

Canadian attitudes on disarmament

by Don Munton and Michael Slack

The survey was conducted during March and April by the Canadian Institute of International Affairs (CIIA). It asked a range of questions about current international problems, particularly arms control and disarmament, of the Institute's 3000 members across Canada. The results reported here are based on a preliminary analysis of approximately 500 returned questionnaires. (If this were a random sample of Canadians the results would be expected to be accurate within plus or minus 5%, 95 time out of 100.) The CIIA does not itself take policy positions; these results thus reflect only the collective views of the survey respondents. The Institute's members, while likely more interested in international affairs than the average citizen, probably do not hold views markedly non-representative of Canadians as a whole.

By the time the Second United Nations Special Session on Disarmament (UNSSOD II) began in early June, the threat of nuclear war had re-emerged as the dominant international concern of Canadians. Some see greater military strength as necessary for security. Many more support actual reductions in the nuclear arsenals of the superpowers. And there appear to have been in recent decades some significant shifts in the perceptions held of the United States and the Soviet Union by at least a key segment of the Canadian public. Deteriorating East-West relations, the lack of progress in arms control talks, and even the precariousness of world peace are now blamed, not on the USSR alone, but on both superpowers.

These are some of the general, and often surprising, findings of a recent opinion survey. An earlier poll conducted in late 1980 found that Canadians saw energy and resource shortages, the danger of nuclear war, and world hunger as the three most important current international problems. Each was mentioned by slightly more or slightly less than 20% of those sampled. Only eighteen months later, in answer to the same question, fully 35% of the CIIA respondents select the danger of nuclear war as the most important problem. Almost 60% indicate it is one of the three most important. (See Table 1.) No other single problem is even close. Despite pervasive conditions of high unemployment and high interest rates, the "weakness of Western economic systems" is a poor runner-up with only 16% of respondents ranking it first.

Another indication of increasing concern about a nuclear holocaust can be found in answers to the question

"Are the chances of a nuclear war breaking out greater, or less great, than they were ten years ago?" In a 1971 Canadian Gallup poll, about one in every six (17%) responded "greater." In a 1975 poll, one in every three (33%) said the same. In the current CIIA survey, it was three out of every five (59%). And, while about one-half of the respondents were saying "less great" in the early 1970s, today less than one in ten say this. (The current survey's results actually compare quite closely in this respect with some recent Gallup polls using the same question, and also compare with recent surveys in the United States.)

Not surprisingly, the vast majority in the current survey believe East-West relations have deteriorated. Almost one-half (48%) agree that East-West relations "have worsened in recent years and are likely to continue to deteriorate through the 1980s." About one-third (34%) agree that relations have worsened but that this is not likely to be a long-term trend. Fewer than one in five (18%) believe there has been no significant change.

Arms control or disarmament

In this climate it might be expected that arms control and disarmament questions would be regarded as important. They are. Almost three-quarters (73%) of those surveyed rate arms control and disarmament measures as very important. Over 90% believe them to be important to some degree. Moreover, and perhaps more surprisingly, arms reduction is overwhelmingly preferred to increased arms as the best road to security. When asked whether Canada's security would be enhanced if Western arms levels were "increased somewhat," maintained, or "reduced somewhat," almost three-quarters (73%) choose the third of these alternatives. In contrast, but one in five (22%) believe security would be enhanced by increased arms. Only a very small group (4%) prefer maintaining existing levels. To the extent these attitudes are shared by the Canadian public at large, such results imply a powerful undercurrent of support for measures at least as strong as

Don Munton is at present Research Director of the Canadian Institute of International Affairs on leave from the Centre for Foreign Policy Studies, Dalhousie University, Halifax. He is the author of articles on public opinion and other aspects of Canadian foreign policy and is presently writing a book on Canada-US relations. Michael Slack is a graduate student in the Political Science Department at York University. He specializes in strategic studies and Canadian defence policy.