Half of Canadians say their country is ‘too generous’ toward illegal border crossers

57 per cent disapprove of the federal government’s handling of this summer’s surge in asylum seekers

September 1, 2017 – In the wake of a new wave of asylum seekers crossing the border in search of permanent residency, more than half of Canadians say this country is being “too generous” towards those coming in through irregular channels.

Since July 1, more than 7,000 people have walked across the border into Quebec to make asylum claims.

Now, a new public opinion poll from the Angus Reid Institute finds 53 per cent of Canadians of the opinion the country’s approach is too giving – more than eight times as many as those who say Canada is not being “generous enough”.

Asked to weigh in on Prime Minister Justin Trudeau’s public statements about Canada welcoming refugees while also discouraging irregular border crossings, slightly more than half of Canadians (54%) say the PM’s messaging has been “unclear,” and a majority (57%) disapprove of the Trudeau government’s handling of the situation overall.

Key Findings:

- Opinions divide along political lines: Three-quarters (75%) of past Conservative voters say Canada has been too generous, compared to 45 per cent of New Democrats, and four-in-ten (40%) Liberals

- Asked how Canada should focus available resources, seven-in-ten (70%) would prioritize border monitoring and security over assistance to the new arrivals (30%)

- Looking to the future, some 43 per cent of Canadians expect the number of irregular border crossings to increase “quite a bit” (23%) or “become a flood” (20%) before the end of this year

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INDEX

- More than half think Canada is being “too generous” toward border-jumpers
- Preference for border monitoring dwarfs desire for assistance
- Is the PM’s message clear?
- Most disapprove of Ottawa’s handling of this file
- Will the number of asylum seekers increase or decrease?

More than half think Canada is being “too generous” toward border-jumpers

The rapid increase in the number of people crossing the Quebec border has created an entire ecosystem dedicated to processing the new arrivals and providing temporary shelter for them. Tents have been set up near the popular unofficial crossing at Roxham Road in Saint-Bernard-de-Lacolle, turning it into a “24/7 outdoor processing centre” where those crossing illegally are arrested, searched, and held until they can be turned over to the Canada Border Services Agency.

Montreal’s Olympic Stadium has been used as temporary housing for the new arrivals, once they’ve been screened for security risks.

These arrangements are in part the result of a loophole in the Safe Third Country Agreement, which requires asylum seekers currently in the United States to make their claims there. Anyone who tries to enter Canada from the U.S. and claim refugee status here is supposed to be denied entry if they arrive at an official border-crossing. The STCA doesn’t apply to “inland” claimants, however, meaning those who cross the border illegally can have their refugee claim processed in Canada.

To many Canadians, all of this amounts to their country being overly generous toward people who came here illegally. More than half (53%) say Canada is being “too generous,” while only 6 per cent say the country is “not generous enough.” One-in-three (34%) say the response has been “about right.” The idea that Canada has been too generous is most prevalent among those ages 35 and older, and especially among men in those age groups:
Based on whatever you have seen, read, or heard about this issue, would you say Canada is too generous, about right, or not generous enough toward these people?

![Graph showing responses to generosity question by age and gender]

As seen in the preceding graph, Millennials are largely divided between believing Canada has been too generous and about right in its approach. They’re also twice as likely as the national average to say that the country isn’t being generous enough (14% to 6%) – a finding driven by the 21 per cent of young women who feel this way.

Politically, past Conservative voters are most likely to take a harder line on the issue. Three-quarters of those who cast ballots for that party in 2015 see the current government’s approach as too open-handed. Past Liberal voters are most likely to say that the treatment of asylum seekers has been about right (46%), though it’s notable that four-in-ten Liberals join the majority in saying Canada has been too generous:

![Graph showing responses to generosity question by political affiliation]

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Conservative Party leader Andrew Scheer has voiced concerns over the strain on Canada’s health care system brought on by the policy of offering immediate access to health care for refugees.

And while the position of the federal NDP in response to refugees has been one focusing on generosity, it is not necessarily in line with their own base – 45 per cent of whom say Canada has been too generous already.

Preference for border monitoring dwarfs desire for assistance

Much of the debate over illegal arrivals to Canada revolves around the allocation of resources. Should Canada be more focused on helping these people once they arrive? Or on discouraging them from coming in the first place?

These two priorities remain as polarizing as they were when the Angus Reid Institute first asked Canadians about them in April of this year. Eight-in-ten (82%) say that assigning police, immigration officers and technology to monitor the border is an important or a major priority, up from 74 per cent in April. This, compared to fewer than half (47%) who say the same about settling new arrivals in Canada and providing them with the assistance they need:

How much priority do you yourself think should be given to:

- Getting these new arrivals safely into Canada and providing medical, housing and other needed assistance: 53% important/major priority; 47% not a priority/lower priority
- Assigning police, immigration officers and technology (such as drones) to monitor and secure the unguarded areas of our border: 82% important/major priority; 18% not a priority/lower priority

Further, seven-in-ten prefer security and stemming the flow of asylum seekers crossing irregularly over providing medical, housing and other assistance to them:
These views are consistent across all regions of the country, (see comprehensive tables for greater detail), but opinion differs by age. Younger Canadians, those ages 18 to 34, are almost twice as likely as those ages 55 and older (43% to 23%) to say that assistance for newcomers should be the top concern:

Again, there is also a significant disparity in responses by political preference. Past Conservative voters are nearly unanimous in prioritizing security (89%), while much larger portions of Liberal (41%) and perhaps surprisingly, NDP voters (35%), say that assisting asylum seekers should be the priority.

