

CANADA'S SECURITY CONCERNS

Timothy Compston reports on the security issues giving Canadian decision makers cause for concern

Canada, whose cities tend to rank highly in global surveys of where people would like to live, has a well-deserved reputation as a peaceful, democratic and multi-cultural society. Consequently, it's far from being the first country that comes to mind in any discussion about the threat of terrorism, extremism or even securing land borders. The reality, however, is that although often overshadowed by incidents South of the border like 9/11 and a catalogue of events in Europe, Canada too has had to deal with its own share of tragedies.

The Canadian-specific situations that come to mind, on the terrorism front, range from a right-wing extremist attacking a mosque in Quebec City earlier this year – that Prime Minister, Justin Trudeau, described as: “A terrorist attack on Muslims in a centre of worship or refuge” – to, crucially, the targeting of a soldier in Ottawa and the Canadian Parliament itself as part of a shooting spree. Such scenarios have shaken Canada to its core and led to

THE IDEA THAT A GUNMAN COULD PENETRATE THE CANADIAN GOVERNMENT WAS FRANKLY SHOCKING

much analysis and soul searching regarding the factors that produced these outcomes and how, and if, they might have been prevented.

Long-time editor of Toronto-based *Canadian Security* magazine, Neil Sutton is certainly well placed to offer his thoughts regarding the situation in and around the Canadian Parliament on that fateful day back in October 2014. Interviewing Sutton last month, more than two years on, he was quick to acknowledge the enormity of what transpired and how, crucially, the implications of the attack have reverberated around the country ever since. “The attack at the National War Memorial and Parliament Hill was a real wake-up call for most Canadians. It's not like Canada has been completely untouched by terrorism in the past, but for many that was their first real experience of it, at least in such a public fashion. The idea

that a lone gunman could penetrate that deeply into the heart of Canadian Government was frankly shocking, though to some security professionals not a total surprise. I think it brought home the notion that terror can truly strike anywhere and Canada is by no means immune,” said Sutton.

EARLY WARNING SIGNS

Drilling down into the detail of what could, potentially, have motivated the instigator of the Ottawa shootings to take such an extreme course of action, it is thought that the 32-year old Muslim-convert Michael Zehaf-Bibeau – a Canadian citizen with a history of drug and violence-related offences – was inspired by ISIS and, apparently, was already on a Government watch list. In fact, earlier that month (October 2014) he had been in Ottawa following up on a passport application with a view to travelling to Syria where the civil war was already in full swing. A video that Zehaf-Bibeau recorded, just before the attack, also served to shed some light on his thinking and ultimately led to him being labelled by the Canadian authorities as a “home-grown radical terrorist”.

In terms of how the sequence of events unfolded, the first act on that Wednesday morning was when Zehaf-Bibeau parked his vehicle behind the Cenotaph in Ottawa and proceeded on foot towards the National War Memorial before firing on the soldiers that were on ceremonial guard duty there. Sadly, Cpl Nathan Cirillo was hit by the rifle shots and subsequently died of his injuries. Soon after Zehaf-Bibeau decided to abandon his own vehicle and instead hijacked a ministerial car and made his way to the Canadian Parliament's centre block with the RCMP (Royal Canadian Mounted Police) in hot pursuit. Before he could be apprehended Zehaf-Bibeau managed to enter the Rotunda and then moved down the Hall of Honour close to where the Prime Minister and MPs were having meetings. Thankfully, his murderous plans were cut short and he was shot dead by the quick-thinking sergeant-at-arms, Kevin Vickers, during a gun battle with the police and security guards just outside the Library of Parliament. For the quick thinking and bravery he displayed, the sergeant-at-arms received a



Forensic police officers work near the National War Memorial in Ottawa after the Parliament Hill attack in 2014

standing ovation when Parliament reconvened the next day, where the then Prime Minister, Stephen Harper, promised tougher security measures.

The targeting of Canada's Parliament in such a brazen way had several ramifications, specifically it was the catalyst for the rolling out of new anti-terrorism legislation in the shape of the Protection of Canada from Terrorists Act – otherwise known as Bill C-51 – which came into force in June 2015. The Bill C-51, among other things, gave greater powers to the Canadian Security Intelligence Service (CSIS) to disrupt terrorist threats rather than simply to gather evidence against them. It was voted for by the ruling Conservatives and the Liberal opposition party, although it was opposed by the NDP. Now in power, the Liberal Government of Justin Trudeau may look to make good on election promises to repeal what it feels are some problematic aspects of Bill C-51 in its current form. High on the agenda here may be a requirement for a statutory review of the Anti-Terrorism Act after three years; a guarantee that all Canadian Security Intelligence Service warrants respect the Charter of Rights and Freedoms; to define “terrorist propaganda” more clearly and to prioritise community outreach and counter-radicalisation efforts. The tug of war over Bill C-51 really serves to underline the difficulties that all Western democracies face when trying to tackle extremism, and the threat of terrorism, while at the same time protecting the privacy and freedoms of law-abiding citizens.

