Canada 1994, 47).

The end of the Cold War and the federal government's effort throughout the 1990s to eliminate the deficit significantly weakened the country's involvement in the field of development assistance. Canada was actually one of the donor countries most affected by the worldwide phenomenon of aid fatigue. Between 1991 and 1999, Canadian aid dropped by 33% in current value.ⁱⁱ After reaching 0.45% in 1991, the aid/GNP ratio fell to 0.25% in 2000, a performance that pulled Canada down from the 7th to the 16th position

among OECD donor countries. Even within the G7, Canada's position then was a poor 5th, behind France, the United Kingdom, Japan, and Germany. Revealingly, the government now avoids all reference to the UN target of 0.7%. Critics have also put the quality of Canadian aid into question by drawing attention to the political, strategic, and economic objectives that constantly compete with developmental goals. In fact, the Canadian government institutionalized this competition in its 1995 foreign policy statement, according to which development assistance "promotes prosperity and employment, protects global security and projects Canadian values and culture" (Canada 1995). Perhaps as a reflection of this confusion in policy objectives, Canada is among the rich countries that devote the smallest proportion of their aid budget to the least developed countries, the poorest of the poor.

Canada does continue to stand out for the originality of its policies in certain spheres, such as the active collaboration with non-governmental organizations, the promotion of gender equality, and the protection of the environment. It should also be stressed that development assistance has begun to benefit from the country's improved fiscal situation. In 2002, Prime Minister Jean Chrétien announced a long-term commitment to increase aid resources by 8% a year (CIDA 2002b, 2). The same year, the focus on Africa during the G8 Summit in Kananaskis led the government to create the Canada Fund for Africa, with a budget of \$500 million over three years (Tomlinson 2002a). Overall, however, in spite of these recent initiatives and of a sophisticated discourse emphasizing poverty reduction and the need to

promote the developing countries' ownership of aid programs, Canada is no longer the leader it once was in matters of development assistance.

The Canadian government has generally proposed that citizens were aware of the country's financial situation and supported the changes made to aid policy. Yet this interpretation — suggesting that Canadians have likely become less “humane” and more “realist” than in the past — has rarely been the object of empirical verification. This is the purpose of the next section.

The Canadian Public and Foreign Aid:

Supportive But Not Very Attentive

The few analyses that have been conducted on Canadian public attitudes toward development assistance tend to reinforce the idea that, in this country, aid is a consensual issue. Canadians are usually presented as supportive of foreign aid, and their attitudes are depicted as fairly stable over time. At the end of the 1980s, for instance, Réal Lavergne noted that “one usually finds between 75 per cent and 80 per cent of the population to be in favour of current or increased aid levels” (1989, 38). The number of respondents in favour of increased levels, Lavergne added, “has remained approximately constant over the last twenty years” (1989, 40). A decade later, Ian Smillie concluded in the same vein that, in spite of some fluctuations in the Canadians' support for aid, “the long-term trend has shown little significant change upward or downward, and it remains at the relatively high levels that have prevailed for the better part of two decades” (Smillie 1998a, 58). This

picture is fundamentally correct but, as we will see, it remains too general to be entirely satisfying. Indeed, many of the basic conflicts that shape Canadian politics, both in its domestic and foreign affairs dimensions, are reflected in public attitudes towards aid. When we pay attention to these conflicts, we obtain a more nuanced, less monolithic view of the Canadian public. Before we introduce these distinctions, however, we must first revisit the Canadian consensus.