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Is the PM’s message clear?

Many asylum seekers have referenced Canada’s reputation as an open, diverse, and welcoming society as their reason for choosing to come here. Some of the people crossing the border, in fact, have cited Trudeau’s welcoming rhetoric as their reason for attempting to come to Canada.

The Prime Minister has consistently encouraged this perception of Canada, most famously when he tweeted a welcoming message to refugees on the same day that the Trump administration began its first attempt at banning residents of several majority-Muslim countries from entering the United States.

After criticism from political opponents, amid the rising number of illegal refugee crossings, Trudeau has amended his message somewhat, tweeting that although Canada is an open and welcoming society, “we are also a country of laws”.

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As asked whether they believe the Prime Minister’s messaging on this issue has been clear or unclear, Canadians are split. Just over half (54%) say Trudeau has been unclear about Canada’s position when it comes to asylum seekers crossing the border. The remaining 46 per cent say the PM’s message has been clear.

Of note, those who say they have been paying “a lot of attention” (29% of respondents) to the issue are more likely to say Trudeau has been unclear:

Would you say, overall, the Prime Minister’s messaging on this issue has been:

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<th>A lot of attention</th>
<th>Some attention</th>
<th>A little bit of attention</th>
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<td>32%</td>
<td>53%</td>
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<td>54%</td>
<td>68%</td>
<td>47%</td>
<td>51%</td>
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Most disapprove of Ottawa’s handling of this file

A majority disapprove of the Trudeau government’s handling of the file. Overall, 43 per cent of Canadians approve of the federal government’s performance on this file, while 57 per cent disapprove. Women and younger Canadians are more evenly split, while men and those over age 35 are especially critical, as seen in the following graph:

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As might be expected, those who cast ballots for the Conservatives in 2015 are especially disapproving of the Trudeau government’s handling of this issue. More than eight-in-ten (84%) do so. They are joined in this opinion by roughly half of New Democrats (49%) and roughly a third of Trudeau’s own Liberal Party voters:

The intensity of disapproval is also of note. While one-in-ten (9%) Canadians say they strongly approve of the government’s handling on this file, nearly four times as many (33%) strongly disapprove:
Will the number of asylum seekers increase or decrease?

In April, after months of illegal border crossings in frigid winter conditions, the Angus Reid Institute asked Canadians how they expected the flow of people seeking refugee status to change as the weather got warmer.

Not surprisingly, more than half expected a significant increase, including 21 per cent who anticipated “a flood of refugee seekers.”

Today, with significantly larger numbers of asylum seekers arriving in Quebec, responses to this question suggest that many Canadians expect the number of illegal border crossings to continue to rise. That said, the number who expect the flow of asylum seekers to stay the same or decrease has gone up since April, as seen in the following graph:

Thinking ahead to the rest of this year, do you expect the number of these arrivals to ...

- Decrease to just a trickle: April 2017 - 5%, August 2017 - 10%
- Stay at the same levels as now: April 2017 - 17%, August 2017 - 22%
- Increase slightly: April 2017 - 25%, August 2017 - 25%
- Increase quite a bit: April 2017 - 23%, August 2017 - 32%
- Become a flood of refugee seekers: April 2017 - 21%, August 2017 - 20%
Views on the future flow of asylum seekers into the country are highly correlated with views on the government’s performance on the issue.

Those who approve of the Trudeau government’s handling of the situation tend to see the number of illegal border crossings increasing – at most – only slightly, while most of those who are critical of the government’s performance are anticipating the number to increase “quite a bit” or “become a flood.”

Thinking ahead to the rest of this year, do you expect the number of these arrivals to ...

- **Decrease to just a trickle**: 15% (Approve), 7% (Disapprove)
- **Stay at the same levels as now**: 31% (Approve), 14% (Disapprove)
- **Increase slightly**: 30% (Approve), 21% (Disapprove)
- **Increase quite a bit**: 28% (Approve), 17% (Disapprove)
- **Become a flood of refugee seekers**: 30% (Approve), 7% (Disapprove)

The **Angus Reid Institute (ARI)** was founded in October 2014 by pollster and sociologist, Dr. Angus Reid. ARI is a national, not-for-profit, non-partisan public opinion research foundation established to advance education by commissioning, conducting and disseminating to the public accessible and impartial statistical data, research and policy analysis on economics, political science, philanthropy, public administration, domestic and international affairs and other socio-economic issues of importance to Canada and its world.

For detailed results by age, gender, region, education, and other demographics, [click here.](#)

For detailed results by awareness and approval/disapproval of handling, [click here.](#)