

THE GLOBE AND MAIL 

TRY GLOBE UNLIMITED - 1 MONTH FOR JUST 99¢



And get unlimited access on all your devices

[See my options!](#)

Justin Trudeau's comments on the 'root causes' of terrorism unfortunately focused on narrow political point-scoring at the expense of deeper understanding of the issues at stake.

THE CANADIAN PRESS

Finding 'root causes' of terrorism is the core of Canadian policy

David Carment And Stewart Prest

Published Tuesday, Apr. 23, 2013 09:57 AM EDT

Last updated Tuesday, Apr. 23, 2013 12:13 PM EDT

Justin Trudeau's comments on the "root causes" of terrorism have sparked considerable debate in the media. The discussion has focused on narrow political point-scoring at the expense of deeper understanding of the issues at stake.

Mr. Trudeau's observations were badly timed, spoken when Canadians, like their American neighbours, felt raw, exposed, and vulnerable. Still there is a valuable role for political leaders who provide that stabilizing viewpoint; seizing control of the narrative, rather than surrendering to it.

In contrast, Prime Minister Harper's comments, with his calls for harsh punishment without any hope of more general understanding are unhelpful. They tap into and assuage that feeling of

helpless rage, but offer nothing beyond vengeance as a solution.

Those who dismiss the “root causes” argument misunderstand both the scope of Canadian policy and the underlying causes of terrorism. Dealing with root causes is the stated policy of the government of Canada, as expressed in the words of former foreign minister Lawrence Cannon, and in Public Safety Canada’s (PSC) approach to counter violent extremism.

In fact, the Harper government has been spending billions of dollars on a task force in Afghanistan, working with G8 countries on African governance and poverty and pushing legislation at home to strengthen Public Safety’s efforts to engage Canadians through its Kanishka program. All are initiatives intended to tackle terrorism’s root causes.

Indeed, the so called “Global War on Terror” was partly focused on fixing failed states whose ungoverned spaces provided the right conditions for terrorism to flourish. John Baird’s efforts to restore democracy to Mali are a more recent example. Former U.S. secretary of state Hillary Clinton was a strong proponent of a “root causes” strategy recognizing that military force was insufficient in fixing the complex problems fundamental to states that served as safe havens for terrorist activity.

James Wolfensohn, formerly of the World Bank, echoed Ms. Clinton, when he spoke of the need for a global strategy designed to address “the root causes of terrorism: those of economic exclusion, poverty and under-development.” Global players such as the World Bank and USAID, are using their immense resources to foster development and governance in the Western Sahara, the Arab Peninsula, North East Africa and throughout Central and Southwestern Asia for exactly the same reasons.

The events of September 11, 2001, fundamentally altered Western states’ approach to terrorism by reinforcing the point that securing failed states would lead to improved security for all. After the Boston attacks, disengagement from this agenda is not an option because the motivations for these bombings link back to Chechnya and even Kyrgyzstan, places ravaged by war and underdevelopment.

The fact that the roots of terrorist activity may be found internationally makes it even more important that our policy makers understand what it takes to counteract them. We live in a globalized world, and for a government to assume that we need not prepare for challenges arising beyond our shores is quite simply ill advised.

Studies on those Canadians involved in international terrorism show that a sense of exclusion, marginalization and political grievance are often key facets of “home grown” terrorist behaviour. Typically, the integration of Canadians socially, economically and politically increases their capacity to participate positively in society. But that is not always the case, as one recently released study from CSIS shows a more complex set of issues are at play. Even well-integrated Canadian citizens, mostly young males, are susceptible to extremism.

In brief, the Canadian government must tread carefully and not turn its back on the need to understand root causes, especially when those involved are our own citizens and the consequences of neglect are severe. With more research we can understand why some people resort to terrorism, and we can work to diminish its consequences through comprehensive and well-grounded security policies. An important first step in preventing terrorism is to understand its causes, both here and abroad. Unfortunately that is a step that critics of Justin Trudeau seem uninterested in taking.

David Carment is editor of Canadian Foreign Policy Journal at Carleton University and a CDEAI fellow. Stewart Prest is a doctoral candidate at the University of British Columbia. They are the authors along with Teddy Samy of Security, Development and the Fragile State: Bridging the Gap between Theory and Policy (2009).

© 2013 The Globe and Mail Inc. All Rights Reserved.