Canadian Citizens Expect Much More From Democracy

Friday, April 4, 2003 – It has become commonplace to remark on the falling participation rates in political parties and elections in Canada. Some see this as evidence that Canadians are losing interest in their political institutions and, perhaps, in the democratic process itself.

The enthusiasm with which participants enter into CPRN's citizens' dialogues suggests a different story. Yes, citizens *are* unhappy about the apparent failure of traditional political institutions to respond to their priorities. They also speak of the lack of impact their votes have at election time. But none of this should be taken as evidence of their desire to withdraw from political participation.

Indeed, CPRN's citizens' dialogues demonstrate a strong desire by citizens to be part of the policy deliberation process and to be involved in a real way in the tough political choices of the day. What's more, the capacity of citizens to play that role has never been higher.

In a recent contribution to an Arthur Kroeger College of Public Affairs Leadership Forum at Carleton University, CPRN's President, Judith Maxwell, draws on the dialogue experience to discuss what Canadians are looking for from their political institutions and the political process in the 21st century.

She argues that we should add new practices for citizen engagement to the collection of proposals for political reform under consideration today. She discusses what we have learned about effective citizen involvement techniques and their impact on both participants and the policy research process. And she explores ways these techniques might be introduced into the political process itself.

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