Fostering Canadians’ Role in Public Policy: A Strategy for Institutionalizing Public Involvement in Policy

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# Table of Contents

Executive Summary ........................................................................................................ III

Acknowledgements ........................................................................................................ VI

Introduction .................................................................................................................. 1

I. What Does “Institutionalization” Mean? ................................................................. 3

II. What Is Meaningful Public Involvement? .............................................................. 6

III. Citizen Engagement: Why Do We Need It? ...................................................... 11

IV. Public Involvement In OECD Countries: Selective Examples .................... 14

V. The Canadian Experience .................................................................................... 24

VI. Obstacles to Meaningful Public Involvement ................................................... 31

VII. Lessons Learned and Recommendations ....................................................... 34

Bibliography ................................................................................................................ 40

Appendix ....................................................................................................................... 44
Executive Summary

Citizen engagement is at the apex of the public involvement pyramid. In basic terms, it means that citizens are full-fledged participants in the policy process and that their input is given substantial weight toward policy outcomes. In Canada, citizen engagement is not a regular part of the policy process. Public consultation exercises such as town hall meetings are common, but they usually invite citizens’ input only in the final stages of the policy process, when main objectives have already been defined and alternative solutions discarded. To be meaningful, public involvement must: occur throughout the policy process, before major decisions are taken; reflect the diversity of the population; provide participants with credible, balanced information about the issues in question; use a fair process; and communicate the results to the public at large.

Survey data indicate that Canadians want to play a more meaningful role in the policy process and are less willing to defer to the expertise of policy elites. In light of the growing voter apathy, evidenced by low voter turnout and declining membership in political parties, it is in the best interest of both citizens and governments to embrace innovative methods of public participation that give citizens a more powerful role. To that end, we argue that citizen engagement exercises, which invite citizen participation and input at the various stages of the policy process, should become a regular, institutionalized part of policymaking in Canada.

Public involvement in policy strengthens rather than threatens representative democracy. Public involvement enables, even requires, that citizens become informed, formulate considered opinions, and discuss them with others, especially with those whom they would not otherwise interact. In the process, social capital, social trust and civic knowledge are strengthened. It helps political leaders to gain better insight into the public’s opinions, values, and priorities which supports them in their roles as the people’s representatives. It can make for better public policy, as citizen feedback on the successes and failures of previous policies can better inform policy decisions. And, the inclusiveness of the process better legitimizes the policy outcome, as groups with diverse opinions have been given a fair chance to engage.

A review of OECD case studies and a series of interviews with Canadian policy makers identified four key criteria for successful institutionalization of public involvement in policy:

- Public involvement is a core element in the policy process;
- Public input is given substantial weight in policy development processes; it cannot be a “token” effort, in perception or reality;
- The commitment to institutionalized public involvement is government-wide as opposed to concentrated in certain departments; and

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2 Phillips 11.
The effort to institutionalize public involvement includes the public service and parliament.

The goal of institutionalization has proven to be an elusive one, for Canada and for other OECD countries. While many governments hold frequent public consultations, no government has made citizen engagement a regular part of the policy process.

Predictably, policy elites – politicians, public servants, and stakeholder groups alike – are resistant to increased public involvement, and for a number of reasons. Many are reluctant to give up control over the policy agenda and some believe that citizens are not sufficiently informed to make a valuable contribution to policy discussions. Canada’s parliamentary system of government, with its excessive concentration of power in the executive branch, makes it difficult to carve out a place for public involvement in policy.

To institutionalize meaningful citizen engagement in the policy process, Canada must overcome a number of structural, cultural and practical barriers.

First, current policy structures must be revamped to make room for the public at the policy table. In our view, this effort must start with Parliament itself, especially through greater use of parliamentary committees to engage the public. Parliamentary reform is only a matter of time: the government needs greater checks and balances on its exercise of power and a good measure of that must come from Parliament. In any event, citizen engagement, in the absence of parliamentary reform will remain on the margins.

The collective experience suggest that there are few, if any, policy areas that are “off limits” to public involvement. That being said, models of public deliberation vary in terms of their capacity to deal with particular sorts of policy questions. There is no one best way for all situations. The diversity of approaches is an asset and not a liability to the enhancement of citizen engagement. The professional public service must develop a critical mass of expertise on citizen engagement so that different methodologies for engagement exercises are appropriately deployed and citizen participants are well served in terms of their information and educative needs and the requirements for well conducted deliberations. A public service that is dedicated to institutionalized public involvement will help to nurture among political elites, policy experts, and stakeholders an appreciation of the value of public input.

Cultural and attitudinal barriers present a daunting challenge to institutionalization, especially since the resistance to public involvement among elites and the public is mutually reinforcing. It is likely that policy elites’ resistance to public involvement fuels feelings of voter apathy. Further, voter indifference vis-à-vis low voter turnout permits elite indifference to public input, and the cycle continues. To break this cycle, it is necessary to target the attitudes of both the elites and the masses. Citizen engagement requires that those in positions of authority relinquish or diminish some of their power to make decisions in order to share power with citizens. Political parties, vehicles that are meant to link these two groups, can be a fundamental starting point. Political parties need to better engage their members and the public in shaping their policies. They must make a particular effort to reach out to young voters, who are increasingly disconnected from parties. Party policy foundations, if adopted by Canadian
parties, could take a leading role in facilitating public involvement exercises. Further, by producing new research and publicizing the results, they could improve civic education, which is a necessary step in cultivating public interest in politics.

Evidence shows that the sense of civic duty - at least in relation to voting - is significantly lower among young Canadians, in contrast to many European countries. To address this, serious consideration should be given to lowering the voting age to 16 as a way to help them form the habit to vote.

Practical obstacles, such as cost considerations, can be dealt with through the reallocation of some budgetary resources now devoted to polling and advertising and some portion of parliamentary committee budgets. This could go some way to kick start the institutionalization of citizen engagement. However, this would require solid support for public involvement among government elites. There is widespread agreement that participants of deliberative policy exercises find their experiences to be positive and fulfilling, with most indicating interest in becoming more involved in public affairs, including participating in other dialogues. There is always some element of self-selection in this regard, but the hopeful sign, for those wishing to promote democratic participation, is that most citizens who have not previously been engaged come away from these exercises with an increased interest in participation. This finding alone should justify the resources committed by government to such exercises.

Greater use of the Internet is critical to the institutionalization of meaningful public involvement in the policy process. There is no technological fix here and it is not appropriate for all occasions, but technology is necessary to overcome the practical barriers of cost, accessibility and geography to citizen engagement. An insistence by MPs that parliamentary committees spend more time out of Ottawa will also help address geographic barriers.

It is obvious that the demand for meaningful public involvement is a trend that will not be reversed. While traditional consultation will continue to be an important part of public involvement, it is clear that more is expected. Our recommendations on how to institutionalize public involvement build on the conclusions of a 2005 Institute of Governance roundtable on the democratic deficit: building an "infrastructure" for citizen engagement within governments is a necessary next step. 3

Low voter turnout and declining and low party memberships must not be taken merely as evidence that public interest in politics is waning. Rather, they suggest that current mechanisms for public involvement are unsatisfactory. Consistently, countries that have undertaken citizen engagement exercises that are linked to the policy process have reported high rates of participant satisfaction. Evidence indicates that citizens are more interested in participating in politics if they feel that their input will make a difference. Institutionalizing public involvement could reinvigorate the Canadian polity by providing regular opportunities for citizens to have a meaningful input on salient policy issues.

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Introduction

Canadian government efforts to involve the public in the policy process almost always take the form of citizen consultation rather than citizen engagement. A key difference between these two approaches to public participation is that consultations ask for citizen input on one or more policy options, while engagement invites citizens to the policy table before policy options are developed. Yet, a leading British think tank lists the British Columbia’s Citizen Assembly on Electoral Reform as its first illustration of what it calls “everyday democracy”. In this case, citizen engagement went beyond the better known forms of citizen consultation, such as town hall meetings, focus groups, online discussion groups and public hearings, which are the most common forms of public involvement.

The practice of engaging interest groups and other stakeholders during policy development is used frequently throughout OECD countries, including Canada. Most, if not all, federal departments in Canada have incorporated citizen consultations into their policy process. In fact, the federal government has a website called “Consulting with Canadians” that lists all ongoing consultations. At the provincial and municipal levels, it is common for governments to seek public input prior to finalizing a policy. For instance, in Nova Scotia, recently-tabled legislation on the use of all-terrain vehicles was crafted after extensive public consultations.

Public consultation exercises give citizens opportunities to communicate with government officials and fellow citizens and to consider the costs and benefits of specific policy issues. They provide government officials the opportunity to learn how policy proposals are being received on the ground, and how citizens of different backgrounds would be affected by a policy once it is implemented. That said, these exercises do have limitations. They offer a role only to those citizens who volunteer to participate. Governments do not always actively recruit a diverse set of opinions; nor do they commit to using public input in decision-making. In citizen consultation exercises, the onus is on the citizen to be proactive. Consultations also often occur late in the policy development or formulation process and citizens are left to respond in a context where commitments have been made and ideas hardened. And, of course the government normally sets the agenda for consultation exercises, which limits the breadth of issues which citizens can consider.

Public interest in meaningful involvement in policy is growing. A survey taken in September 2005 by SES Research, the Public Policy Forum, and the Crossing Boundaries National Council found that three in five Canadians want more opportunities to influence government decisions directly. Further, the poll found that traditional methods of public involvement, such as town hall meetings and consultations, are not attractive to Canadians. Parliamentary reform is also seen as an inadequate means to

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close the gap, or the democratic deficit, between what citizens expect from their democracy and what they perceive as reality. The momentum for meaningful public involvement in policy has been growing since the Meech Lake Accord when Canadians explicitly rejected the notion that major policy changes should occur without citizen input.

The authors assert that meaningful public involvement in policy would be a valuable complement to representative democracy. It would make for more educated, informed, and engaged citizens and representatives alike, as engagement exercises would bring these groups together to exchange perspectives and to develop solutions to common problems. Given the increased demand for meaningful public involvement in Canada, the purpose of this paper is to consider what is needed to institutionalize this practice.

This paper is divided into seven sections. In the first two, we identify the criteria for “institutionalization” and “meaningful public involvement” respectively. In the third section, we consider the common arguments for and against increased public involvement in policymaking. Then, our approach shifts from theoretical to practical. In the fourth section, we analyze the most prominent approaches to public involvement used in OECD countries. The above mentioned criteria for meaningful public involvement and institutionalization form the basis of our analysis. While no OECD country has fully institutionalized meaningful public involvement in the form of citizen engagement, a survey of their approaches helps to identify the challenges that governments face in overcoming institutional, cultural, and practical barriers. The fifth section considers selective public involvement exercises that have taken place in Canada with reference to the same criteria. In the sixth section, after assessing public involvement in Canada and other OECD countries, we identify some of the most significant obstacles to meaningful public involvement that exist for OECD countries. In the final section, we conclude by outlining what might be done by the Canadian government to incorporate meaningful public involvement more fully into the policy process.