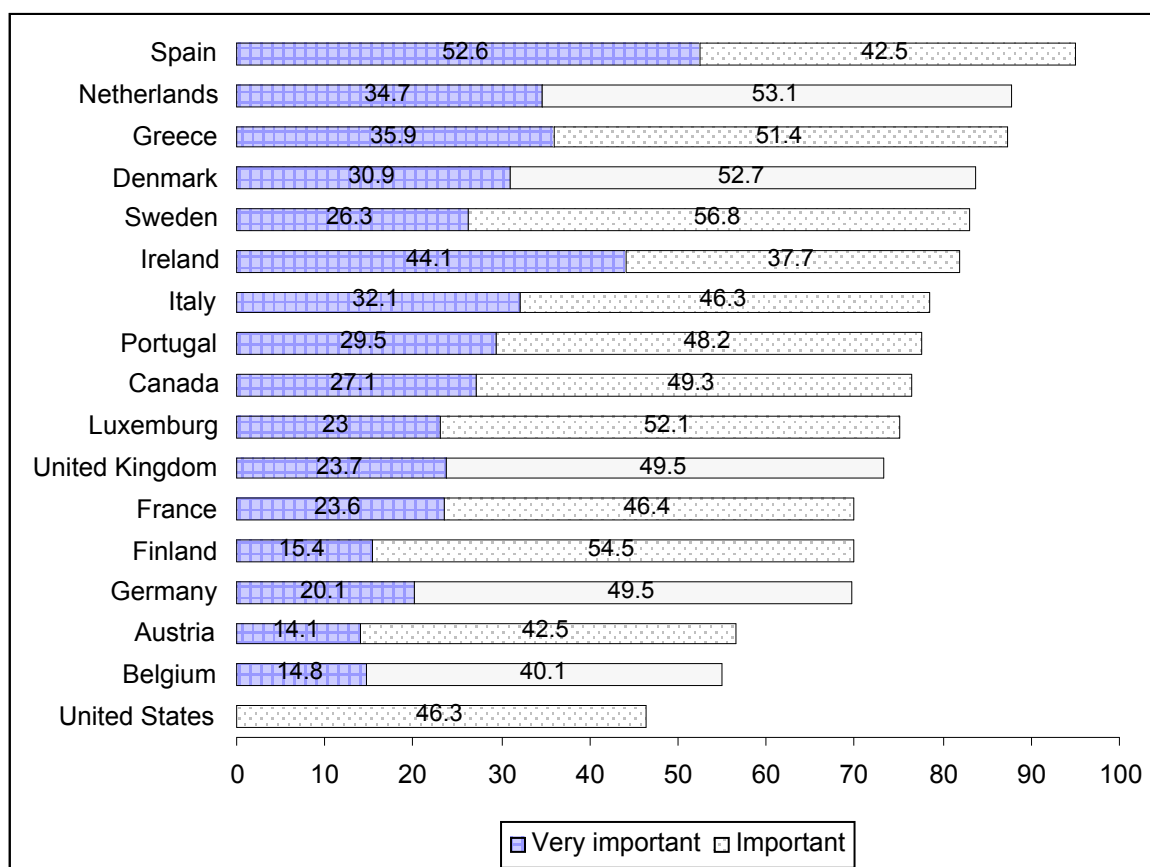
Overall, the Canadian public does appear highly supportive of foreign aid. An Ipsos-Reid survey presented to the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade in September 2001 confirms the earlier findings of Lavergne and Smillie. According to this survey, 76.4% of Canadians consider that it is important for their country to pursue the promotion of assistance to poorer countries, while only 11.2% think that this foreign policy objective is not important (12.4% are neutral).ⁱⁱⁱ 53% of the respondents also agree that Canada should give more aid to developing countries, while only 26% disagree (21% are neutral).^{iv} The fact that public support for more generous levels of foreign aid is lower than the support for the very principle of development assistance is to be expected, since the commitment evoked in the budget increase question is more explicit and important. The gap between these two questions, however, indicates that the Canadian consensus over foreign aid is weaker and more fragile than what is often suggested. It is telling that only a small majority (53%) favor increased budgets, even though the previous decade was marked by a drastic reduction of the country's aid effort.

This limited support for what, in fact, would be a movement back toward Canada's traditional policies, may in part be explained by the public's lack of information on the issue. In Canada and elsewhere, most studies converge to suggest that public opinion on development assistance is "often misinformed and based on exaggerated perceptions of the size of aid budgets, or weak understanding of development co-operation" (OECD 2001, 1). On average, Canadians think that 10.5% of the federal budget is devoted to aid; only 20% know that, in fact, it amounts to less than 2% (Tomlinson 2002b, 3). When told of the actual size of the aid budget, respondents tend to become more supportive of higher expenditures. In an Environics poll presented to the Canadian International Development Agency in October 1998, the percentage of persons who considered that the country's aid budget was not sufficient increased from 24% to 44% when respondents were informed of the real amount of money that the federal government spent on development assistance (Environics Research Inc. 1998). These results suggest that public support for increased aid budget would probably be higher if Canadians were better informed about the cutbacks of recent years.

In a cross-national perspective, Canadian support for foreign aid is about average, and the country stands very much as the quintessential "middle" power. As can be seen in Table 1 below, among the 17 countries for which comparable data are available, Canada occupies the median position: 8 countries show a higher level of public support for development assistance than Canada, and 8 countries a lower level. The countries where support is stronger than in Canada can be divided in two main groups: those of Northern

Europe, where development assistance has long been a foreign policy priority (the Netherlands, Denmark, and Sweden), and countries of Southern Europe, which have themselves benefited from European regional development programs (Spain, Greece, Italy, and Portugal) (Noël and Thérien 2002, 645). Canadians' attitudes toward aid are more positive, however, than what is the case in 4 out of the 5 G7 countries for which data are available (the United Kingdom, France, Germany, and the United States). The contrast with the United States, the only country where less than half of the population (46%) supports foreign aid, is particularly striking. In spite of the close economic integration and cultural proximity between the two countries, Canadians and Americans remain divided in their views regarding the role of rich countries toward poor countries, just as they are over a variety of other public policies (Perlin 1997; Hoberg 2002). Overall, the level of support for the aid program in Canada is remarkably similar to what is found in Europe. In 1998, 76% of Europeans thought that foreign aid was an important goal to pursue, and 51% of them agreed that their national governments should give more aid to poor countries (INRA 1999, 2). Such results are almost identical to those of the 2001 Ipsos-Reid survey mentioned above.

