

**Arthur Kroeger College Leadership Forum
February 11, 2003
Speaking Notes for Judith Maxwell**

WHAT CITIZENS WANT FROM DEMOCRACY

I would like to build on some of the ideas from the earlier session this morning, as well as the CPRN experience with citizen dialogues to talk to you about what citizens are looking for from the political process at the beginning of the 21st century.

Preston Manning spoke to us about the “need to rediscover democracy as an ideal.” When they get a chance to think through the role of democracy they soon begin to articulate an ideal democracy, and it is one in which they are more involved.

This may seem strange, since we know that citizens are less involved in the traditional party politics than in the past, and Henry Milner has just explained a smaller percentage of the population is now voting in elections. My impression is that Canadians do not believe that their vote makes much difference. And they are offended by the increasingly adversarial nature of the system – what Jodi White described as “wedge politics”. They are appalled by negative advertising, for example, and see that as evidence of the lack of content in party politics.

What citizens are looking for is a way to add their own energy to the policy discourse. They want to engage on issues that are important to them and to their country. They do not expect to make the decisions, but they want to be able to listen, learn, and speak about these issues.

Many of our political processes today are founded on the assumption that citizens are delegating their political and civic roles to organized groups. Parliamentary committees and traditional consultation exercises would be obvious examples. It is rare for an “unorganized citizen” to participate in these processes.

Our work shows that organized groups have an important role to play in advocacy to get issues on the agenda and in their practical knowledge about specific issues.

But citizens themselves are the only ones who can reconcile their many perspectives on a given issue. At one and the same time, citizens must wear three hats. They are taxpayers who pay the cost of decisions, they are consumers or users of government services, and they are members of the community (local and pan-Canadian). It is only when they bring all three perspectives to bear on an issue that we can identify priorities, determine what choices are aligned with citizens' values, and reconcile conflicting values.

Polling, focus groups, and traditional consultations all have their place in the political process, but none of them can deliver a true sense of priorities, or reconcile conflicting values.

The reason that citizen involvement is desirable today is the growing capacity of citizens to participate. They are better educated, more diverse, and less deferential than any previous generation. So far, their capacity to engage is mostly latent. But in the work we have done on quality of life, on the future of health care, and currently on the kind of Canada we want, we have discovered that citizens can engage and make an important contribution. It has been remarkable to see how a representative sample of Canadians (across education, income, age, gender, and ethnicity) can come to grips with fundamental political choices, when they are given a fair chance.

New practices are needed

There are many proposals for political reform under consideration in forums across Canada – reforms to Parliament, to the electoral process and so on. These are important and deserve active consideration. But we must add one more item to that established list -- new practices for citizen involvement on the issues.

The learning we have done at CPRN has been strongly influenced by the work of Daniel Yankelovich, who is an authority on public opinion analysis in the United States, and the author of a number of books on involving citizens – including *Making Democracy Work* and *The Magic of Dialogue*.

Dan likes to point out to us that, on any big political issue, no matter how divisive, it is likely that people can agree on about 80 percent of the issue. The conflict will be on the last 20 percent.

Adversarial systems (and a lot of public opinion polls) start with the 20 percent of conflict, and they never get to the 80 percent of common ground. Consequently, there is no trust to build upon.

The most successful citizen involvement techniques start by identifying the common ground. Once this is established, people can see that there is a common purpose, they begin to trust each other, and their confidence in the process increases. They can then begin to work through their differences in a respectful way. And even if they cannot reach consensus on the last 20 percent, they leave the process with a much better understanding of the opposing point of view. But this takes more than 10 minutes. On the big issues, like the future of health care, it takes a full day – 8 or 9 hours.

I witnessed a variation on this theme at a recent conference of the leaders of major health care stakeholder groups from across Canada convened by the Public Policy Forum. It was held in December, just two weeks after the release of the Romanow Commission's Report.

About 120 people were divided into five working groups with pre-appointed moderators. Each group focused on a different element of the current health care debate. They were asked to identify the key actions they wanted to see, building on the Romanow report and the earlier Senate Committee report led by Michael Kirby. This was a very constructive and creative process. Many of the groups stayed to work overtime, and they found huge amounts of common ground.

The next morning there was an open-mike session where people were asked to comment on the work they had done. They immediately stepped back into their advocacy roles – arguing for their own constituency. Chaos resumed. For two hours, the common ground disappeared from sight. The federal and provincial health ministers arrived, and the moderators stepped up to the podium to summarize the common ground established the previous day.

While I certainly advocate for more citizen engagement, I am not arguing for a new set of political institutions to be added onto or to displace existing institutions.

The core question, going forward, is how we can build the practice of citizen involvement into the political process – to change it from a fascinating research process into a new way of doing the business of the democracy.

Examples could include the following:

- Adding a dialogue dimension to consultation processes by departments, legislative committees, and royal commissions. This would require convening special sessions with a representative sample of citizens. They would be given a report on what was said during the consultation, and then given the tools they would need to work through the contradictions and establish the common ground.
- Giving legislative committees a mandate (and the resources) to engage a representative group of citizens on a topic before the legislation is drafted.

In every case, I think that elected members of the legislature should be encouraged to participate in these processes, whether they are convened by departments or the legislature. This would ensure that elected representatives are then in the best possible position to represent the views of citizens in further discussion in caucus, in the legislature, and in other settings.

I want to repeat here that citizen involvement does not replace the work of experts and interest groups. Citizens can create the values framework for policy-making, but they do not have the technical knowledge to determine how decisions should be implemented. Experts and advocates bring a practical and technical capacity to the public discourse that citizens do not have. Good policy making requires both those dimensions – values and technical knowledge.

Now, it is not necessary to engage citizens directly on every policy action. Their involvement is essential when priorities are being set, or when the context is shifting. These are the times when opinions are fluid, and when decision-makers need to set the longer-range direction for policy. In our experience, citizens rise to these occasions.

They are eager to help shape the future course of events, and even they are surprised by what they can accomplish, given the right tools.

Public opinion polls are valuable when opinion is stable. A consultation process is necessary to give the experts and interest groups a chance to advise on the direction a government proposes to take. But when the stakes are high, neither polls nor consultation can do the job on their own. They need the values framework that only citizens can provide. And citizens – unorganized citizens – have the capacity and the desire to be involved.

When asked, they will be able to reconcile their hopes and dreams with the real world conditions they face as taxpayers, as consumers, and as members of the community. That, my friends, is what democracy should be about.