Our research for this paper included a literature review of the public involvement exercises held in Canada and around the world as well as a select number of interviews with government officials and public participation practitioners. We relied heavily on these interviews for information on the public involvement exercises that have taken place in Canada. For the purposes of this paper, we thought it unnecessary to try to provide a description of every public involvement exercise conducted in the OECD. Instead, our goal is to provide a general analysis of the different approaches that governments have employed and are employing most often to involve citizens in policy.
I. What does “institutionalization” mean?

Among political scientists, a common definition of “institutionalization” is the one offered by Samuel Huntington: “Institutionalization is the process by which organizations acquire value and stability”.7 Larry Hill describes “institutionalization” as a process that occurs over time by which “the organization creates authority relationships vis-à-vis the environmental actors”.8 Both of these definitions are relevant to our discussion. The first speaks to the fact that institutionalizing public involvement requires that it become a stable, regular component of the policy process and that the value of citizen involvement is understood by other policy actors and by the public. Hill’s definition underlines the fact that institutionalization encourages policy actors as well as members of the public to recognize the authority and legitimacy of members of the public in the policy process. Institutionalizing public involvement requires both structural and attitudinal change; and these two factors are mutually reinforcing. The re-conceptualization of the role of the citizen in the policy process is necessary to facilitate structural change, and once structural reform has taken place, attitudinal and cultural support for public involvement in policy will grow and strengthen.

To provide a clear litmus test for the institutionalization of public involvement in policy, we propose the following four criteria.

- Public involvement is a core element embedded in the policy process;
- Public input is given substantial weight in policy development processes; it cannot be a “token” effort, in perception or reality;
- The commitment to institutionalized public involvement is government-wide as opposed to concentrated in certain departments;
- The effort to institutionalize public involvement includes the public service and parliament.

Public involvement as a core element in the policy process

In order to qualify as “institutionalization”, public involvement must be a standard element of the policy process, as is stakeholder and expert involvement in most jurisdictions. In other words, it must be a regularized part of the policy process, and not just a “one-off” exercise. Otherwise, the perception will be that policymakers involve the public only at their convenience. Selective involvement is unlikely to address the public trust problem and might make it worse.

One way to advance “public involvement” in the policy process is to embed the requirement for it in legislation. The Canadian Environmental Protection Act 1999 includes several provisions that are intended to invite the public to participate in environmental policy initiatives. The act's provisions include: information sharing through the Environmental Registry; citizens’ right to request investigations of alleged violations of the legislation; citizens’ right to request the addition of a substance to the

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Priority Substances List; and, the right to provide comments on various initiatives.\(^9\) The level of participation that these clauses advance is minimal but the CEPA 1999 model demonstrates that the law can establish a right to meaningful public involvement in the policy process.

**Public input must be given substantial weight**

Institutionalization requires that public input is given serious consideration in the policy process. If citizens feel that their voices are being drowned out by the voices of interest groups, lobbyists, experts and stakeholders, then governments’ efforts to involve the public in policy will be seen to be superficial or token gestures. To address this requirement, it is necessary for established policy actors to recognize and embrace the value of the public’s contribution. In our view, the public is best equipped to articulate their values and priorities. On these dimensions of policy, their voice should not be replaced by those of experts or stakeholders. The Romanow Commission on the Future of Health Care in Canada, for instance, gave considerable attention to public demands for more openness and transparency in health care policy. In response, it proposed a “health covenant” between the public, governments, and health care providers in order to encourage mutual responsibility and public participation.\(^10\) The principal way to institutionalize public involvement, of course, is to make it a formal requirement of the government decision-making process, which already requires that the matter of public consultation be explicitly addressed in all Cabinet policy submissions.

**Government-wide commitment**

The effort to institutionalize public involvement in policy must exist within every department. Currently, departments vary in terms of their relative efforts to engage the public in policy discussions. One explanation is that some public servants and stakeholders believe that certain policy questions are too narrow, technical or specialized to warrant broad public engagement. Further, some politicians and public servants believe that the public do not want to be involved in those policy decisions that “do not affect them” directly. This argument then usually leads to proposals to conduct limited public involvement exercises that engage only stakeholders or interest groups active in a policy area.

**Public involvement via Parliament and the public service**

Both Parliament and the public service have important roles to perform in advancing public involvement. Parliament is the locus of the public’s elected and politically appointed representatives where laws are passed and the government held to account for its policy decisions. A greater role for parliament in public involvement would empower both MPs and the public. Citizen engagement exercises would help MPs to become better informed about policies and thus better able to debate policy and to hold ministers to account. In doing so, parliamentary committees and local constituency offices could use citizen involvement exercises to enable citizens not only to provide

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input but to dialogue with MPs on policy matters. One MP has gone so far as to host three gatherings in 2004 dedicated to conceiving of ways to better engage the public.11

The public service is the locus for substantive policy development. Therefore, public service cooperation in the institutionalization of public involvement is vital. The public service is the ideal institution to generate the knowledge and expertise required to administer and facilitate public involvement exercises and to provide information to the public. Many departments have developed the expertise and infrastructure necessary to administer public consultation exercises, although the skills, resources, and attitudes of public servants tend not to go much beyond support for public consultation. Departments need to develop the expertise and capacity to provide balanced information to participants to facilitate their policy deliberations and to undertake their own public involvement exercises. They must also have the capacity to effectively communicate the results to the broader public.

II. What is Meaningful Public Involvement?

There are several different efforts to categorize or classify different forms of public participation. For instance, the OECD distinguishes between three different types of citizen “involvement” in the policy process. At the most basic stage, the policy process is transparent enough so that citizens have the information necessary to hold governments to account and to assess policies and their implications. Information provision of this nature is now the norm in OECD countries.

Next, consultation exercises allow for citizens to provide feedback on policy options, perhaps before they become finalized. In addition to the fact that OECD countries differ widely in terms of their commitments to citizen consultation, in many of the countries that do consult citizens, invitations to these exercises are exclusively to the well organized, including interest groups and stakeholders, and do not include “ordinary” citizens. In many countries, of course, some organized groups, such as business and labour, have long had well established institutionalized relationships with government in specific areas of policy and are consulted on a regular basis whenever a new policy direction is being considered. In some instances, the engagement of these groups goes beyond consultation to tripartite negotiations, even to shared governance.

Finally, opportunities for active participation allow citizens to become full partners or decision-makers in the policy process. This means that citizens are involved in defining the policy objectives, choosing between policy alternatives, and developing implementation strategies. These exercises are rare indeed. The BC’s Citizens’ Assembly is one such case; one of the very few. Few OECD countries have undertaken exercises that come close to meeting all the criteria for citizen engagement exercises, and even these have been pilot projects.\(^\text{12}\)

A second effort at classification is presented by the International Association for Public Participation (IAPP). It uses a “public participation spectrum” to illustrate five levels of public participation in politics. As with the OECD, the most basic level of public involvement simply means that a government informs the public of the problem at hand and the process by which it arrived at a solution. There is no dialogue, only a one-way communication. Then, again as with the OECD, there is consultation. But then the IAPP takes OECD’s third category of “active participation” and has three levels. First, there are public involvement exercises where government officials work with the public while drafting policy to ensure that public concerns are taken into account. Second, there are public collaboration exercises where government officials partner with the public at each stage of the decision-making process, including the identification of alternatives and the selection of the preferred one. Finally, there is empowerment where decision-making authority is placed in the hands of citizens, as in the case of the BC citizens’ assembly. The IAPP continuum demonstrates how the various forms of public participation differ in terms of the role of the public in the policy process.\(^\text{13}\) Each of these approaches has some value and utility. And, depending on the policy area as well as the stage of policy development, one or more approaches will be more appropriate than others.


To qualify as “meaningful” – for participants and general public alike – a public involvement initiative that involves deliberation must meet the following criteria:\footnote{Joshua Cohen describes deliberation democracy as those exercises in which the discourse between participants moulds their decisions on preferred policy outcomes. It is assumed that participants are willing to be persuaded by reasoned argument and are not wed to a particular outcome before discourse begins. For more information, see Cohen’s “Deliberation and Democratic Legitimacy” in Bohman and Rehg, eds. Deliberative Democracy: Essays on Reason and Politics. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1997.}

\begin{itemize}
  \item it must be linked to the policy decision-making process;
  \item its participant-roster must reflect the diversity of the population;
  \item the process must provide an opportunity for the participants to receive credible, balanced, honest information about the issues in question;
  \item the process must be organized and facilitated so that its deliberations respect the principles of equality and fairness; and,
  \item the results of the deliberative process must be communicated effectively to the public at large.
\end{itemize}

\section*{Link to the policy decision-making process}

Torres, Gunn, Bernier, and Leighninger argue that discussions must be focused on action, and they must carry some degree of decision-making authority.\footnote{Lars Hasselblad Torres, Rosemary Gunn, Roger Bernier, and Matthew Leighninger, “The Deliberative Agency: Opportunities to Deepen Public Participation.” Deliberative Democracy Consortium Discussion Paper. March 2004. \url{http://www.deliberative-democracy.net/resources/library/delib_agency_030404.pdf}.} It must be clear to participants in the deliberation process that their efforts are not simply for consultative purposes or to validate decisions that have already been taken. Citizens may improve their civic education in an exercise that includes a careful consideration of a policy issue, even if their views never become policy. However, if citizens are to be expected to sacrifice the considerable time and energy required by meaningful public deliberations, they must be assured that the result of their deliberations “matter”. A deliberative procedure that fails in this regard will be interpreted as a shallow commitment to public involvement and may even undermine, rather than enhance, public trust in government.

Although there may need to be some room for discretion on the part of governments or legislatures in terms of the degree of impact that the results of public deliberations should have on a policy outcome, there is an enormous difference between those public involvement exercises where the participants’ recommendations are binding on governments and those where there is no requirement to act. In public consultations, such as done via opinion polls or focus groups, for example, there is no firm commitment from government that the results will be incorporated into policy. In the case of deliberative exercises, by contrast, there is usually at least a promise that the results of the deliberation will be taken into account and feedback provided.\footnote{“CPRN and Deliberative Dialogue: A Primer.” Ottawa, Ontario: Canadian Policy Research Networks, May 2005. \url{www.cprn.org}.}

For some, public involvement in the policy process poses a challenge to the notion of the accountability of elected representatives. The basic argument is that if a government is forced to implement a policy decision that results from a public deliberation process, it cannot be held responsible or accountable for that policy or its consequences, except insofar as it initiated the process itself and thus must accept
general responsibility for whatever was the outcome. In our view, this challenge is not a
major obstacle to public involvement, so long as citizens are not demanding “direct
democracy” over the full policy agenda. According to Abelson and Gauvin, most citizens
want to have opportunities to influence politicians when decisions are taken. They
want citizen input to be given due influence in the policy process along with the input of
experts and stakeholders. They do not demand a veto. Public involvement in policy is
vital to the health of representative democracies, at least insofar as it is meant to co-
exist with representative democracy, and not to replace it. In this case, citizen
involvement in policymaking does not absolve governments of responsibility for how they
respond to citizens who are engaged in these exercises and for how they engage
citizens in the policy process. Governments can be judged, moreover, on the degree to
which they design and employ public involvement approaches that are informed, fair,
and representative.