**Table 1: Support for the Aid Program in North America
and Europe^v**



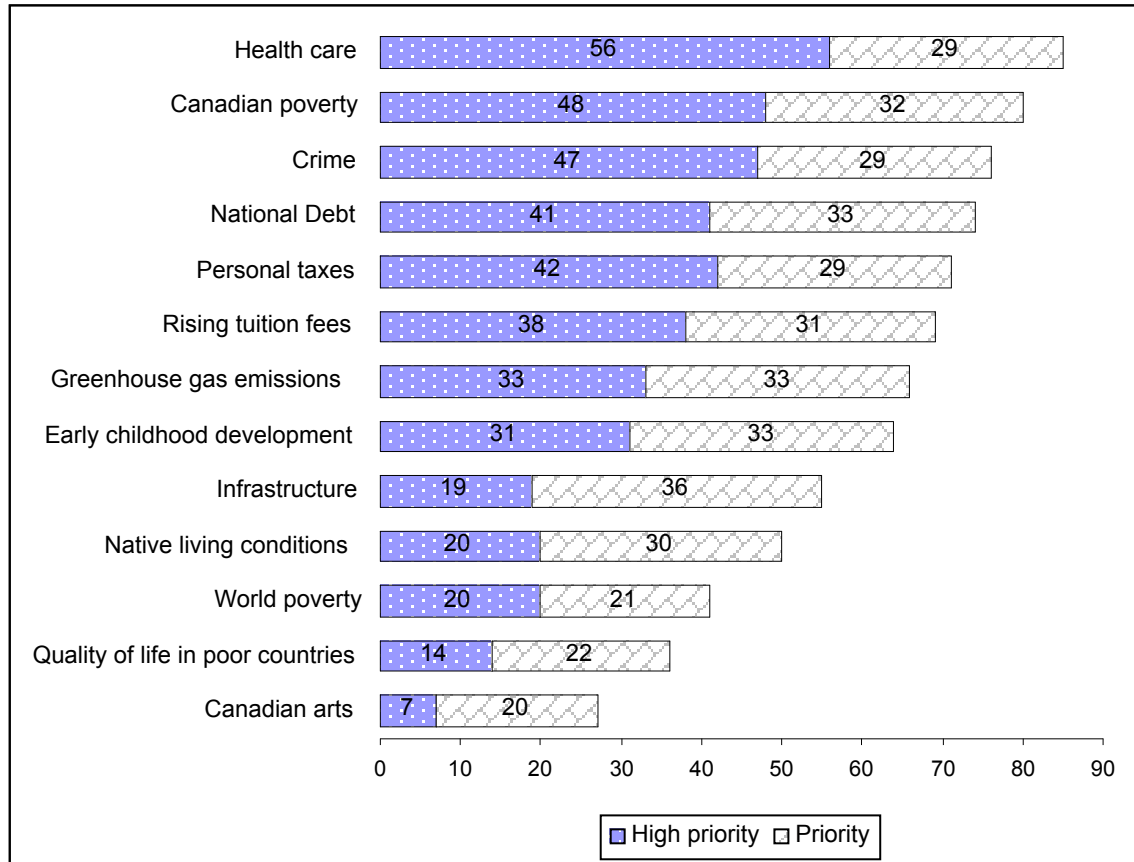
Sources: For Canada: Ipsos-Reid 2001; for the United States: Chicago Council of Foreign Relations, 2000; for Europe: INRA 1999.^{vi}

Over time, Canadian attitudes toward development assistance have not varied much, less in fact than Canadian policy. As in most other OECD countries, overall, public support for aid “has not declined in the past decade”

(OECD 2001, 1). This does not mean that the public does not respond to the policy context. Public attitudes do fluctuate from one year to another. Various surveys have shown higher levels of support in the early 1990s and lower levels in the mid-1990s. In the 1993-95 period, in particular, when the fight against the budget deficit was the utmost priority of the government, the proportion of Canadians who thought that the government spent the right amount or not enough to assist developing countries had dropped to around 50% (from 76% in 1989; Environics Research Inc. 1998). In a context of unprecedented financial restrictions, Canadians were more preoccupied with domestic than with foreign policy issues.

Even when the budgetary context is less difficult, domestic programs tend to have the priority. Canadians are supportive of foreign aid, but they simply do not rank it very high among their different concerns. As can be seen in Table 2, in 2000, only 41 % of Canadians thought world poverty should be a priority for the federal government (20 % made it a high priority), and even less (36%) said the same for the quality of life in poor countries (a high priority for 14% of respondents). These international development objectives ranked well below a series of domestic priorities, including many that were not even within the jurisdictions of the federal government. The main public concerns had to do with health care (a priority for 85% of respondents), Canadian poverty (80%), crime (76%), the national debt (74%), personal taxes (71%), rising tuition fees (69%), greenhouse gas emissions (66%), and early childhood development (64%). Among issues that were given a low priority, only Canadian arts (71% of respondents made it a low priority) ranked behind

