

Recent government efforts fail to engage Canadians in activities in Americas

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OTTAWA — The federal government's efforts over the past few years to engage Canadians in its activities with the Americas aren't working, according to a public-opinion poll.

The Ipsos Reid survey was commissioned by the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade to determine how much attention Canadians are paying to its re-engagement strategy with the Americas, as announced in 2007 by Prime Minister Stephen Harper.

About 84 per cent of Canadians surveyed said that what happens in Central America, South America and the Caribbean is important to Canada, citing reasons such as impact on the economy (52 per cent) and humanitarian concerns (18 per cent).

More people said the Americas are important because of economic reasons as well as a sense of interconnectedness — up from 44 per cent and 19 per cent in 2008 respectively — but "very little has shifted," the survey suggests.

Harper announced his re-engagement strategy with the Americas in July 2007, while on tour stop through the continent in Santiago, Chile.

"We are a country of the Americas," Harper said. "Re-engagement in our hemisphere is a critical international priority for our government. Canada is committed to playing a bigger role in the Americas and to doing so for the long term."

It was built on three pillars: security, the promotion of values such as freedom and democracy, and building sustainable economies through free trade.

The strategy was reiterated during the 2008 Speech from the Throne, after Harper's Conservatives had won a minority government.

The survey did find that more Canadians believe the country's interest are linked to the United States and Mexico, at 96 per cent, than in 2008, and that Canadians agree that the government's foreign policy goals, such as controlling drug trafficking, are important.

But the pollster ultimately concludes: "The public are not actively engaged or concerned with Central America, South America or the Caribbean."

"The government is right here. We should be doing more with the Americas because we've got significant interest," said Colin Robertson, former Canadian diplomat and current vice-president with the Canadian Defence and Foreign Affairs Institute. "It serves our interests with other relationships as well," such as with China and the United States, who eye the continent for its natural resources.

"You can't change geography," he added. "Therefore we should be putting significant weight and emphasis on what takes place."

As well, new to the survey this year were questions about Haiti, which was added after a 7.0-magnitude earthquake that devastated that country.

Four in five Canadians agree the government should continue to send aid to Haiti for the next five to ten years, while one in five (18 per cent) do not agree.

As many Canadians view the country's interests to be linked to Haiti as linked with Mexico, the survey also reported, which has a much larger population and economy.

Ipsos Reid polled 1,000 adults over three weeks in January. The survey has a margin of error of plus or minus 3.1 percentage points. The data is weighted to ensure the survey sample's age and gender composition reflects that of the actual adult Canadian population according to the Statistics Canada census.