Representation of diversity

Demographic factors such as age, gender, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and
place of residence affect political interests and orientations. If a public involvement
exercise does not represent a population’s demographic diversity, it runs the risk of
alienating the groups that are not represented and thereby undermining the legitimacy of
the entire project. As Levine, Fung, and Gastil point out, public deliberation practitioners
must take it upon themselves to set and meet demographic diversity targets. Research
in the United States shows that citizens with more formal education participate more
frequently in public involvement exercises. This means that citizens with less education
have to be encouraged to participate. All of the commonly-used public involvement
methodologies discussed later in the paper, such as Citizens’ Juries and Citizens’
Assemblies, make an effort to ensure that demographic diversity is given priority when
participants are recruited. In this way, these processes are meant to be more
“representative” than elected legislatures that everywhere have representation deficits
for at least some groups.

The representation of diversity in public deliberation exercises has the potential
not only to produce widely-accepted policy outcomes, but to enhance mutual respect
among citizens with varying opinions and preferences who might not otherwise interact.
Deliberative dialogue seeks to facilitate the creation of “shared meaning” by inviting the
expression of competing points of view in a non-competitive or non-adversarial
environment. It is this objective that makes deliberative democracy uniquely suited to
conflict resolution. As Cohen suggests, deliberative democracy exercises invite
participants to come with an open mind to persuasion by reasoned argument. The idea
is that the discourse itself, and not participants’ loyalties to personal or political interests,
act as the basis for the group’s ultimate recommendations regarding policy preferences.
Informed dialogue in an organized forum, where everyone gets a chance to
participate, has the potential to achieve an understanding of the issue at hand before
policy decisions are taken. As Phillips points out, in deliberation exercises, participants
are to be moved by the reasoned arguments of others, and not by appeals to shared

19 CPRN and Deliberative Dialogue: A Primer.
20 Cohen 92.
partisanship.\textsuperscript{21} If participants are open to reasoned arguments, this makes it possible for them to change their stance on an issue as they learn more about its various implications.

**Informed participants**

A third requirement for meaningful public involvement is that participants be adequately informed about the issue or issues that they have been asked to consider. Conover, Searing, and Crewe point out that a major obstacle preventing many citizens from joining in either formal or informal political discussions is that they feel uninformed about politics and therefore unable to contribute to discussions.\textsuperscript{22} Participants must have balanced information about the major perspectives on an issue before participating so that they can both articulate their own points of view and listen to and understand those of others. In most cases, the organizers of deliberation exercises distribute balanced information packages to all participants before the event occurs. Neutral experts on the issue, or advocates for the different perspectives, can also outline or present the different arguments and answer questions. The effort to make participants as informed as possible enhances the civic education aspect of the deliberation exercise. It also helps to “level the playing field” between those participants who initially are knowledgeable about the issue and those who are not.

**Organized dialogue**

The fourth criterion is that deliberation exercises be organized to maximize the potential for fair and productive communication. Most deliberation exercises are facilitated by trained moderators whose role is to secure participation that is equitable and respectful, to see that discussion stays focused and that ample time is given to the most important issues. It is not enough that members of different demographic groups are present at these meetings. The rules for procedure need to be clearly established before deliberation begins.\textsuperscript{23}

Levine, Fung, and Gastil contend that organized deliberation makes for a more positive experience for participants. They state that “when deliberation is organized, people like it. In fact, they find it deeply satisfying and significant.”\textsuperscript{24} This is not surprising. It is easy to see how the opportunity to express one’s political views in a non-threatening environment, and then to see them addressed in policy decision-making, would strengthen citizens’ feelings of efficacy. Participant satisfaction is vital to institutionalizing public involvement exercises. If participants are not fulfilled by the experience, they will not be inclined to participate in the future.

Torres, Gunn, Bernier, and Leighton argue that the conditions for fair, non-hostile dialogue are best met in small groups of 9-15 participants. This number optimizes the opportunity for each individual to contribute meaningfully, although it

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\textsuperscript{24} Levine, Fung, and Gastil, 1.
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sometimes will require careful attention to meeting demographic diversity targets. Most deliberation exercises discussed in this paper involve a large assembly of participants who are also organized into small groups for discussion purposes.

Communicating the results to the general public

The final requirement is that the results of the deliberation process reach the general public. For small-scale public deliberations to be meaningful to the entire polity, the results of deliberation exercises must be communicated effectively to the larger population. Further, if the entire voting population has access to the participants’ recommendations, all citizens will have information with which to hold the government to account if it fails to act on them.

Widespread publication can be the most daunting challenge facing deliberative democracy exercises. As a case in point, the widely acclaimed BC Citizens’ Assembly included a direct role for the entire public in the form of a referendum on the Assembly’s recommendation. But public surveys found that the vast majority of citizens knew very little about the referendum question that came from the assembly.

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25 Torres 5.
III. Citizen Engagement: Why do we need it?

John Uhr describes deliberative democracy as “fair and open community deliberation about the merits of competing political arguments.” Over the past decade, there has been a deliberative democracy “explosion”. Governments and private organizations around the world have initiated formal public dialogue exercises in a range of policy areas. Gastil and Keith argue that the “deliberative democracy renaissance” can be explained by changes in politics, telecommunications, and culture. New “civic actors”, such as the Pew Charitable Trusts and AmericaSpeaks, have emerged in the past decade to encourage public deliberation outside of traditional political institutions. Given the decline in allegiance to political parties, it is not surprising that support for non-partisan opportunities for participation by way of public deliberations is on the rise. Concerns about a decline in social capital, as argued by Robert Putnam, have buttressed efforts to introduce deliberative democracy. As Abelson and Gauvin indicate, citizens are becoming less willing to rely on elected representatives either as the sole advocates of their interests or as the sole decision-makers. Citizens want their own seat at the policy table. The widespread use of the Internet helps to facilitate civic deliberation because it allows citizens to transcend geographical, cultural, and socioeconomic borders. Increasing diversity and multiculturalism in most Western countries, combined with a rise in international partnerships, has made it even more important to develop effective strategies for the accommodation of difference. Deliberative democracy is held out as one major way to meet the new challenges introduced by these political, technological, and cultural changes.

Polling data indicate that Canadians want a more direct role in the policy process. However, among politicians, public servants, and stakeholders in policy communities, there is an obvious lack of enthusiasm for this idea. Citizen engagement is not on the radar of politicians of any political stripe. For instance, the election campaign of 2005-06 came and went without any mention of citizen engagement. This is not to say that none of Canada’s Members of Parliament value the importance of citizen input. For instance, veteran MP Ed Broadbent is very supportive of institutionalized citizen engagement. However, he and others are careful to point out that the role of MPs in policymaking must not be minimized as a result. The Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs, on which Broadbent sat, released a report on electoral reform in November of 2004 that acknowledged that citizen engagement on the issue of electoral reform is essential, but insisted that “any decision to change the electoral system is a political one” in which MPs must play a key role.

Some critics of citizen engagement, including many public servants, fear that institutionalizing citizen engagement will force governments to implement citizens’ ideas,

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even when they disagree with them. In order to appease these concerns about a mandatory deferral to the outcomes of public deliberations, they would have to be reassured that the outcomes of these citizen engagement exercises would not always be binding. However, the legitimacy of engagement exercises can be lost if governments appear to be unwilling to ever take their results seriously. Governments have to strike a careful balance between the public’s desire for meaningful involvement and government’s authority to exercise discretion.

Coleman and Gotze point out that engaging the public in the policy process might have the effect of inflating participants’ expectations to unattainable or unrealistic heights. At the same time, the threads of public trust can become frayed if citizens feel that politicians and public servants do not support engagement exercises.

Another potential negative outcome of citizen engagement is that the airing of political preferences might have an unexpected and unintended polarizing effect. Ian Shapiro warns that deliberation can widen the gaps between diverse interests rather than narrow them. To make his point, he compares deliberative democracy to a couple in a “distant but not collapsing marriage” who consult a marriage counselor. Once honest communication gets underway, the couple might uncover differences that prove to be irreconcilable and ultimately destroy the marriage. Shapiro’s point is that while deliberation might have positive results, there are no guarantees that honest, rational dialogue will lead to broad agreement. This concern is the justification for the use of various kinds of elite accommodation arrangements, even formal “consociational” structures, whereby conflict is muted by compromises that seek to avoid explicitly and publicly debating the causes of the divisions between interests or groups.

Finally, a common criticism of deliberative democracy is the opposite of polarization – the fostering of a “false consensus”. Not all citizens are drawn to the idea of sharing their political preferences in a public setting. Confident, extroverted participants are likely to be more successful at this task than are others. If this situation arises, it might lead to a “false consensus”. In this case, a consensus is reached because the articulation of some opposing views is suppressed.

Karpowitz and Mansbridge contend that trained facilitators are critical to avoiding these two above outcomes. To avoid the result of a false consensus, they must ensure that participants feel comfortable in sharing their real preferences and are given ample opportunities to do so. In an attempt to avoid polarization, facilitators must encourage the use of non-offensive language and help participants to find common ground amidst their differences. That said, however, it is important that the facilitators

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33 Consociational democracy is a political system commonly used in countries with deep ethnic, religious, or linguistic tensions. The idea is that groups are autonomous on local matters, and political elites from each group negotiate matters that necessitate cooperation. Elite cooperation minimizes contact between the groups, which is vital to maintaining peace in some diverse societies. For more information, see writings by Arend Lijphart such as “Cultural Diversity and Theories of Political Integration” in the Canadian Journal of Political Science, 1971.


35 Ibid.
know where to draw the line between finding a consensus and forcing one. If facilitators and participants focus too hard on coming to a solution, they might ignore critical issues and interests. And, there will invariably be instances where consensus is not possible. In this case, the result does not necessarily mean that deliberations have failed; nor does it mean that deliberative democracy itself is not a legitimate or useful process of democratic governance.

All this said, however, there is still a strong case to be made for enhancing public involvement in the policy process. As noted, public involvement in policy is meant to supplement, not replace, representative democracy. Public involvement enables, even requires, that citizens become informed, formulate considered opinions, and discuss them with others, especially those with whom they would not otherwise interact. In the process, social capital, social trust and civic knowledge are strengthened. For their part, political leaders gain better insight into the public’s opinions, values, and priorities which helps them in their roles as the people’s representatives.\textsuperscript{36} It can make for better public policy, as citizen feedback on the successes and failures of previous policies can better inform policy decisions.\textsuperscript{37} And, the inclusiveness of the process better legitimizes the policy outcome, as groups with diverse opinions have been given a fair chance to engage.\textsuperscript{38}

Equally important, citizen engagement exercises take a less adversarial form than do legislative debates, as citizens are less likely than party-partisans to hold to well-formed ideological or partisan positions. Adversarial debate among partisans is an effective way to reach decisions on certain kinds of policy issues. Non-adversarial dialogue is more suitable, however, for reaching decisions on matters where consensus or broad agreement is highly valued.