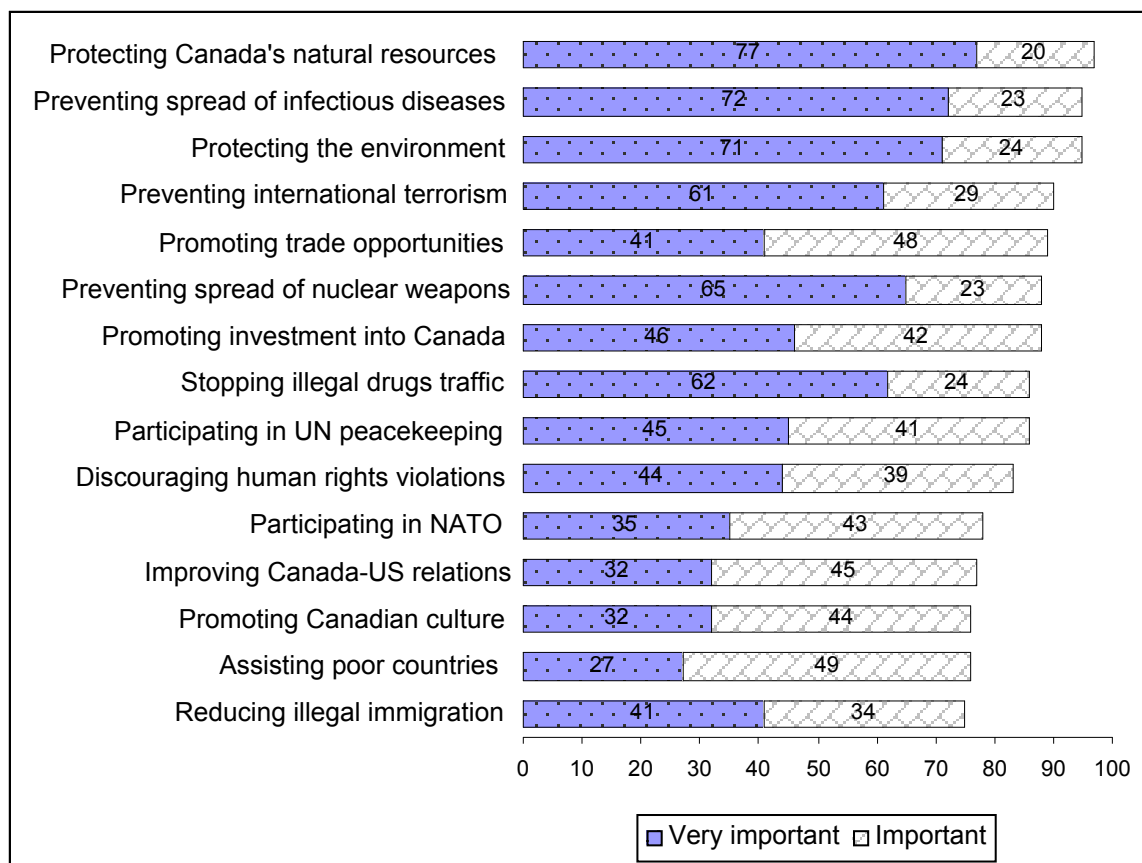
quality of life in poor countries (63%) and world poverty (57%). Public support for foreign aid, it has been said, tends to be “a mile wide and an inch deep” (Smillie 1998b, 23). The contrast between the high support expressed by Canadians and the relatively low importance they give to the issue seems in line with this assessment. The fact that Canadians give more importance to domestic issues than to the reduction of world poverty is not surprising. This is indeed the situation that prevails in most donor countries, and it probably reflects the common view that “charity begins at home.” In Canada, however, the gap between the public’s preoccupation with world poverty and its concerns for domestic issues, including poverty in Canada, appears particularly wide. In this respect, Canadians’ attitudes seem close to those that prevail in some European countries that are less supportive of foreign aid, and more preoccupied by domestic inequalities (Austria, Belgium, France) (Noël and Thérien 2002, 642-45).

Table 2: The Public Policy Priorities of Canadians

Source: Earncliffe Research and Communications 2000.^{vii}

When comparing foreign aid with other foreign policy priorities, we also see the limits of public support for “humane internationalism.” Table 3 presents 15 foreign policy goals that Canadians were asked to assess in the 2001 Ipsos-Reid survey. Assisting poor countries was the policy priority that elicited the least “very important” assessments (27%). The issue ranked near the bottom of the list of “important” or “very important” objectives, with 76% of

respondents saying it was important, a rate similar to that obtained for reducing illegal immigration (75%), promoting Canadian culture (76%), or improving Canada-US relations (77%), but quite below protecting Canada's natural resources (97%), preventing the spread of infectious diseases (95%), protecting the environment (95%), preventing international terrorism (90%), and promoting trade opportunities (89%). At the very least, this order of preferences suggests that aid is no more than one of many Canada's vocations.

Table 3: The Foreign Policy Priorities of Canadians

Source: Ipsos-Reid 2001. See endnote 7 for the exact question.

One reason often evoked to explain Canadians' lukewarm support for development assistance is a high degree of skepticism about the effectiveness of the aid program.^{viii} The Ipsos-Reid survey indicates that, in 2001, 50% of Canadians believed that aid made poor countries too dependent, and as much as 37% thought that it would not make a difference even in the poorest countries. Such attitudes are fairly similar to what is found in Europe and in the United States, where citizens are also concerned about

the use of development resources and, above all, about the possibility that aid be granted to non-democratic governments that violate human rights. As Ian Smillie notes, there is a widely shared perception that “aid has little impact, is used for self-serving purposes, and is being wasted by bureaucrats and dictators alike.” Such “public disenchantment,” argues Smillie, is not equivalent to “compassion fatigue” (1998b, 21 and 24). Still, in Canada as elsewhere, many citizens have doubts about foreign aid.

