

Afghan mission impossible: Poll

Half of Canadians oppose troop role Support dropping sharply: EKOS

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OTTAWA—Public support for Canada's military role in Afghanistan has dropped "precipitously" as more and more Canadians think troops are fighting an impossible mission, a new poll shows.

"We're sending our best people over there with our best equipment. It's a real effort and you know what, the more we do the less we seem to be seeing success," said Frank Graves, president of EKOS Research.

"Maybe we have to be there but, my God, it's ... (an) ambivalent position because it doesn't seem we're going to make any difference."

Currently, 49 per cent of Canadians oppose the Afghanistan mission, 38 per cent support it and 12 per cent have no opinion, according to an EKOS poll done for the *Toronto Star*.

"There has been a precipitous decline. For the first time we see more Canadians opposed to the mission than in support of it," Graves said in an interview.

In December, 2001, support for Canadian participation in military action in Afghanistan was at 62 per cent, with only 18 per cent opposed. By December, 2002, 50 per cent supported the mission, with 30 per cent opposed. And support has dropped more than 10 percentage points since early this year, the same time that Canadian troops took on a more dangerous and high profile role in southern Afghanistan.

Surprisingly though, opposition isn't driven by concerns about mounting casualties — 16 soldiers have been killed in the last three months alone. Rather, opponents say the mission is unlikely to bring stability and democracy to Afghanistan and fear that it is bringing Canada uncomfortably close to American foreign policy, the poll indicates.

More broadly, Graves said pessimism is infecting Canadians' outlook on the world and fuelling an "incipient isolationism."

"There's a growing sense that problems in places like the Middle East, in Iraq, in Israel are things not tractable, not solvable, that our best interests will (not) achieve real progress in our lifetime," Graves said.

"That's a very depressing sense of futility and hopelessness that seems to infect our outlook."

Even among supporters, just 23 per cent think Canadian efforts will be able to bring stability and democracy to Afghanistan. Instead, 39 per cent of supporters cited the need to have troops in Afghanistan to root out terrorism "before it strikes us here at home."

They also said Canada has a moral and legal obligation to NATO allies and the government of Afghanistan.



RON BULL / TORONTO STAR

World War I veterans Dwight Wilson, left, and Lloyd Clement are front and centre at the unveiling yesterday of the 30-metre-long Veterans' Memorial on the front lawn of the Legislature building.

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The EKOS survey sampled 1,004 Canadians between Sept. 12 and 14 and is considered accurate within 3.1 per cent, 19 times out of 20.

Prime Minister Stephen Harper says the Canadian mission is making a difference.

"Afghanistan was really the launching pad for attacks on North American soil that killed Canadian citizens," Harper said in a weekend interview with CBC Radio One's *The House*.

"We're much safer as Canadians today because we've undertaken this mission and most Afghans are also safer."

Despite the public unease about Afghanistan, Harper and his Conservatives don't appear to be paying a political price.

"There's a real sort of paradox here," Graves said. "Despite this precipitous decline in support for the mission, it doesn't appear to have had any deleterious impact on Harper's approval ratings or the prospects for this party."

Indeed, while Harper visited troops in Afghanistan in the spring and his government endorsed a two-year extension of mission, Canadians recognize that it was the Liberals who dispatched the troops on the more difficult Kandahar mission in the first place.

On a similar note, public opposition hasn't produced any political return for the New Democrats, who have called for troops to be brought home.

"The evidence seems to be to the contrary ... the NDP are going nowhere," he said.

While the decline in support may be slowed if the mission can go several weeks without new casualties, Graves doubts that public backing will turn around.



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