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Learning to Engage: Experiences with Civic Engagement in Canada

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Overview

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Overview

Over the last decade it has become clear that there is a growing risk of “disconnection” between government and citizens. Research tells us that citizens are increasingly concerned that their democratic institutions are out of sync with their values and interests. Moreover, citizens strongly believe that there is a growing gap between their actual and desired level of influence in government decision making.¹ As one citizen stated, “I don’t think unless you work trying to get your government to be democratic and to work with you ... that you discover the kind of pain you feel when you find out you’re invisible.”²

The new millennium is marked by reflection on the very nature of civil society, democracy and social cohesion. The Commonwealth Foundation has invited Commonwealth countries to join them in an exploration of ways to strengthen, promote and encourage the wide variety of citizen initiatives that make up civil society and that, therefore, strengthen social cohesion, democracy and citizen engagement in societal development.³

This report explores the Commonwealth Foundation’s questions about the roles for citizens and governments in a good society by examining six Canadian experiences with civic engagement. Each case study involves different sectors of society, and different key players, goals, processes and outcomes. Each touches on long standing policy issues within Canada. The case studies detail how players have come together – or failed to – to engage one another and work toward finding creative solutions to sometimes overwhelming and complex policy situations. Many of these experiences highlight obstacles to a trusting relationship between government and citizens. At the same time, they point to steps that can be taken on the part of citizens and governments to recreate their relationship and allow for meaningful, mutual engagement. Of note, none of the case studies provide a neatly packaged outcome.

Six case studies are considered, involving three different kinds of situations:

¹Bourgon, Jocelyne. 1998. “A Voice for All: Engaging Canadians for Change.” Notes for address by Clerk of the Privy Council and Secretary to the Cabinet. Institute on Governance conference, Aylmer, Quebec. October 27.

²Linda Ryan Nye quoted in: Watson, Patrick and Barber, Benjamin. 1988. The Struggle for Democracy. Lester & Orpen Dennys. Toronto, Ontario.

³Commonwealth Foundation. 1998. “Information for Focus Groups and Individual Interviewees.” *Civil Society in the New Millennium Project*. London, England.

- 1. Government-initiated Engagement: The government has actively sought input for its policy-making role and, in doing so, has reached out to the public in organized and well-defined ways with specific parameters placed on dialogue and discussion.**
 - ***Immigration Review:*** In 1994, public backlash against immigration policy was at an all-time high. The Minister of Citizenship and Immigration called for extensive public consultation and, in doing so, created a capacity for the public to critically and constructively analyze and engage in this complex policy debate.
 - ***National Forum on Health:*** During the early 1990s, federal support for Canada's countrywide health care plan, Medicare, appeared to be waning. The health care system was perceived to be in crisis, and the public was deeply concerned that their treasured Medicare was being steadily eroded by deep funding cuts and an indifferent government. In 1994, the Prime Minister established the National Forum on Health to inform Canadians and to advise the federal government on innovative ways to improve the health care system and health of Canadians. The ensuing engagement process illustrated that Canadians were ready to roll up their sleeves and do constructive work.
- 2. Citizen-initiated Engagement: Citizens have attempted, with varying degrees of success, to engage governments in finding solutions to longer-term and often overwhelming problems that require the co-ordination of many different levels of government. These situations demand solutions that are creative and multifaceted.**
 - ***Sydney Tar Ponds:*** Sydney, Nova Scotia, is home to the largest toxic waste site in North America. Coined the "National Shame" by the federal Minister of the Environment in 1996, the "toxic witch's brew" is a result of almost a century of baking coke for steel-making, decades of raw sewage pumping, and landfill leachate from an unlined municipal landfill. After two disastrous and costly attempts at clean-up, expansive media coverage, community action, and commitment from all levels of government, in the early spring of 1999 there was finally movement in the direction of cleaning up the Tar Ponds.
 - ***Nunavut:*** On April 1, 1999, after almost three decades of painfully slow negotiations, Canada's map was fundamentally changed as the Northwest Territories were divided and Nunavut, "our land" in Inuktitut, was born. Nunavut is a manifestation of the Inuit land claim, the largest land claim ever settled in Canadian history. It is the result of the Inuit's persistence, patience and pragmatism, and comes at a crucial time for aboriginal groups in Canada. Currently, many aboriginal groups are involved in their own negotiations with the federal government for, at the very least, a recognized and legitimate voice in resource decision-making and, at the most, self-government or self-rule.

3. Citizens in the Global Arena: Citizens have struggled to find a voice and create civic space for themselves in debates that transcend national borders and involve ill-defined jurisdictions, such as international trade and domestic financial markets.

