How a frightening world shapes Canadians’ values

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Over the past couple of decades, Canadian society has been evolving toward a more open and flexible outlook: a worldview that sees diversity as an asset and cross-cultural interaction as an opportunity instead of a threat. But not all Canadians welcome this change, and recent events seem to be strengthening the will of those who believe that people coming to Canada from elsewhere are more likely to bring trouble than valuable energy and ideas. One example: Canadians’ attitudes about terror attacks and the steps to be taken to avoid them.

Most Canadians consider it at least somewhat likely that there will be a terror attack here over the next couple of years, including about one in four who consider an attack very likely. Asked to anticipate their reaction to such an attack, about two-thirds of Canadians say they expect to maintain their normal routines and not let the risk of another attack change their life. The other one-third expect to make changes in their lives, for instance reducing their visits to public places or changing travel plans to minimize risk.

When asked about the appropriate response to terror attacks, just over half of Canadians respond that bringing the responsible individuals to justice is sufficient, whereas more than four in 10 feel Canada and its allies should respond by going to war against terrorists.

What measures will Canadians accept in order to reduce terror threats? About one in four find it acceptable that the police should be able to listen in on phone calls and read texts without a special warrant, as currently required. Four in 10 strongly agree with slowing immigration and the acceptance of refugees from certain regions – and one-quarter strongly support the total elimination of immigrant and refugee flows from those areas.

Attitudes and opinions about security and the appropriate response to terrorist threats are the tip of an iceberg of values. There tends to be a lot of overlap among Canadians who are supportive of limiting or eliminating immigration from certain areas of the world, those who find police snooping acceptable, and those who support going to war to end terror. People who support these measures are also united by certain underlying values. They tend to score higher on traditional social values related to family, gender, and patriarchy. They also tend to score above average on xenophobia and cultural assimilation (the belief that immigrants should assimilate, leaving behind their heritage cultures). Not surprisingly, they tend to stand out in their fear of violence. These Canadians’ values shed light on their attitudes about terrorist threats. Being more deferential to traditional forms of authority, they are less hesitant to give police additional powers. In this worldview, it doesn’t make sense to tie good guys’ hands while they are trying to fight bad guys. Outsiders are suspect until they demonstrate loyalty, which they can do by assimilating fully and quickly.

Not surprisingly, we find different values among the approximately two-thirds of Canadians who are more open to immigration, express less acceptance of police “snooping,” and lean toward individual justice rather than war as a response to terror. These Canadians hold values such as adaptability to complexity, global consciousness, multiculturalism, and social learning (the belief that people benefit from interacting with diverse others). This group is more skeptical of traditional institutions and authority, and seeks to adapt to and learn from the world’s diversity. In this worldview, individuals have multiple identities and navigate a complex world where anyone can be an insider or an outsider depending on the context. Authority figures don’t deserve automatic deference; even good guys can do bad things if granted excessive power.

Although Canada’s long-term values trajectory is toward this latter worldview defined by adaptability, questioning of authority, and openness to difference, our most recent survey reveals a modest stalling of this evolution. Perhaps this change is a function of many people’s sense that the world is becoming a scarier place. Regardless, as Canadians and their leaders debate policy in the years ahead, it is useful to remember the values landscape that underlies our reactions to the latest headlines.