While the exact reasons for Canadians’ skepticism remain difficult to evaluate with precision, what is certain, however, is that collectively Canadians appear profoundly ambivalent, if not incoherent, about foreign aid. Consider, for instance, the interplay between principles and interests that emerge in the 2001 Ipsos-Reid survey. That year, a majority of Canadians (67%) believed that social values such as the protection of the environment and the promotion of human rights should be the driving forces behind Canada's foreign policy. Only 32% of respondents thought that the country's external relations should be guided primarily by economic objectives such as increasing trade opportunities. At the same time, responses to some questions related to aid indicated a strong tendency to focus on the national interest. A majority of Canadians (61%), for example, believed that aid should be given primarily to countries where there is a clear benefit to Canada (23% disagreed with this proposition, and 16% were neutral). In the same perspective, Africa was considered to be the least important region for Canadian foreign policy, even though it was certainly the continent where development needs were the greatest.

To sum up, Canadians appear supportive of foreign aid in principle, at a level that is constant over time and comparable to that found in European countries, but their generosity remains guarded. Support for increases in aid budget stays much below the support expressed for aid in general and, when compared to other domestic and international priorities, aid is surpassed by practically all issues of interest to Canadians. Canadians wish a foreign policy anchored in social values, but they worry about the effectiveness of development assistance and consider aid should be distributed with an eye for Canadian interests. To some extent, these ambivalent views parallel those of the Canadian government whose sophisticated and generous development rhetoric has not been matched by policy and expenditures in the last decade. As the next section shows, the tensions identified here may well be a reflection of political conflicts within the Canadian public rather than of mere incoherence.

Two Publics?

The Left, the Right, and Development Assistance

Development assistance is a political issue, anchored in a country's domestic politics. As a form of income redistribution, it raises all the core questions that divide the left and the right in liberal democracies, questions that have to do with human development, freedom, equality and the role of individual and collective actions. The rhetoric of the left about aid typically evokes social justice, solidarity and public commitments, whereas discourses

on the right refer instead to dependency, inefficiency, and waste. In countries where social-democratic parties have been powerful and where they have built a generous and universal welfare state, foreign aid tends to be at a high level (Noël and Thérien 1995; Thérien and Noël 2000). Where conservatives have dominated, domestic inequalities remain more important and they tend to prevail in the public's mind, over international development issues (Noël and Thérien 2002). Not surprisingly, individuals and groups on the left tend to be more favorable to international redistribution, whereas people and social forces on the right are generally more skeptical and reluctant (Lumsdaine 1993; Thérien 2002). Behind their broad but relatively thin consensus on internationalism and foreign aid, Canadians are therefore likely to be divided along political lines, on foreign aid just as on other foreign or domestic issues.

The Environics survey of 1998 suggests that indeed Canadians are divided between left and right over development assistance. Less than 30% of the respondents who identified themselves as supporters of the New Democratic Party (27%), of the Bloc québécois (28%), and of the Liberal Party of Canada (29%) considered that too much was spent on foreign aid, whereas more than 40% of respondents who identified themselves as supporters of conservative parties thought Canada spent too much (43% of the supporters of the Progressive Conservative party, and 46% of those who identified with the Reform Party) (Environics Research Inc. 1998). These results are in line with the ideological positions of Canadian parties, which clearly differentiate themselves on a left-right axis. The NDP is solidly anchored on the left, the Bloc québécois supports Quebec sovereignty and is on the centre-left, the

Liberal Party is a left-leaning centrist party, and the Conservatives and the Alliance (formerly the Reform party) compete for the conservative votes, with the Alliance being somewhat further on the right (Blais, Gigendil, Nadeau and Nevitte 2002, 17-33).^{ix}

The relationship between ideological/partisan orientations and support for foreign aid, however, has rarely been tested rigorously. In fact, the question was seldom raised, because practitioners and scholars seemed more interested in establishing the contours of the Canadian consensus than in exploring the political divisions that underpin public opinion on foreign policy. As a consequence, polls on foreign policy issues rarely asked questions about domestic issues or partisan preferences, whereas more conventional political surveys left most foreign policy issues aside. To study this relationship between domestic and foreign policy attitudes, we will use findings from the post-electoral questionnaire of the 2000 Canadian Election Study, which include many questions on individual political preferences (Blais, Gigendil, Nadeau and Nevitte 2000). This data set is not without limitations since it contains only one question on foreign aid, raised in the context of a discussion of a number of domestic spending priorities.^x Still, the Canadian Election Study survey offers a unique opportunity to link attitudes about development assistance to a number of ideological and partisan orientations.

To test the validity of the foreign aid question included in the 2000 Canadian Election Study we have compared it, indirectly, to two similar questions, one on support for aid and the other on support for increased aid budgets, taken from the 2001 Ipsos-Reid survey. Table 4 presents the

relationships between support for foreign aid, as measured by the three questions, and a number of basic socio-economic characteristics, namely age, level of education, personal income, gender, region, language, and religiosity. The first column indicates the expected direction of the relationship, on the basis of the literature on public opinion and foreign aid.