- ***Multilateral Agreement on Investment:*** Over the past fifteen years, Canadians have discussed and debated the consequences of globalization as the federal government entered into two far-reaching, international trade agreements. Exhausted by defeat in their campaigns against the Free Trade Agreement and the North American Free Trade Agreement, Canadian non-governmental organizations were not sure if they could muster up the support and energy to mount another campaign against the Multilateral Agreement on Investment (MAI). Slowly, however, the issue ignited across the country as Canadians started to ask: *Why is this deal being negotiated behind closed doors? Who will benefit from this agreement? What does this agreement mean to Canadians? How can I have my voice heard?* The debate that has ensued across the country articulates some of the questions and concerns that Canadians have not only with the MAI, but also with increased trade liberalization and globalization as a whole.
- ***Regulating Financial Services:*** When the federal government announced a review of the regulatory framework for financial services, a number of non-governmental organizations came together to engage the federal government and financial institutions with a proactive agenda of desired changes. Subsequently, when two of Canada's five major banks announced they were merging, government had no choice but to respond to citizens clamouring to be involved in the merger debate. The mergers were proposed in an environment of increasing public dissatisfaction with lower levels of service, higher user fees, branch closures and enormous bank profits. These announcements sparked an intense, year-long discussion across the country, which highlighted the varying capacity of citizen groups to participate fully in long-term policy processes involving transnational players. However, a number of non-governmental organizations were able to use this time of intense public and governmental focus to advance constructive methods of improving financial sector accountability and create civic space for financial consumers.

Ultimately, this report begins to articulate questions, and some of the answers, surrounding the issue of trust. These questions include:

- How is capacity built within governments so that they are better able to respond to citizens?
- How is capacity built within the population for more effectively engaging governments?

This report is organized in the following way:

- Section 1 describes the Canadian federation and Canada’s system of governance.
- Section 2 investigates six Canadian experiences with engagement including examples that are government-initiated and those that are citizen-initiated. Following each case study, several questions regarding effective engagement are explored. The case studies have taken place in a political context that is both unique to Canada and its federation and also shared to varying degrees with other Commonwealth countries.
- Section 3 considers an alternative model for mutual engagement that addresses many of the shortcomings of other engagement processes.
- Section 4, the final section of the report, puts forward action steps for more effective mutual engagement.

Action is recommended in four areas, as outlined in Table 1, that will contribute to building a culture characterized by mutual, respectful engagement and to the creation of just, prosperous and caring societies. They are: building capacity, setting the ground rules, reporting and evaluating results, and making it easier for citizens to engage governments.

Table 1: Actions for Effective Mutual Engagement

Building Capacity

- Governments and other organizations conducting citizen engagement processes maximize the use of teachers, students and educational technology in order to offer authentic opportunities to learn about participation, policy formulation and deliberation.
- Governments provide training grants to organizations that wish to more effectively engage in ongoing policy processes. Specific decisions concerning resource allocation should be undertaken in collaboration between citizens and governments.
- Educational institutions strive to make their training programs for the non-profit sector more accessible to community organizations by reflecting their resource and staffing constraints when programming and scheduling.
- The Public Service Commission and the Canadian Centre for Management Development assume a position of world-wide leadership in preparing Canada’s federal public servants with the skills to foster effective and meaningful relationships with the public.

Setting the Ground Rules for Mutual Engagement

- Set the scope and timelines for all consultation processes in collaboration between governments and citizens.
- Make deliberative techniques, such as study circles or dialogue groups, central to all engagement processes.
- Governments establish, in collaboration with community organizations, performance guidelines and standard operating procedures for engagement processes.

Reporting and Evaluating Results

- Government build provisions for deliberative and trust-building activities into annual reporting and annual budgets so they are clearly accountable for their commitments to increased citizen engagement.
- Governments establish a function in the office of the Auditor General that conducts regular audits of citizen engagement activity and makes findings known to the public in accessible formats.
- Public broadcasters, as part of their annual reporting to government, report on the range of activities they have undertaken to promote civic participation and mutual engagement.

Making it Easier for Citizens to Engage Governments

- Elected representatives become actively involved in engagement processes as part of their constituency activities.
- Governments consider using existing activity centres, such as Canada Employment Centres, Human Resource Access Centres and public libraries, as sites where information about engagement activities and access to the Internet are made available. At these sites, citizens have access to assistance in negotiating new technologies to help them to retrieve information about government activities and contact and interact with the public service or elected representatives on-line.
- Governments facilitate the creation of independent Citizens' Associations in various sectors.
- Governments and citizens explore current models that are demonstrably engaging citizens and governments in ongoing communication.
- A national body should be created to provide tools, processes and assistance to citizens and governments as they apply the skills of effective mutual engagement.