\textsuperscript{37} Phillips 11.
\textsuperscript{38} Mark Button and David Michael Ryfe, “What can we learn from the practice of deliberative democracy?” The Deliberative Democracy Handbook, 24-25.
IV. Public Involvement in OECD countries: selective examples

In recent decades, governments have come to rely extensively on public opinion polls to gauge the public’s outlook on policy issues. Although polls are valid for a number of purposes, they are not the best tool when there is a need for deliberation over policy options and the consideration of tradeoffs. Opinion polls are usually conducted over the telephone and respondents have no prior notice of the call. In any event, the limits of polls to ascertain, let alone to communicate, the “will of the people”, combined with increased demands on governments for meaningful public engagement, have led to the creation of different types of public deliberation exercises.

Using the criteria for institutionalization discussed earlier, we analyze some of the methods used in various OECD countries to involve the public in policy. Then, we turn to some of the public involvement exercises that have taken place in Canada, at the federal and provincial levels. This contrast allows us to identify the challenges that Canada and other countries face in meeting the goal of institutionalization. Despite the fact that Canadian efforts at public involvement are confined mostly to consultation rather than engagement, Canada is considered by other OECD countries to be a “leader” in public involvement in policy. There is general agreement among scholars that, while public consultation is common in OECD countries, citizen engagement in which communication between governments and citizens is two-way, meaningful, and institutionalized is the exception among OECD countries.

There are various approaches used to conduct meaningful public involvement exercises. The following methods have been used by practitioners of deliberative dialogue in OECD countries. These exercises have been used by both governments and private organizations to engage citizens. While several countries, including Canada, Australia, and the United Kingdom, have experimented with these methodologies, the experiments tend to be limited to a one-time exercise. For example, the citizens’ assembly format is not an institutionalized part of policy-making in British Columbia; it has been used but once, on the policy issue of electoral reform. In addition to the citizens’ assembly approach, the following are the models most identified with the meaningful public involvement end of the public participation continuum outlined previously.

United States

21st Century Town Meeting

The 21st Century Town Meeting was created by AmericaSpeaks, a non-profit organization based in Washington, D.C. that develops deliberative tools that include both citizens and public officials in the policy process. Town Meetings are convened jointly by AmericaSpeaks and a sponsoring organization. To date, AmericaSpeaks has convened more than 40 Town Meetings in more than 30 American states.

Each Town Meeting engages up to several thousand people. This large group is broken down into smaller units of 10-12 people. Each small group deliberates the policy,
planning, or resource allocation issue that the meeting was called to address. The entire group considers the leading proposals from table discussions and votes on final recommendations to policymakers. Issue experts are on hand to answer questions and policy-makers both participate in and observe table discussions.  

**Deliberative Polling®**

Deliberative polling was proposed first by Professor James Fishkin in an article in the Atlantic Monthly in 1988. His method combines an opinion poll completed by a large, random sample with deliberation by small groups on a public policy issue. In the first stage of the exercise, a random, representative sample is polled on a set of policy issues. The purpose of the large, random sample is to get a sense of how the general population would respond to the questions being asked in the poll. Then, these respondents are invited to gather at one location to discuss the issues in small groups over the course of a weekend. At the end of the weekend, participants complete the original survey again. The purpose of the exercise is to see how opinions change, or remain the same, after deliberation with others.

**Citizens’ Juries**

This approach was created by Ned Crosby, the founder of the Jefferson Center, a non-profit organization in the United States devoted to generating citizen engagement on public matters. Over 200 citizens’ juries have been conducted in Britain, Australia, and other countries since 1996. Compared with the methodologies discussed so far, citizens’ juries involve a very small number of participants. A panel of 18-24 participants meets for 4-5 days to examine a policy issue. Jurists listen to a variety of expert witnesses and deliberate on the issue amongst themselves. Jurists rely on information given by expert witnesses and are given the opportunity to question them about the issue.

Although the small number of participants is helpful in maintaining high-quality deliberations, it is a liability in terms of attracting government and media attention. Crosby and Nethercut acknowledge that larger exercises, such as Town Meetings and Deliberative Polls, are more attractive to governments and, therefore, tend to have a more significant impact on policy. Given the mass media’s tendency to focus their attention on deliberations involving large numbers of participants, the ability of citizens’ juries to educate the larger population is severely limited. From the perspective of institutionalization, the small sample size makes the exercise an easy one to run frequently, compared to Town Meetings. However, government officials would have to be committed to implementing, or at least considering seriously, the jury’s recommendations. Also, it would be necessary to communicate the results of the exercise to the larger population so that citizens would be aware of the public’s involvement.

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Australia

In Australia, exchanges between federal government officials and citizens tend to be institutionalized but one-sided. There are very few opportunities for meaningful exchanges on policy through which citizen input might have an impact on policy outcomes. Consultations held prior to the final stage of the policy process have been the norm in Australia for some time, but invitees are limited to organized interest groups and stakeholders. Australian public servants and government officials accept that citizen consultation is the “right thing to do”, but there is no government-wide approach to citizen consultation. The result is a great deal of variation between departments in terms of the rate at which and how they consult citizens.

Citizens’ Advisory Committee – Murray Darling Basin

Active citizen engagement in policy is certainly not the norm in Australia. However, the management of the Murray Darling Basin is one issue on which the government has brought citizens into policy discussions. The Murray Darling Basin is home to Australia’s longest river, extending over more than one million square kilometres. The region produces forty percent of the gross value agricultural production. The issue of water management is vexing, particularly because the river borders on three political jurisdictions. In May of 2004, the federal government recognized a role for citizen involvement in this area. A Citizen Advisory Committee, created in 1986, was given a mandate for direct “engagement” with the residents of the Basin. In addition to holding local engagement exercises and disseminating information back to citizens, the Committee itself has been given the opportunity to participate directly in policy discussions. The Committee of 20 is appointed from the citizenry by the Ministerial Council on the basis of expertise, skills, and diversity of background.

The Murray Darling Basin initiative indicates willingness on the part of the Australian government to conceive of a more active role for citizens in policy. However, this exercise is does not meet all the criteria for institutionalization or for meaningful public involvement. The effort to engage citizens is restricted to a narrow policy area; it is not government-wide by any means. While local “engagement” meetings are held regularly, there is no guarantee that these are anything more than information sessions with a question-and-answer component. Citizen input will not necessarily find its way into policy outcomes. Further, the Citizen Advisory Committee’s members are appointed as experts, not community representatives. Although committee members have been given a direct role in the process, they might not voice local concerns if they conflict with expert knowledge.

In terms of the criteria for meaningful public involvement, there is no indication that discussions are moderated or that demographic diversity has been a factor in assembling participant groups. That said, the meetings provide an important opportunity to inform citizens on issues and policy trade offs, as well as of the diverse

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viewpoints of citizens from different communities. We see this exercise as a step in the right direction, but as falling short of the criteria for institutionalizing meaningful public involvement.

Online consultations – Australian Federal Government Departments

To meet increasing demands for direct involvement by ordinary citizens, several Australian government departments have used the Internet as a method of citizen involvement. The advantages of online consultations include accessibility, timeliness, protection of citizens’ privacy, and the ability to involve many citizens in policy discussions. Online consultations with individual citizens are also meant to compliment consultations held with stakeholders and organized groups. For instance, the Australian Department of Defence online consultations on the future of defence policy was used to collect citizens’ feedback on policy proposals, and officials pledged to take citizen input “into consideration”.46

While online citizen consultations are better than no public involvement, this method falls short of meeting the criteria for institutionalized, meaningful public involvement. An online invitation for input on a pre-crafted policy proposal does not guarantee that citizens are sufficiently well informed on the issue, nor does it ensure that the pool of respondents represent the demographic diversity of the overall population. Because citizens submit their comments as individuals, there is no opportunity for them to deliberate as a group and to discuss policy trade-offs. Although this method is employed by several departments, some of which hold online consultations regularly, there is no guarantee that citizen input will affect policy decisions. There is no opportunity for direct contact between government officials or public servants and the citizen participants as groups.

Australian State Governments

Compared to the Australian federal government, there appears to be a deeper commitment to public involvement at the state level. For instance, the websites of the Premier and Cabinet in Western Australia, Queensland, Victoria, and Tasmania all contain a commitment to involve citizens on policy matters.

The Government of Western Australia has undertaken a number of citizen engagement exercises on urban planning issues. The government has used a variety of methodologies, such as 21st Century Town Meetings, Citizens’ Juries, Deliberative Surveys, and Consensus Forums.47 Some of the key questions that have been put to the public include: How do we maintain our population? How do we ensure an adequate standard of health services? How can we plan for a more vibrant culture?48 These are value-oriented questions that require a significant degree of citizen input so that the policies that result are supported and reflective of public values and priorities.

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An example of this was the Department of Planning and Infrastructure’s initiatives in 2003 called “Dialogue with the City”. The city of Perth faces an anticipated rate of population growth that will require 375,000 new jobs and 350,000 new homes in the next 25 years. Using a variety of civic engagement exercises including an interactive website, a television campaign, an intensive dialogue involving over 1100 participants, and a mail-in survey with 1700 respondents, the government identified citizens’ priorities.\textsuperscript{49} Since the Dialogue exercise in 2003, the Government has been faithful to its pledge of meaningful citizen involvement. The Minister for Planning and Infrastructure has assembled a twelve-person planning team to work with three liaison teams whose role is to canvass their constituencies on matters that develop during the implementation phase.\textsuperscript{50}

The Dialogue with the City deliberation exercise is an example of meaningful public involvement. Participants were informed, discussion was moderated by trained facilitators, and the participant pool represented the population’s demographic diversity. The results of the deliberation were made public and were given to government officials to be used in policy decisions. However, this event does not count as the “institutionalization” of public involvement; it was a one-time event and therefore did not become a regular component in the policy process. Given the amount of time, money, and preparation that went into its planning, it would no surprise if it were not to be a frequent occurrence. That said, the Department of Planning and Infrastructure has shown a genuine commitment to citizen involvement under Minister MacTiernan’s direction. Its accomplishments to date suggest that it could become a leader in institutionalizing citizen engagement.

Although Australian government officials, at both the national and state levels, show a willingness to consider a more active role for citizens in the policy process, citizen engagement beyond consultation occurs rarely and as “one-off” exercises. By contrast, consultation exercises with organized groups are regular occurrences. Consultations with citizens at large occur most often via the Internet.

The United Kingdom

Citizen consultations are a normal part of the policy process in the United Kingdom. As in the Canadian government, the UK government website includes a “Public Consultations” directory that has links to ongoing policy consultations with citizens. Citizens’ role in the consultation process is to respond to a policy document that summarizes a ready-made policy proposal. There is no citizen involvement in the creation of these documents. This means that the citizens do not play a role in either the definition of the policy objectives or in the selection of policy alternatives. Their role is confined to the final stages of the policy process, after important decisions have already been made.

The UK Cabinet office has developed a “code of practice” that all departments must follow when holding consultations with the public. This ensures a standardized


Fostering Canadians’ Role in Public Policy: A Strategy for Institutionalizing Public Involvement in Policy

approach across the entire government. When conducting consultations, government departments must:

- build a timeframe that allows plenty of time for each stage of the process;
- clarify who is consulted and for what purpose(s);
- ensure that the policy document is as clear as possible, and is distributed widely;
- analyze responses carefully and with an open mind;
- make results of consultations widely available and explain the reasons behind finalized policy choices.