Table 4: Socio-economic Correlates of Public Support for the Aid Program and for Increased Aid Spending

	Predicted Support	Aid Program (Ipsos-Reid)	Aid Spending (Ipsos-Reid)	Aid Spending (CES)
Age	-	-.025	-.043	-.016
Education	+	.010	.064*	.039*
Income	-	-.084**	-.078**	-.020
Gender (women)	+	.145***	.067**	.053**
Region (Quebec)	+	.125***	.240***	.018
Language (French)	+	.134***	.223***	.010
Religiosity	+	NA	NA	.062**

Sources: Ipsos-Reid, 2001; Blais, Gidengil, Nadeau, and Nevitte, 2000.

Note: The results are Pearson correlation coefficients.

Significance levels (two-tailed): *<.05 **<.01 ***<.001.

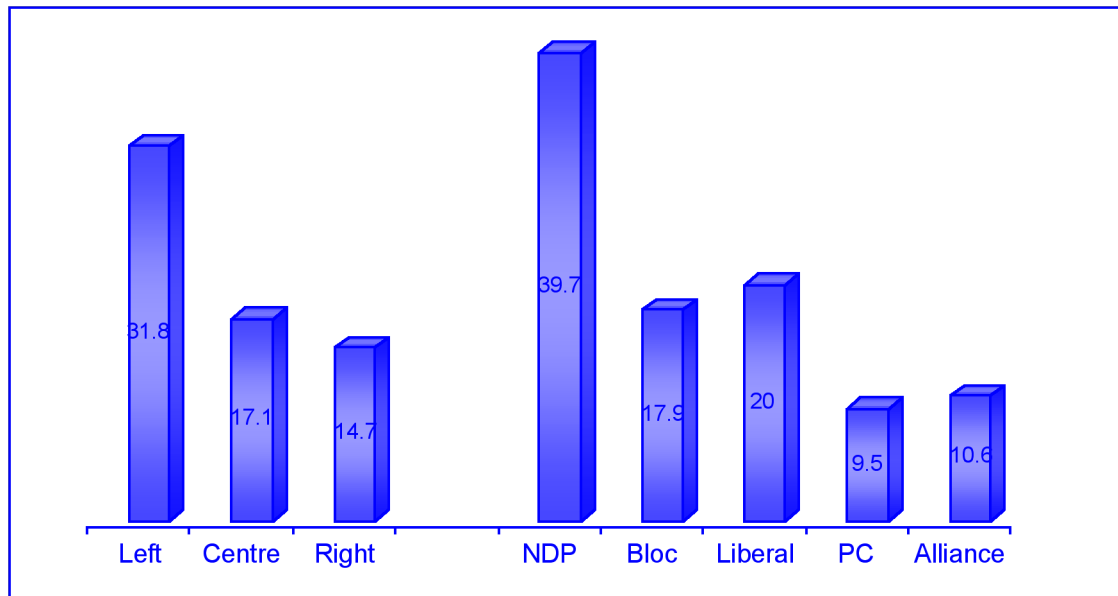
Gender, Region and Language are dummy variables with the value of 1 as noted in parentheses. The exact questions are presented in endnotes 3, 4 and 10.

First, it should be noted that the three questions produce relationships in the same, expected direction. Second, findings for the Ipsos-Reid questions tend to be more robust, with at least four relationships that are significant. Women, francophones, and Quebec residents are significantly more supportive of foreign aid than men, Anglophones and Canadians outside

Quebec. Persons with higher income, on the other hand, are less favorable to development assistance. With the Canadian Election Study question, the relationships involving gender, language, region, and income are all in the predicted direction, but only gender is significant. Level of education and religiosity, on the other hand, become significant in this case: respondents that are more educated or more religious are more likely to approve foreign aid than others. Third, most correlations are not very strong, and this may explain why three different questions produce results that are compatible but different. We can thus conclude that the Canadian Election Study is a valid assessment of support for foreign aid, although without a broader set of questions we must remain careful in the interpretation of our findings. Further, we should note that, however significant, socio-economic variables may not be the best predictors of support for foreign aid. Ideological and partisan orientations could well be more important.

Table 5 below presents descriptive data on the level of support for increased spending on foreign aid, according to a respondent's ideological and partisan orientations. The results indicate clearly the ideological underpinnings of support for foreign aid, with people who place themselves on the left being much more likely to approve higher expenditures (32%) than people who consider themselves to be in the political centre (17%) or on the right (15%). Partisan figures are even more striking, with new democrats at 40% of support and conservatives and reformists around 10%. Liberals and Bloc québécois voters stand in the middle with 20% and 18% of respondents approving increases in spending.^{xi}

**Table 5: Ideological and Partisan Orientations and Support
for Increased Aid Spending**



Source: Blais, Gidengil, Nadeau, and Nevitte 2000.