The aftermath of the incident in and around Parliament also resulted in the publication of a series of reports on how the situation was handled and key lessons for the future. Ultimately, in February 2015 the Federal Government announced that the RCMP would take over operational command of all security on Parliament Hill. This step was widely welcomed, including in a review by the Ontario Provincial Police – ‘RCMP Security Posture, Parliament Hill, October 22, 2014’ – as: “The most important change required in improving security on Parliament Hill, supported by this review and as recommended in numerous other reviews”. The OPP report shed light on the situation before where three agencies were responsible for security: the RCMP for the exterior grounds, the House of Commons Security Service and the Senate Protective Services for the interior of the buildings. The authors of the OPP review didn't pull their punches pointing out that in practice this working relationship between the agencies had been inadequate: “All three agencies work as separate entities, with limited interaction or sharing of information”. During the attack, it was noted in the OPP findings that RCMP officers had hesitated before entering the Parliament proper due to directives to never enter the building when armed. They only did so when ordered to take that course of action by a supervisor.

Outside of the targeting of the National War Memorial and Parliament Hill, Canada has been on the

receiving end of other serious terrorist acts. Just two days earlier, for instance, there was a hostile vehicle attack where a car was deliberately driven into two soldiers in Saint-Jean-sur-Richelieu, Quebec, by Martin Couture-Rouleau. Unfortunately, one soldier died of his injuries. Couture-Rouleau had been 'self-radicalised' and was already on the radar of the RCMP for his posts on Facebook and the fact that he was looking to leave Canada for Turkey, with his passport being seized to prevent him travelling. Commenting at a subsequent press conference, Canada's public safety minister said that Couture-Rouleau's attack was clearly linked to terrorist ideology: "It is an unacceptable act against our country, our Quebec values, our Canadian values".

DECISIVE ACTION TAKEN

Demonstrating the widespread and ever-changing nature of terrorist targeting, the year before (2013) saw the discovery of a plot by two individuals to bomb the British Columbia legislature building during Canada Day celebrations. There was also the uncovering of a plan by an al-Qaeda linked group to bomb a Via Rail train in the Greater Toronto area. The intention was to cause a train to derail with a view to killing and hurting as many passengers as possible. Thankfully the RCMP – working in concert with the FBI – stopped the attack in its tracks before it moved beyond the planning stages. Fast-forward to August 2016, and terrorism was still making its presence felt in Canada. In this case a suspect, Aaron Driver – who was thought to be planning a suicide bombing – was killed by police in Strathroy, Ontario. Driver had been under a court order not to associate with terrorist groups such as ISIS.

Turning to the targeting of a mosque in Quebec City back in January, this served to underline the reality that murderous acts are not confined to one

group or ideology, all forms of extremism – including that from the right wing – can be problematic. In this case, the suspect – 27-year-old - Alexandre Bissonnette – was charged with six counts of first-degree murder and five counts of attempted murder. Neil Sutton from *Canadian Security* magazine reckons that the gun attack on a mosque in the Ste-Foy neighbourhood of Quebec City really struck at the core for a lot of people: "Canada is widely regarded as fairly peaceable and tolerant nation. We're a pretty diverse and multi-cultural group. I think a lot of people are having trouble pigeonholing this attack. Is this an act of terror, a hate crime, an active shooter event? All three? Are these labels important? I think we're still struggling with the notion of domestic terrorism and all that it implies".

CANADA HAS HAD TO DEAL WITH MORE THAN ITS FAIR SHARE OF NATIONAL TRAGEDIES

Moving on to another development concentrating the minds of the Canadian authorities – after the recent US Presidential election and the fallout from the new administration's tougher line on illegal immigration – over the past few months there has been a marked upturn in people trying to make their way from the US into Canada, often well away from the manned crossing points. This unprecedented situation is certainly stretching the resources of those tasked with controlling Canada's nearly 4,000-mile-long Southern border.

In the end, just like other countries in the firing line, it is important for Canadian authorities and citizens to remain vigilant to the threat posed by homegrown radicalised individuals and associated groups, as well as those trying to come in from overseas ●

Timothy Compston

is a journalist and security professional that specialises in security issues. He studied International Relations and Strategic Studies at Lancaster University, is PR director at Compston PR and a previous chairman of both the National Committee and CCTV PR Committee of the British Security Industry Association.

Investigators search the parking lot at the Islamic Cultural Center in Quebec City, after the attack in January