The code of practice indicates a government-wide commitment to public consultation. It is fair to say that consultation has become an institutionalized part of the policy process. However, this measure does not meet the criteria for institutionalized citizen engagement. Extending an invitation for citizens to comment on a policy paper does not guarantee demographic representation or informed participants. It does not promote policy debate or consideration of tradeoffs, and there is no guarantee that citizens’ responses will factor into policy outcomes, especially if they are at odds with interest group and stakeholder views and interests.

In the UK, as elsewhere, local government is the most fertile ground for the growth of citizen engagement. Public involvement in policymaking at the local level is a major part of the UK government’s public service modernization agenda. In fact, the Local Government Act 1999 requires that local authorities discuss with tax-payers and service-users those policy proposals that could affect them. The rationale is that citizen input on service delivery is a necessary step to maximizing efficiency and citizen satisfaction. Also, it lends democratic legitimacy to policy decisions.

In a 2003 report, the independent Audit Commission stated that of the 150 local councils, 96 had commendable public involvement that was inclusive of diverse groups. On the other hand, 52 councils had “poor” arrangements that required modification. Some councils had failed to include key minority groups, while others had not provided satisfactory feedback to participants. These shortcomings undermine the effectiveness of the public involvement exercise. Without appropriate feedback, participants have no way of knowing if their input had an impact on the outcome. The failure to ensure that minority groups are included threatens the bond of trust between government officials and excluded groups. Also, it compromises the legitimacy and perhaps even the quality of policy outcomes, as not all interests are heard during policy development. The Audit Commission identifies five success factors that must be present for public involvement exercises to be successful: focus on citizens; understanding communities and their internal diversity; clarity of purpose and the likely impact of citizen input on policy outcomes; appropriate communication with participants; and delivering change.

51 The UK government’s public service reform agenda utilizes public involvement exercises to gather input on how to make services more citizen-centered. The Commission for Patient and Public Involvement in Health is an example of this trend. The Commission is an independent public body established by the Department of Health in 2003. Its purpose is to ensure that public participation in important decisions, whether they are made at the national, regional, or local level. For more information, see the Commission’s homepage at http://www.cppih.org/.


The councils that boast “commendable” practices meet many of the criteria for meaningful public involvement. These exercises are inclusive of diverse groups, moderated by a facilitator (in some cases), and the results are used to “inform” the policy decision. The duty to consult with citizens is legislated, which is a major step toward institutionalizing or “embedding” public involvement in the policy process. In order to bring these exercises from the consultation stage to the engagement stage, it is necessary that all councils meet all of the criteria for meaningful public involvement. In time, the successful innovations of local governments in terms of civic engagement exercises might inspire the British central government to follow suit.

Scottish Civic Forum

This private organization describes itself as a “gateway” between government and civic organizations and individuals. Its main activities are to encourage debate about controversial political issues, to share information on proposed legislation, and to educate people about politics in the hope that they become active citizens. Via fax, mail, and email, the Forum advertises its upcoming public consultations and disperses information packages on policy proposals that are before the Scottish Parliament. Most noteworthy, and hence its inclusion here, the Forum advertises “calls for evidence” put out by parliamentary committees while they are studying a bill. Committees invite citizens to submit their responses to a policy proposal, via mail or email. Individuals might be called upon to give oral presentations before committees.54

There is much to praise about the Forum’s activities, as they contribute to the citizenry’s levels of education and public trust. The Forum’s advertising of committees’ calls for evidence promotes public involvement by bringing politicians and citizens together. However, individual and group presentations to committees fall short of meeting the criteria for institutionalized public involvement. Calls for evidence occur at the discretion of committees; they are not required. Because citizens are invited into the process at the committee stage, the government has already defined the fundamental elements of its policy and eliminated some alternatives. Although there is still an opportunity for amendment, the committee stage occurs late in the policy process. And, of course, there is no guarantee that citizens’ submissions will have any effect on policy outcomes. Finally, there is no interaction between citizens themselves. Because they do not deliberate, the likelihood of citizens developing an understanding of opposing viewpoints is diminished.

Denmark and Germany

Although none of the OECD countries has institutionalized meaningful public involvement in their policy processes, Denmark and Germany stand out in that each of these governments has used an explicit form of deliberative dialogue in a limited capacity. In Denmark, the Board of Technology uses the “consensus conference” model to gather citizens’ input on policies respecting new technologies. In Germany, the “planning cell” model is used occasionally to test public support for a policy issue. These exercises do not meet the criteria for institutionalization. Moreover, in Denmark they are confined to one policy area, and in Germany they are held only occasionally and then only when a government official requests it. However, the consensus conference and

the planning cell approaches are examples of meaningful public involvement exercises. Participants are demographically diverse, informed, and moderated in their discussions. The fact that the German and Danish governments have, to some degree, incorporated these exercises into the policy process shows that it can be done.

**Danish Board of Technology: Consensus Conferences**

Typically, experts assume that ordinary citizens are ill-equipped to evaluate policy alternatives and their potential implications, especially in complicated, technical fields. In the late 1980s, the Danish Board of Technology set out to challenge this assumption. This parliamentary agency, whose responsibility it is to assess new technologies, thought it important to stimulate public discussion and debate on technological advancements and their impacts on society. To achieve this goal, the agency began the practice of inviting ordinary citizens into the process. Participants are supplied with balanced information on the new technology before they are invited to deliberate and come to a conclusion. This conclusion is presented to the Danish Parliament. The purpose is not to give the public a final say over policy direction, but to educate legislators on the public’s concerns and priorities.55

The “consensus conference” format that the Danish Board of Technology uses for citizen engagement brings together 10-25 randomly selected citizens for eight days over a period of three months to deliberate on a policy issue. Various presenters, including experts, activists, and policymakers, appear before the group to answer questions.56 Since the development of new technologies often has enormous social consequences, public input is useful for policymakers to determine whether these changes are viewed by the public as positive or negative.57 As Hendriks reports, most participants find their experience in a consensus conference to be fulfilling, informative, and meaningful.58

**Germany: Planning Cells**

The planning cell exercise can involve hundreds of citizens at multiple venues. These projects usually involve 6-10 planning cells working at the same time, each with 25 participants. Each planning cell is similar to a consensus conference in that participants listen to experts and representatives speak about the topic. For most deliberations, planning cells organize the 25 participants into groups of five, which gives them more opportunity to contribute. The stimulus for these meetings usually comes from government officials looking for public input on an issue of importance to them.59

Instead of a single moderator, planning cells use one female and one male “process steward” who manage discussion rather than facilitate deliberation. Management of group dynamics is “loose” in order to avoid manipulating participants. At

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58 Hendriks 2005.
59 Ibid 84-7.
the end of the planning cell, the recommendations from all of the cells are synthesized into a citizens’ report. The final report is presented to decision makers and made available to the public.

Planning cells are a good example of how public involvement can be institutionalized, at least in part. Because planning cells are usually initiated by a government official, there is a general commitment on the part of the government to act on the issue being considered. Also, the cost of operating a planning cell is not a serious deterrent. Although the cost varies depending on the amount of travel that is necessary, Hendriks estimates that a project involving 8 planning cells costs between $180,000 and $200,000 (U.S.).

Online Deliberation Exercises

Although almost all online public involvement exercises are confined to requests for citizens to comment on a policy document that is “ready for the printers”, there are a few examples in the OECD of governments using the Internet as a tool of citizen deliberation. These exercises involve real-time discussions between citizens with diverse interests. Nonetheless, Coleman and Gotze have found not only that online citizen deliberations are the exception rather than the rule but that, when they do occur, few citizens are aware of them and the results rarely have any discernible impact on the policy process.

In the United Kingdom, the Hansard Society’s e-democracy program runs pilot online discussions on behalf of the government. These exercises invite citizens to participate while policies are being developed and before final decisions are taken, which makes it more likely that citizen input will have an effect on the outcome. Participants report feeling satisfied with the exercises and Members of Parliament say that they value citizens’ input. The results of these exercises are submitted to Parliament. This does not guarantee that public input will be incorporated but it means that it might be heard.

These exercises normally invite “affected” citizens to participate in policy discussions, that is, those citizens with a direct interest in the policy outcome. For instance, only farmers, retailers, distributors, producers, and the like would be invited to participate in an online discussion about agricultural policy. This approach limits the educational impact of the deliberation exercise as far as the general public is concerned. Also, it ignores the fact that costs and benefits invariably extend beyond the most directly affected population.

In Germany, the city of Esslingen has used online discussions to gather citizen input on new plans for housing. Approximately 5,000 citizens were considered to be affected directly by policy changes in this instance. The government-sponsored web project posted information about the policy in progress and invited citizens to participate in interactive discussions over a period of one month. Although only 26 people posted

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60 Ibid 94.
120 messages, the website had over 4,000 hits. The substance of these discussions went on to frame both media debate on the topic and politicians’ discussions.\textsuperscript{63}

Online discussions are now widely accessible, as Internet access becomes less expensive and often available at no cost in public facilities. For many, this format is less intimidating than face-to-face interactions in an assembly or group setting. Participating in online public discussions gives citizens exposure to diverse and opposing preferences, although responding to policy proposals online does not offer the same opportunity to learn, through personal interaction, how others would be affected by the proposed change. These discussions, while superior to online consultation documents, do not fully qualify as meaningful public involvement, as there is usually no effort by organizers to ensure that the participant body is diverse or informed about the issue. Not is there any guarantee that public input will be communicated to the general public. Moreover, government officials rarely participate in these exercises. Finally, since government-sponsored online deliberation exercises are the exception rather than the norm, this format is not yet a regularized method of public involvement.

\textsuperscript{63} Coleman and Gotze.
V. The Canadian Experience

In this section, we outline a number of public involvement initiatives that have taken place in Canada. As stated previously, many, perhaps most, federal and provincial government departments rely on online consultation exercises to gather citizen input on policy proposals and some conduct public consultation exercises or informal town hall meetings. As a rule, online consultations tend to occur in the later stages of the policy process, while meetings with interest groups and stakeholders happen much earlier. The events that we discuss below are more the exception, than the norm, which means that none of them counts as evidence of “institutionalization”. But they do demonstrate that governments are capable of engaging the public in meaningful policy dialogue. These citizen engagement exercises also raise the bar of public involvement in Canada above mere consultation.

British Columbia Citizens’ Assembly on Electoral Reform

The mandate of the BC Citizens’ Assembly on Electoral Reform was to assess different electoral systems and decide whether or not British Columbia should discard the single-member plurality system in favour of a new one that would be proposed by the assembly. As noted, the Assembly is considered by many to be the gold standard of meaningful public involvement. In addition to their own deliberations, the 160 members of the Assembly considered 1,603 written submissions from the public and held over 50 public meetings to get citizens’ input. In the end, the Assembly recommended that the province switch to the single-transferable vote system (STV). The Assembly’s recommendation was brought to the public for approval in a referendum on May 17, 2005. It was supported by 58% of voters with majority support in 77 of the province’s 79 ridings, but nonetheless failed because it did not reach the required 60% to pass.64

The Assembly captured the province’s demographic diversity. Members underwent an intensive educational process during which they studied the pros and cons of different electoral systems used throughout the world. Discussions were moderated to secure fair and equitable participation.

