

# The Canadian public and foreign policy

by P.H. Chapin

There are many in this country who believe they are knowledgeable about what Canadians know or want in foreign policy. Unfortunately, the portrait they paint is not often flattering. They tend to describe their fellow citizens as parochial in their interests, ill-versed in international affairs, stimulated only by the most gruesome instances of man's inhumanity to man.

Recently, empirical data has become available against which to test such assumptions, and it suggests the assumptions are wrong. While Canadians may claim only modest knowledge of international affairs, the data makes clear they possess an impressive grasp of the world and its complexities and have sophisticated views on a broad range of international issues.

In the spring of 1984 and again in the summer of 1985, the Department of External Affairs — for the first times in its history — commissioned comprehensive public opinion polls on foreign policy issues. Before then polls had been accorded rather limited value in the Department. But the establishment of a full-fledged policy development bureau in the fall of 1983 provided the necessary stimulus for adding public opinion polling to the Department's inventory of policy-making tools.

The polls were conducted on the Department's behalf by Goldfarb Consultants and Decima Research respectively. In both cases departmental officers worked closely with the pollster to devise questionnaires ranging across a wide spectrum of issues. In writing the questions care was taken to build links with more limited departmental polls in 1979 and 1982, and with polls taken in the United States and Europe.

The picture that emerged was one of a society in which the vast majority express an interest in international events, believe that Canada can and should exert its influence internationally, and expect their government to be actively engaged in finding solutions to international problems. The two issues Canadians care most about are international peace and security, and relieving the hunger and poverty of the Third World. The relationship which is most important to them is that with the United States.

*P. H. Chapin is Director of the Political and Strategic Analysis Division of the Policy Development Bureau in the Department of External Affairs in Ottawa.*

## International peace and security

If the media sometimes implies that Canadians worry a lot about nuclear war and that they tend to blame the Americans for most of the difficulties which have beset détente, the polls tell another tale. In both 1984 and 1985 two-out-of-three respondents doubted they would encounter nuclear war in their lifetimes. By the same margin, they thought both the United States and the Soviet Union bore some responsibility for the deterioration in East/West relations, with a minority blaming the Americans less than the Russians.

Nor are Canadians as allergic on defence questions: the press often portrays them to be. Significant majorities believe that the Soviet Union poses a military threat and that deterring a possible Soviet attack requires maintaining a balance of forces between East and West. In the 1984 poll four-out-of-five favored Canada's remaining in NATO — an approval rating significantly higher than that recently recorded in major allied countries (see Chart 1).

In 1984 four-out-of-five also approved increased spending on conventional forces "if it would reduce reliance on nuclear weapons to defend the West." But national preference for reducing reliance on nuclear weapons would not seem to amount to a national aversion against resorting to nuclear weapons in *extremis*. Opinion was evenly divided on the question of whether NATO forces should be prepared to resort to nuclear weapons to avoid being overwhelmed by Warsaw Pact conventional forces. Polls indicate the average European, in contrast, would prefer to risk defeat.

## Cruise and SDI

The 1984 poll posed a series of questions on cruise missile testing, and found a similar division of opinion on the issue, 47 percent for and 47 percent against. In contrast, a 1982 poll indicated 24 percent for and 67 percent against. One can only assume that, in the intervening period, the national debate on the issue led a significant minority of the population to the conclusion that the merits of cruise missile testing were greater than they had originally believed.

The 1985 poll, for its part, posed a series of questions on the US Strategic Defence Initiative. By design the questionnaire avoided using the pejorative "Star Wars" designation at the outset of the questioning. What it found was that