Table 6 presents the correlations between ideological self-placement, partisan orientations, and support for increases in foreign aid, and confirms that all these relationships are in the expected direction and significant. First, there is a strong positive relationship between ideological self-placement and partisan views, which confirms the relevance of the left-right orientations of Canadian parties. Second, the relationships between personal political views and support for increased aid budget are also positive and significant, with people on the left and centre-left more likely to support such increases. Our

results echo the findings of Wittkopf and Holsti on the ideological divisions that define the foreign policy orientations of the American public (Wittkopf 1990; Holsti 1996). They suggest, as we hypothesized, that Canadians are divided over internationalism, along left-right ideological and partisan lines. These findings are also compatible with those of Lumsdaine, who has probed extensively the ideological foundations of support for foreign aid, and with our own comparative work, which associated support for foreign aid with domestic political orientations (Lumsdaine 1993; Noël and Thérien 2002).

**Table 6: Correlations Between Ideological and Partisan Orientations,
and Support for Increased Aid Spending**

	Right to left self- placement scale	Increase aid spending levels
Right to left self- placement scale		.147***
Partisan affiliation from right to left	.444***	.156***

Source: Blais, Gidengil, Nadeau, and Nevitte 2000.

Note: The results are Pearson correlation coefficients.

Significance levels (two-tailed): *<.05 **<.01 ***<.001.

The Canadian Election Study being an extensive survey of political attitudes, we also have the possibility of going one step further, to see how support for increased foreign aid budgets relates to a host of other ideological orientations, which can be seen as dimensions of the broader left-right debate. Table 7 below presents the most plausible and interesting relationships.

**Table 7: Political, Economic and Social Beliefs, and Support
for Increased Aid Spending**

Political Beliefs		Economic Beliefs		Social Beliefs	
Support for Domestic Redistribution	.254***	Support for Free-Trade	.074***	Support for Women's Rights	.168***
Confidence in the Government	.208***	Support for Trade Unions	.170***	Dislike for Minorities	-.273***
Support for Increased Defense Spending	.059**	People Can Find Jobs if They Try Hard Enough	-.127***	Dislike for Immigrants	-.315***
Support for Peacekeeping	.182***	Jobs Should be Created Only by the Private Sector	.031	Dislike for Aborigines	-.250***
				Social Traditionalism	-.148***
				Support for Environmental Protection	.085**

Source: Blais, Gidengil, Nadeau, and Nevitte 2000.

Note: The results are Pearson correlation coefficients.

Significance levels (two-tailed): *<.05 **<.01 ***<.001.

With respect to political beliefs, the relationship between support for domestic redistribution and support for increases in foreign aid budgets yields

the strongest correlation (.254***). This finding is consistent with our theoretical expectations that attitudes about aid are anchored in broader views about justice and redistribution, and can be understood as a manifestation of the political debate between the left and the right. There is also a strong positive relationship between confidence in government and support for increased foreign aid budget (.208***). This result is more difficult to interpret. One may assume that confidence in government is a dimension of the left-right debate, people on the right being more likely to distrust government. From this perspective, it would seem logical that citizens who have less confidence in government would have more doubts about the effectiveness of aid and oppose higher expenditures. This reasoning, however, is not supported by the relationships between confidence in government and the respondents' ideological and partisan orientations, which are not significant. This is the case because, in Canada as elsewhere, there is a general decline in the public's confidence in government (Bricker and Greenspon 2001, 6 and 316-17; Warren 2002). This decline is not driven by conservative views, but rather by new values and ideas about politics and democracy. People who distrust government tend to be informed and active citizens. They are not disengaged, but attentive and critical, and they can be found on the left and in the centre, as well as on the right (Roese 2002). The relationship between confidence in government and support for increased foreign aid budgets must therefore be interpreted with prudence. A low level of confidence cannot simply be read as a conservative view.

The last two items in the political beliefs column, support for increased defence spending and support for peacekeeping, are both positively and significantly related to support for increased aid budgets. These relationships, however, cannot be understood simply as expressions of the left-right debate. They probably capture other dimensions of support for internationalism, such as a preference for an “activist” foreign policy (Munton and Keating 2001, 537-39). The same could be said of support for free-trade, which Munton and Keating have associated with “economic internationalism” (2001, 537-39). The two other items in the economic beliefs column yield significant relationships, more in line with our left-right explanation. Respondents who support trade unions are more likely to approve foreign aid, and those who believe that “people can find jobs if they try hard enough” tend to disapprove increased aid budgets. Finally, correlations between social beliefs and support for aid are also consistent with a left-right interpretation. Canadians who support women’s rights and environmental protection are favorable to development assistance, whereas those who dislike minorities, immigrants or aboriginal peoples do not. Predictably, social traditionalism is also negatively correlated with support for a more important aid effort.