This exercise stood to have an enormous impact in a very important policy area. Members of the Assembly knew that their recommendation would be put to a binding referendum if they decided to recommend a new model. Hence, they were assured from the beginning that their participation had purpose. Although the provincial electorate had the final decision over whether or not to adopt a new electoral system, the Assembly’s members did not have to bear the burden of making a binding recommendation that might not be supported by the public.65

The central criticism of the B.C. exercise is directed not at the deliberative process itself, but at how it had less than satisfactory benefits for the larger community. Evidence suggests that it had little civic education effect for the citizens at large. Polls

65 Interview with expert on electoral reform who participated in the BC Citizens’ Assembly. August 17, 2005.
showed that 60-70% of British Columbians knew little or nothing about the referendum question when they went to vote. Fair Voting BC noted that while $5.5 million of the public’s money was spent educating assembly members, only $800,000 was spent on operating the Referendum Information Office that was to inform voters about the referendum via a rudimentary advertising campaign. The government’s commitment to this exercise seemed to focus on the assembly itself; it gave insufficient attention to educating the public on the issue of electoral reform. Nick Loenen of Fair Voting argues that given the perceived complexity of the STV system, a major effort on the “yes” side was required to educate citizens on how the system would work. Interestingly, polling data indicated that the more people knew about the STV alternative, the more they supported it. The 2005 Speech from the Throne delivered in British Columbia after the referendum included a promise to hold another STV referendum in November of 2008 accompanied by a pledge to provide funding for both the “yes” and the “no” sides.

The process was also criticized on the ground that politicians were not permitted to participate directly as members. Those in favour of the exclusion of politicians argued that their participation would place them in a conflict of interest given that electoral systems are not neutral in their effects and some systems would appear to favour some parties and politicians over others. As a consequence, it was argued, no politician could approach this question objectively. Citizens, so this argument went, are in a better position to make changes to vote-counting rules in an impartial manner. That said, it is likely that some form of participation by politicians and political parties would have added to the assembly’s knowledge of the political process and raised public awareness of the assembly process itself. In particular, the direct involvement of political parties might have enhanced the assembly’s “civic education” capacity by giving the issue a higher profile for the general public.

The citizens’ assembly model was successful in terms of its educational effects for participants and its potential impact on the policy process. However, it was a complex exercise that required much in the way of planning, organizing, management, funding and facilitation. And, the exercise was a pilot project rather than an embedded part of the policy process. The tardy establishment of the promised citizen’s assembly in Ontario, also to deal with electoral reform, is testimony to the complexity of this level of public involvement exercise.

**Ontario Citizens’ Assembly and Citizens Jury**

Ontario’s Democratic Renewal project proposes to employ a number of approaches. In November of 2004, it held a “Dialogue on Democracy” conference that included MPPs, expert panelists, and a selection of citizen notables. Participants in the day-long meeting discussed possible reforms to political institutions and methods of meaningful public involvement in decision-making processes. In June 2005, the government passed legislation giving Elections Ontario the mandate to select volunteer members for a Citizens Assembly on Electoral Reform and a Citizens’ Jury on Political Finance Reform. The Chief Electoral Officer of Ontario is required to ensure that the diversity of Ontario is reflected in both the assembly and the jury. The assembly will examine Ontario’s electoral system, and any changes it recommends will be put to a

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67 Interview with expert on electoral reform. August 17, 2005.
public referendum. The 12-person jury will make recommendations on how political parties and election campaigns are financed.

The government’s multi-pronged approach is commendable, as no public involvement method is suitable for all situations. The citizens’ jury model is probably more appropriate than a citizens’ assembly for considering reforms to party and campaign financing rules. Juries involve a very small number of participants (18-25) and are most appropriate when the problem has agreed-upon parameters and a limited scope of possible solutions. The campaign finance issue meets these criteria.

The Commission on the Future of Health Care in Canada

The Commission’s public consultation effort was extensive. It included 21 days of public hearings, televised debates with health care experts, a Forum on Aboriginal Health, and policy dialogue sessions with Canadians. More than 30,000 Canadians participated in 2 online surveys.  

The Commission’s policy dialogue sessions on health care were an example of meaningful public involvement. The exercise was held in 12 Canadian cities with 40 participants at each meeting. The participant groups were chosen carefully so that the country’s demographic diversity would be represented. Prior to the discussions, participants received a “backgrounder” on health care policy so that all of them would feel informed enough to participate. Participants considered four different scenarios, each outlining a different course for the health care system to take in the future. Then, they identified their goals for the health care system and considered the trade-offs that they would be willing to make to achieve their desired ends. Commissioner Romanow was very supportive of the citizens’ dialogue exercises, as well as the Commission’s other methods of public consultation. Because of his commitment to citizens’ priorities and values, the report reflected participants’ demand for accountability, transparency, and a more open policy process. Commissioner Romanow proposed a “health covenant” between governments, health care providers, and the Canadian public, through which public participation and mutual responsibility would be encouraged. While the Commission was the subject of much media attention, the citizens’ dialogue was not. As a consequence, Canadians at large could not be but unaware of the citizens’ dialogue exercises or their input to the Commission’s recommendation.

Citizens’ Dialogue on the Long-term Management of Used Nuclear Fuel

Under the federal Nuclear Fuel Waste Act, the Nuclear Waste Management Organization (NWMO) was established in 2002. Its mandate was to conduct a study of the possible strategies for the long term management of Canada’s used nuclear fuel and to recommend a strategy to the Canadian government by November of 2005. In 2003, the NWMO held deliberative dialogue exercises in which they asked groups of 40 participants (462 participants in total) about the values that they thought should underpin

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68 Commission on the Future of Health Care in Canada. “Romanow Commission Releases Results of Two Online Surveys.”
a long-term management strategy. The discussions produced agreement that the strategy recommended by the NWMO should reflect the following values: responsibility; adaptability based on changing knowledge; stewardship and care for future generations; accountability and transparency; knowledge as a public good; and inclusion of citizens in policy decisions. The exercise met the criteria for meaningful public involvement in terms of demographic diversity, facilitated discussion, informed participation, and a clear link to the policy process.70

The citizens’ dialogue was not the only method used to gather citizen input. The organization conducted public opinion polls, focus groups, surveys, and public information sessions both to inform the public about the management of used nuclear fuel and to get citizens’ input. In total, more than 18,000 people, including 500 specialists, took part in the NWMO study. At each “decision point”, the NWMO used a variety of the citizen engagement techniques, as noted above. Its goal was to ensure that the direction of its research as well as the proposals that it was considering reflected the values that Canadians believe should underpin the final solution. Given the large number of people contacted during the NWMO’s work, one could argue that the organization had a considerable educational impact. However, it is likely that most Canadians are unaware of NWMO’s project.

In November of 2005, the NWMO recommended Adapted Phased Management. The recommendation reflected the values and preferences that citizens had communicated throughout the NWMO’s mandate. This method is to be implemented in stages with the end goal of storing all of Canada’s used nuclear fuel in one deep, underground location with a suitable rock formation. Once the government decides on a strategy, the NWMO will become the implementing agency. At that point, the NWMO will have the task of finding a community willing to host the central facilities. NWMO President Elizabeth Dowdeswell has articulated a commitment to open and inclusive consultations on this question.71

Social Development Canada

Social Development Canada has held roundtable discussions and online consultations to learn what social issues are important to Canadians, what obstacles have surfaced in these areas, and what strategies should be used to overcome them. The department has expressed its desire to use the results of these exercises to help guide its future work. The results of online consultations with citizens are to be made available in early 2006 via the department website.

The roundtable discussions typically involved between 15-25 stakeholders and have probed such issues as child care, persons with disabilities, and care-giving. In this context, a “stakeholder” is someone with an active interest in the subject in question. For instance, a care-giver for persons with disabilities would be a stakeholder in roundtable discussions on policies relating to persons with disabilities. In the

roundtables, participants were asked to draw on their experiences to identify priorities for future strategies and policies.72

Roundtables limit the number of participants to create an environment conducive to productive and equitable discussion. These exercises normally began with a presentation from a policy expert or a representative from Social Development Canada and were chaired by experts or practitioners in the subject area being covered. The advantage of limiting roundtable participants to “stakeholders” is that it can be assumed that all participants are knowledgeable and informed in the policy area in question. The roundtable format gives stakeholders from different backgrounds an opportunity to share their diverse experiences and to build a shared understanding that includes various interests and perspectives. Surely, future policies stand to benefit from stakeholders’ deliberations. A valuable advantage of stakeholders’ roundtable is that these meetings give participants the opportunity to review and consider public submissions on the subject.

A disadvantage of “stakeholders-only” roundtables is that often, their results are not communicated to the general public, which reduces the educational benefits of the exercise. Also, stakeholders often come to these gatherings with a firmly held position that they are seeking to protect, not to alter. A problem with consulting Canadian citizens via the department’s website is that because participation is entirely voluntary, there is no way of ensuring that all perspectives will be brought forward. Those who participate in the online consultations are likely to be interested in the subject already, which means that the website will do little to stimulate new interest in social development policy.

Department of Justice Canada

The Department of Justice seeks input from Canadians and “justice stakeholders” in the development of law and policy. The department uses a variety of public consultation mechanisms, including workshops, roundtable discussions, workbooks, and consultation papers. Roundtable discussions are used mainly to consult with experts or “stakeholders” and generally do not engage “ordinary” Canadians.

Consultation papers appear to be the method used most frequently by the Department of Justice to gather input from ordinary Canadians. A consultation paper discusses a policy area and the laws that are currently in place within it, identifies problem areas or issues of concern regarding these laws, and explores options for reform. Citizens are asked to consider the information in the paper and respond to questions about it. These questions consist of both value-oriented ones that ask citizens to identify the principles that a policy should embody and rules-oriented ones that ask citizens for advice on how a policy should be crafted.

In its “Policy Statement and Guidelines to Public Participation,” the department states its commitment to the institutionalization of public involvement in policy. The statement recognizes the need for “transparent, accessible” consultations that gather input from Canadians from diverse backgrounds and perspectives. The Department of

Justice recognizes that “meaningful public involvement cannot be a one-time process”, but must extend throughout the entire policy process. However, the consultation papers used to gather citizens’ input do not meet the criteria for meaningful, institutionalized public involvement.

One advantage of consultation papers is that they increase participants’ knowledge of the subject area that they cover. Another is that they are often circulated and collected prior to government consultations with experts and therefore are available for consideration by the experts at these meetings. A major disadvantage of consultation papers is that there is little or no opportunity for deliberation to take place between citizens. Policy-making involves balancing competing interests, but responding to a consultation paper does not foster an appreciation of the diversity of interests. Also, the use of consultation papers does not ensure a diverse participation base, as there is no active effort to recruit participants.

Consultation papers are used widely throughout the federal government as a form of citizen participation. Health Canada, Industry Canada, Foreign Affairs Canada, and Public Works and Government Works Canada are some of the other departments that employ this method. As stated previously, the advantages of this approach are that it helps to educate and inform participants and it is available to all citizens rather than to a small sample.

The Foreign Policy Dialogue

In 2003, the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade (DFAIT) asked for Canadians’ input on how to shape Canada’s foreign policy. Town hall meetings and internet consultations were used to gather citizens’ input. The department issued a dialogue paper in January of that year entitled “A Dialogue on Foreign Policy” and asked Canadians to read it and respond to questions about it. Minister Bill Graham held public meetings across the country to discuss the questions posed in the dialogue paper.

DFAIT’s efforts to consult the public provided an opportunity for Canadians to learn about foreign policy and to reflect on their own priorities in this regard. In addition to the dialogue paper, the department’s website provided links to papers written by foreign policy experts so that citizens’ could inform themselves more fully before they responded to questions. However, the “Dialogue on Foreign Policy” exercise exhibited the limitations of consultations. First, the website and town hall meetings likely attracted only those Canadians who already had an interest in foreign policy – often stakeholders. These instruments are not effective for stimulating interest in a subject. Second, citizens were not given an opportunity to deliberate with others so as to understand or appreciate competing interests. Public meetings and online discussion groups are suitable for expressing one’s individual opinions, but are not normally effective in promoting responsive and reflective deliberation. Third, participants in these exercises did not receive feedback from government officials that would give them the sense that their voices had been heard by policymakers. There is no direct link between these public

consultations and the policy-making process. The department said that it would incorporate citizens’ responses into the policy process, but there is no established mechanism for holding officials to account on this gesture, beyond the normal political process.\footnote{Bill Graham. “A Dialogue on Foreign Policy: A Report to Canadians.” Foreign Affairs Canada. 6 June 2003. \url{http://www.foreign-policy-dialogue.ca/en/welcome/index.html}.}
VI. Obstacles to Meaningful Public Involvement

To increase the extent to which there is citizen engagement beyond consultation it is necessary to identify and address the most important obstacles to institutionalizing meaningful public involvement in the Canadian system. When interviewing public servants, politicians, academics, and public involvement practitioners for this project, our goal was to ascertain the reasons why institutionalizing meaningful public involvement has been a most elusive goal. Many of the interviewees referred to the same obstacles, which we discuss in this section. The fact that no OECD country has institutionalized public involvement suggests that they face many, if not all, of the same obstacles.

Resistance of policy elites

First, there is the expected resistance of policy elites, including politicians, public servants, and stakeholders, to meaningful citizen engagement exercises. Citizen engagement requires that those in positions of authority relinquish or diminish some of their power to make decisions in order to share power with citizens. The political elite are reluctant to hold open-ended citizen engagement exercises because the agendas and the outcomes of these meetings are harder to control. In a consultation exercise in which citizens are asked to respond to a set of specific questions, the elites and their officials have control over the agenda. However, in citizen engagement, participants have more control over the agenda and the decisions which they make.

Elites are more willing to share power, as necessary, with important organized interests because they can make deals with them, invariably behind closed doors. Political elites are even willing to share power, at times, with stakeholders because they can negotiate with them, if not behind closed doors then usually without the full glare of publicity, given the limited public interest in most of these negotiations. In the case of citizen engagement, however, political elites are more hesitant to share power because they must deliberate in public with citizens.

Stakeholders sometimes object to public involvement in policy on the grounds that citizens at large are not adequately informed of the issues at hand to justify their input in policy outcomes. They deny, in other words, the public interest that must be addressed in every area of public policy, and thus the public’s right to participate in all areas of public policy, regardless of the standing that political elites grant stakeholders.

At least some MPs are adverse to citizen engagement, at least as power sharing, for they see themselves as having been elected to act in Parliament as citizens’ representatives; for many of them, citizen engagement runs against the grain of representative democracy. The adversarial dynamics of Government and Opposition in the parliamentary system assume a partisan divide that, for many partisans, renders efforts at non-partisan citizen engagement rare, even politically suspect. On the other hand, the partisan adversarialism that characterizes the parliamentary process, and as best exemplified in Question Period, breeds cynicism toward political parties in general among non-partisan Canadians.76

Citizens’ reluctance

A second impediment is that many citizens are reluctant to take a more active role in the policy process. There are a number of reasons for this. One is the time commitment, an obstacle that shows no signs of abating given the increasing demands of the contemporary workplace. A second is that many citizens are too aware of their own ignorance to feel able to contribute to a policy discussion, even though they are much less deferential to authority. A third is the high degree of lack of trust and confidence in their government, which prevents many citizens from taking seriously the government’s attempts to engage them. A fourth is the record – there are too many perceived examples of token consultations and too few cases of perceived meaningful public involvement exercises. These perceptions, and realities, have had the effect of “poisoning the well”, as many citizens too easily suspect that all public involvement exercises are for show, that governments are more concerned with scoring political points than they are with learning about citizens’ needs and priorities through a process of engagement.

Structure of parliamentary system

A third impediment is the structure of Canada’s parliamentary system of governance where there are severe institutional constraints to public involvement in policy-making. More so than in any of the major Westminster systems, Canadian government (federally and provincially) is subject to an excessive concentration of power. It is difficult to see how the public can be engaged in Canada’s hierarchical, closed and secretive governmental system. Not only is power concentrated at the centre, under prime ministers and premiers (with even cabinets reduced to being ‘focus groups’), an increased number of political staff have much greater influence and the professional public service is subject to greater pressures to be politically responsive to the government of the day, including using the demanded spin on government communications with the public.

Individualistic, rights-focused political culture

A fourth impediment is the emergence of a political culture that is more individualistic and rights-focused. In this political milieu there is less willingness, interest or capacity to engage in public processes intended to promote a community consensus. Community is not a highly prized value on the part of those inclined to individualism. And, consensus is not something that can be allowed to undermine individual interests that are considered to be non-negotiable.

The significance of this obstacle is evident in light of the declining rates at which Canadians embrace traditional forms of participation, such as voting in elections and joining political parties. Henry Milner has commented extensively on the paradox of Western democracies: as we expect more from our politicians in terms of honest, transparent, efficient government, we contribute less in terms of political participation and social capital. Milner notes that the problem of declining levels of civic participation is likely to become more acute because the youngest generation of voters is the least

77 Interview with a public servant. August 15, 2005.
likely to participate.\textsuperscript{79} This presents a vexing problem in terms of institutionalizing public involvement. How can we be sure that Canadians will embrace efforts at public engagement if they have no sense of belonging or commitment to a political community?

**Geography**

A fifth impediment is that Canada is a big country. To the extent that politics tends to be local, politics is thus highly dispersed over a vast country. The new information and communications technologies are an enormous help here, but they do not entirely overcome geography, especially not for the several aspects where personal interactions are critical for productive deliberation.

**Role of the media**

A sixth obstacle is the extent to which mass media are partisan, as is increasingly the case. With precious few exceptions, the media are not sufficiently expert to provide the quality of public information on complex policy issues that citizens require if they are to participate in citizen engagement exercises.

**Cost of public involvement**

Finally, there is the question of cost of public involvement exercises, which is also related to Canada’s large geography as well as its linguistic diversity. To the degree that citizen engagement is not valued beyond its consultative purposes, cost is likely to be considered a major impediment on a wide range of topics.

VII. Lessons Learned and Recommendations

It is useful to reflect on the experiences of OECD countries, including Canada, in institutionalizing public involvement. Five points stand out in our view.

First, the collective experience suggest that there are few, if any, policy areas that are “off limits” to public involvement. That being said, models of public deliberation vary in terms of their capacity to deal with particular sorts of policy questions. There is no one best way for all situations. The diversity of approaches is an asset and not a liability to the enhancement of citizen engagement. That being said, we should expect that there will almost always be some political disagreement and debate around the selection of which approach should be used for a particular policy issue. The recent debate about how to organize for public involvement in considering change to the federal electoral system is illustrative of this politics.

Second, there is widespread agreement that the participants of public deliberation exercises tend to see their experience as positive and fulfilling. Virtually everywhere, the majority of participants, after completing an exercise, say that they would participate again if asked. There is always some element of self-selection in this regard, but the hopeful sign, for those wishing to promote democratic participation, is that most citizens who have not previously been engaged come away from these exercises with an increased interest in participation. This finding alone should justify the resources committed by government to such exercises.

Third, it is clear that citizen engagement is most doable at the local level. Citizen engagement exercises conducted on local public policy issues by local governments or by senior government on local issues almost always have good participation rates. Most citizens probably see local issues as more salient than regional or national issues. Other things being equal, local exercises are likely to be less costly and administratively easier to implement, an important set of considerations in Canada given its vast territory. A record of successful citizen engagement exercises at the local level is perhaps a necessary condition for institutionalization in provincial and federal governments.

Fourth, the use of the Internet (or its successor technologies) for citizen engagement will be critical to the institutional of meaningful public involvement in policy. There is no technological fix here but technology is necessary to overcome the practical barriers of cost, accessibility, and geography to citizen interaction and citizen-official interaction as the case may be. Online deliberations can be recorded easily and economically for use by both citizens and officials, elected and appointed. The Internet can be used to assemble a demographically diverse participant group. Finally, the Internet can also be used to communicate the results to the general public.

Fifth, it is obvious that the demand for meaningful public involvement is a trend that will not be reversed, even if it is occasionally slowed down in some places. While traditional consultation will continue to be an important part of public involvement, it is clear that more is expected. This means that governments and their citizens must work to remove or overcome the barriers to institutionalization of meaningful public involvement that we have outlined. Our recommendations build on the observations of participants at a 2005 Institute of Governance roundtable on the democratic deficit that building an “infrastructure” for citizen engagement within governments constitutes the
The barriers to this next step can be organized into the following three categories: structural, cultural, and practical. Our recommendations are aimed at reducing these barriers.

Reducing Structural Barriers to Public Involvement

The institutionalization of public involvement requires that current policy structures be revamped to make room for the public at the policy table. In our view, this effort must start with Parliament itself. Although much of the work in citizen engagement must involve the government and the public service, the most critical arena for improved public involvement is a reformed Parliament. While this proposition may seem perverse, given the degree to which the real power structure in Canada excludes the House of Commons and Senate, the excessive concentration of power in our system cannot be sustained without great damage to the democratic regime, including meaningful public involvement. Parliamentary reform, in our view, is a matter of time: the government needs greater checks and balances on its exercise of power and a good measure of that must come from a reformed Parliament. In any event, citizen engagement, in the absence of parliamentary reform, will remain on the margins, even with incremental progress in the refining of the techniques of various deliberative processes. Our parliamentary system requires greater independence for the members of the House and Senate so that our parliamentary representatives begin to have some of the capacities and incentives of elected representatives in non-partisan local government settings. Disciplined caucuses need not disappear altogether for there to be greater room for public involvement in the policy-making process. And, the virtues of policy coherence and democratic accountability, while important in our system, should not be overrated, as they too often are.