Just as they appear ambivalent in their support for foreign aid, Canadians also seem divided over the question. Those who identify themselves on the left, who vote for the NDP and, to a lesser extent, the Liberal Party and the Bloc québécois, and who approve income redistribution, trade unions, women’s rights and environmental protection, are more likely to favour a more generous aid commitment. Those who place themselves on

the right, support the Conservative party or the Alliance, think individuals should see for themselves, and dislike minorities tend to disapprove development assistance. Behind the familiar portrait of a public committed to “humane internationalism,” we find a more fragile consensus, defined by an awkward combination of generous principles and guarded commitments, and a divided public, which disagrees on foreign aid, just as it does on most issues of political relevance. These divisions are in part social, cultural and regional: a young educated woman from Quebec is more likely to support development assistance than an older, less educated but wealthier man from outside Quebec. First and foremost, however, these are political divisions. The ideological and partisan correlates of support for foreign aid make perfect sense as the multi-faceted expression of the opposition between the left and the right in Canada.

Conclusion

In the 1990s, the Canadian government dramatically reduced its foreign aid effort, to end up becoming one of the least generous donor countries of the OECD. All the while, Canada maintained a relatively progressive, even innovative, rhetoric on development assistance, without recognizing the widening gap between this discourse and the country’s actual contributions. To some extent, the Canadian public shared this ambiguity, as it gave a strong approval to development assistance in principle but appeared reluctant to accept increases in aid budgets, despite the successive rounds of cutbacks

of the 1990s. In this sense, Canadians were divided, of two minds, over internationalism. They were also divided in a more fundamental and political way, between two publics, one on the left more favorable to foreign aid, and another on the right, more skeptical, even reluctant. This division indicates the limits of the idea of a consensus on internationalism. There may be such a consensus, but internationalism does not escape politics. On the contrary, attitudes on the subject are closely intertwined with the views Canadians have on ideologies, political parties, income distribution, government, trade unions, the labour market, social rights, minorities, and the environment. Foreign aid, and probably internationalism in general, belongs to the broader political debates that defines Canadian society.

This article has examined how a central component of Canadian internationalism — development assistance — is anchored in public opinion. With the help of data from the Canadian Election Study, a source rarely used by scholars of foreign policy, we have been able to tie citizens' views of foreign aid to the cleavages that shape domestic politics in this country. More work should be pursued in this direction, with other foreign policy issues in particular. Our analysis also suggests that Canadians react to development assistance in ways that are very similar to what has been found in other donor countries. Future studies should be guided by such a comparative perspective, and avoid assuming Canadian internationalism is distinct or unique.

How important, one may ask, is public opinion on international affairs? Many scholars and practitioners assume the public is ignorant and relatively

indifferent about foreign policy. It is true, as we have seen, that foreign aid does not rank very high among the preoccupations of Canadians, and issues that have low political salience are unlikely to be shaped strongly by public attitudes and perceptions (Page 2002, 336-37). The fact that there is little direct link between public opinion and a country's foreign aid is indeed a relatively solid, and to many disappointing, finding of comparative scholarship on the question (McDonnell and Solignac Lecomte 2002; Olsen 2000). Yet, if Canadians are divided, it also means that internationalism is an integral component of the broader political debate. In this sense, public opinion and politics will always matter. In the long run, at least, what Canadians think about global justice, and how they deliberate and vote on the matter, will influence and shape what their government does in the international arena.

NOTES

- ⁱ Our study is primarily based on data drawn from four recent national surveys that were conducted by Environics Research Inc. (1998), Earnscliffe Research and Communications (2000), the Canadian Election Study group (Blais, Gidengil, Nadeau and Nevitte, 2000), and Ipsos-Reid (2001).
- ⁱⁱ The following statistics are drawn from OECD, various years.
- ⁱⁱⁱ The exact question is: "I am going to read you a list of goals Canada has for its foreign policy and for each I'd like you to tell me how important you think it is for Canada to pursue that goal, using a scale of 0 to 10 where 0 means not important at all and 10 means very important. 5) Promoting assistance to poorer countries."
- ^{iv} The exact question is: "I am going to read you a list of statements about Canada's foreign policy and I would like you to tell me whether you agree or disagree with each of these statements. Please respond using a scale from 0 to 10, where 0 means you strongly disagree and 10 means you strongly agree. 12) Canada should give more foreign assistance to developing countries."
- ^v Variations in the questions make any direct comparison tentative, but the results presented here are nevertheless in line with the historical support levels observed in most countries. See, for instance, Smillie and Helmich 1998, and Stern 1998.

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- ^{vi} For Canada, the exact question is presented in endnote 3. For the United States, the question is: “On the whole, do you favour or oppose our giving economic aid to other nations?” For Europe, the question is: “In your opinion, it is very important, important, not very important, or not at all important to help people in poor countries in Africa, South America, Asia, etc. to develop.”
- ^{vii} The exact question is: “Thinking just of the federal government, on a 7-point scale where 1 means lowest priority, 4 means middle priority, and 7 means highest priority, how much priority would you like the government to put on [list topics]?”
- ^{viii} The same argument has been made to explain American attitudes. See Page and Barabas 2000, 348-50.
- ^{ix} This characterization was of course slightly altered with the recent merger of the Progressive Conservative party and the Alliance.
- ^x The exact question is: “Aid to developing countries: should the federal government spend more, less, or about the same as now?” The other issues raised randomly in the list are: defence, welfare, pensions and Old Age Security, health care, unemployment insurance, and education.
- ^{xi} These results are consistent with those of the Environics poll mentioned above.

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