Linking public involvement to Parliament means that greater use can be made of parliamentary committees as the formal institutional link to various forms of citizen engagement, particularly if committees can be used as mechanisms to bring proposals from citizen engagement exercises, directly or indirectly, to a parliamentary vote (instead of, or in addition to, a public referendum). MPs could well find that these linkages are particularly well suited to supporting their demands for a greater role in the legislative process. This could occur whether citizen engagement exercises focus on articulating citizen values, needs and priorities or on specific legislative policy proposals. Indeed, citizen engagement exercises are likely to force MPs to become better informed on policy issues and to develop positions on these issues so that they themselves can dialogue effectively with citizens (and with other MPs in the House or in caucus).

The linkages of citizen engagement exercises with parliamentary committees could take several forms, depending on the nature of the issue in question and depending on whether the desired outcome is primarily designed to achieve a better informed citizenry or a more legitimate policy decision (or both). The institutional infrastructure, in other words, need not be uniform or conform to a single model. Several models of citizen engagement fulfill the criteria of meaningful public involvement.

If citizens are to deliberate in an informed manner they need to be as well informed as possible. The professional public service, including the service that supports
Fostering Canadians’ Role in Public Policy: A Strategy for Institutionalizing Public Involvement in Policy

Parliament, must be the primary source of information, even if it needs to contract external expertise, particularly where the requisite expertise is more readily found in non-partisan, non-profit public policy organizations. Citizens engaged in public involvement exercises, as a matter of principle, should be supported by the same professional and non-partisan public service that serves ministers and MPs (and Senators).

Citizens also need to deliberate in a focused and structured manner that respects diverse opinions and interests and proceeds with fairness and inclusion. Citizens need professional support to achieve this kind and standard of deliberation. This support should also come from the professional public service, or at least be administered by it. In fact, the professional public service must develop a critical mass of expertise on citizen engagement so that the different forms of citizen engagement exercises are appropriately deployed, and so that citizen participants are well served in terms of their information and educative needs and the requirements for well conducted deliberations. In developing this expertise, the public service can draw on its experience in ongoing work to become a world leader in citizen-centred service delivery. A public service that is dedicated to institutionalized public involvement will help to nurture among political elites, policy exerts, and stakeholders appreciation of the value of public input. We discuss this in more detail in the next section.

As much as possible, citizen engagement exercises should not be organized around the architecture of government departments, even though the parliamentary committee structure roughly parallels this design. The reason for this is twofold. On the one hand, major issues of public policy increasingly cut across departmental boundaries and require horizontal efforts to incorporate all the relevant ministers and departments. Citizen engagement exercises on any such multi-departmental (or even whole-of-government) issues need to be organized accordingly. On the other hand, citizens should not have to coordinate the specialized information of government that emanates from several departmental sources. While this specialized architecture is necessary for administrative purposes, it should not stand in the way of integrated information services for citizens engaged in public involvement process. They need not be exposed to the specializations that exist in the backrooms of the public service. They need services through a single window. The public servants should have the responsibility for any coordination of information necessary.

Reducing Cultural Barriers to Institutionalization

Cultural barriers to institutionalization exist among both political elites and the public in general. Neither policy elites nor the public at large are accustomed to the idea of the citizen as “policymaker”. It is thus incumbent on both policy elites and the public at large to come to a new understanding and appreciation of the extent to which there must be a meaningful role for the public at the policy table.

The reduction of attitudinal barriers at the elite level requires that policy actors in the executive and in the public service recognize the value of citizen input to legitimate, sound policies. Several of the public servants interviewed for this project commented on a culture of “control and secrecy” that is pervasive in the federal government. The assumption that the public is uninformed, as well as the belief that many policies are not of concern to Canadians in general, nurtures this resistance. Among the general public, the decline in voter turnout, combined with the increase in voter apathy, seem to counter
survey data that indicate that the public is eager to play a more direct role in policy.\textsuperscript{81} In light of these factors, it is logical to question the likelihood of citizens embracing opportunities for involvement in policy. However, we cannot discount the possibility that citizens are rejecting traditional forms of participation and would take advantage of opportunities to play a more direct role in policy. Recent survey data indicate that Canadians aged 22-29 are more likely to participate in non-traditional political activities than they are to vote.\textsuperscript{82} This is encouraging to proponents of citizen engagement, especially in light of the fact that the low voter turnout problem is concentrated in this demographic group.

The resistance of political elites to public involvement likely encourages political apathy and lack of interest among the public, and vice versa. Voter indifference permits elite indifference toward public input, which, in turn, fuels the former. To break the cycle, public pressure for meaningful involvement is necessary to encourage a cultural change among the political elite. There are a number of ways to generate cultural change among the public.

**A larger role for political parties in encouraging citizen engagement**

First, we recommend a role for political parties in encouraging citizen engagement. Political parties need to better engage their members and the public in shaping their policies. Parties must make a particular effort to reach out to young voters, as evidence shows that this demographic is increasingly removed from this mode of political participation.\textsuperscript{83} In some regards, of course, parties are meant to be organized vehicles for citizen engagement on the part of their members. Canadian parties have not done well in this regard, however, although the record varies across parties and over time. For some years now, parties have struggled to be more than electoral machines at the disposal of parliamentary leaders, especially those in power.

Paradoxically, the merits of parties could well be re-established by an institutionalization of citizen engagement through the creation of party foundations, as recommended by the Royal Commission on Electoral Reform and Party Financing over a decade ago and in 2005 by the New Brunswick Commission on Legislative Democracy.\textsuperscript{84} Partisan interests and views would not thereby disappear, even if there were greater opportunities for the consideration of policy issues in a less partisan and adversarial environment. It would be in the interests of parties to respond effectively to such a development by giving greater internal emphasis to enhancing the capacity of their members to engage in the discussion of policies in an informed manner, even if from a partisan perspective. The development of party foundations to assist party leaders and members in the development of party policies and to educate members on public policy issues constitutes the partisan dimension of improved public involvement. These foundations could not only help parties re-energize themselves but also promote citizen engagement generally. In Germany, for example, each of the major political parties has a party foundation that is funded with public revenue. Their main activities...

\textsuperscript{81} Voter turnout in the 2006 federal election in Canada was 64.9%, an increase from 60.9% in 2004. This is encouraging, but is not enough to indicate a steady trend towards higher voter turnout.


are performing tasks for the party that are not related directly to electioneering, namely, the conduct of policy research and the education of party members on salient policy issues. These foundations perform an important function in terms of civic education. It is not inconceivable that party foundations could be used in Canada for these research and educational purposes and thus be linked to official citizen engagement processes. The two developments could be mutually supportive.

**Improved civic education**

Second, improved civic education is necessary to cultivate public interest in public involvement in policy development. Public participation in citizen engagement exercises cannot be assumed or taken for granted; we must take measures to encourage it. Henry Milner's work suggests that citizens’ willingness to participate in politics is related to their level of political education. He has found that young people abstain from voting not out of protest or rejection of traditional institutions, but because they lack political interest and knowledge. Although Milner’s data relate specifically to young Canadians, the link between political interest and knowledge extends to the entire population. Political parties, Members of Parliament, the public service, and schools have a role to play in informing the public, as do the mass media.

**Cultivating a sense of civic duty**

Third, a greater effort must be made to cultivate a sense of “civic duty”, especially among politically uninterested young people. The “civic duty” sentiment is generally low among young Canadians. The 2004 Canada Election Study team reported that only 55% of young Canadians agreed strongly that “it is every citizen’s duty to vote in an election”, compared with 75% of respondents overall. Only 18% of young respondents reported that they would feel guilty about not voting. European countries, in contrast, display fairly high levels of civic duty among non-voters. The UK Electoral Commission 2002 report found that 63% of those who claimed that they were not interested in election news cast a ballot anyway. Younger generations’ sense of civic duty was lower, as only 16% of non-interested youth claimed that they would vote out of a sense of obligation.

To nurture the sense of civic duty, serious consideration should be given to lowering the voting age to sixteen. Participating out of a sense of duty is something that requires the development of habits, which are best instilled in the young. Young people voting while still in school may well constitute the best way to form this habit.

**Reducing Practical Barriers to Institutionalization**

Practical barriers to institutionalization include financial and geographical considerations. We recommend that the increased costs for improved public involvement come from a major reallocation of budget resources now devoted to

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government polling and advertising. A very large portion of polling and advertising does not serve public purposes, but rather the partisan interests of the government of the day. These substantial sums could go a long way to kick start the institutionalization of citizen engagement as a regular part of the policy process. Some reallocation of parliamentary budgets could probably also occur if the two houses of Parliament are willing to seriously assess the public value of their current work-plans. The same might be said for public funds provided to political parties, especially if coupled with a lowering of spending limits so that more resources are devoted to the involvement of party members and less to professional advertising. Finally, new resources for public involvement need to be generated as a commitment to developing the infrastructure of a citizen-centred democracy in the public service and in Parliament, an infrastructure that demands a considerable infusion of new public resources.

Canada’s vast geography presents practical problems in terms of organizing public involvement exercises that represent the entire nation. At the same time, the party system in Canada is locally based, as is roughly two-thirds of the Canadian public service. Greater public involvement might have the additional benefit of requiring a greater decentralization of policy development within both political parties and the federal public service, with citizen engagement linkages between the two. Finally, MPs must insist that parliamentary committees spend more time out of Ottawa as well as using new information technologies to overcome geographical barriers.

Finally, as noted, the use of the internet for citizen engagement can help to overcome geographical barriers. In addition, it can be a cost-effective way to share information among large numbers of people. Most federal government departments have websites for consultations; and many public servants see on-line deliberation as the next logical step. While the number of participants in several kinds of citizen deliberations needs to be limited, in order to allow for the representative participation of the diversity of the population, all citizens could be given read-access to a citizen dialogue website for information on the topic as well as the views of the participants. Recall the online deliberation exercise in Germany in which only 26 people participated in the dialogue exercise, but over 4,000 people visited the site.

The institutionalization of citizen engagement is an ambitious but achievable goal. The fact that no country in the world has reached it speaks to the magnitude of the barriers discussed above. These obstacles notwithstanding, the trend toward public involvement in policy cannot be reversed. Many opinion polls and surveys have revealed a growing public desire for meaningful engagement. Statistics that indicate a low voter turnout and low party memberships must not be taken merely as evidence that public interest in politics is waning. Rather, they suggest that current mechanisms for public involvement are unsatisfactory. Consistently, countries that have undertaken citizen engagement exercises that were linked to the policy process have reported high rates of participant satisfaction. Further, the vast majority of participants expressed interest in participating in future exercises. These data indicate that levels of participation and interest in politics correlate positively with perceived political efficacy. In other words, citizens are more interested in participating in politics if they feel as though their input will make a difference. Therefore, the institutionalization of citizen engagement could reinvigorate the Canadian polity by providing regular opportunities for citizens to have a meaningful impact on salient policy issues.
Bibliography


Appendix

The authors wish to express their gratitude to the interviewees for this project. Your expertise allowed us to understand further the importance of public involvement and the obstacles that must be overcome in order to institutionalize this process.

Our interviewees included:

- Canadian political scientists who specialize in electoral reform and citizen engagement
- Public servants from various federal government departments, such as Environment Canada, the Department of Fisheries and Oceans, and the Privy Council Office
- Research fellow, Fielding Graduate University
- Senior official, the Nuclear Waste Management Organization