A Social Contract for Today's Canada

Friday, November 15, 2002 – The idea of the social contract is now 350 years old. As first conceived, it gave the state its legitimacy and the citizen his/her rights and it outlined their respective responsibilities in return.

In Canada's diverse, post-industrial, advanced democracy the social contract remains a useful construct, but it has become much more complicated. Citizenship is far more inclusive than in the days of Hobbes and Locke, when only "men of property" qualified. We also identify other "parties" to the modern "contract" – in addition to the individual citizen and the state, we include the market, the family and the community. All can be seen to have rights and responsibilities assigned to them through an implicit social consensus.

We can identify *a* Canadian social contract in the period following the Second World War, when a significant consensus reigned regarding the role of the state in the economy and a broad commitment to social equality. By the mid-1980s, however, that consensus had dissolved in the face of a struggle among competing visions of the social contract.

In an era of widening inequality, new fiscal constraints, growing social diversity, greater integration with the U.S. and global economies, and new demands for security, it becomes important to make these competing visions explicit as we search for appropriate answers to today's challenges.

CPRN's Public Involvement Network is in the midst of a conversation with Canadians designed to explore our current convictions about the appropriate roles of citizen, state, market and community and the underlying values that inform them. The *Citizens' Dialogue on the Kind of Canada We Want* is bringing a representative sample of Canadians together in a series of day-long dialogues in major centres across the country. A report on the results of those exchanges will be published in the Spring of 2003.

As preparation for the dialogues, CPRN commissioned David Laycock and Greg Clarke of Simon Fraser University to paint a picture of the evolution of Canada's implicit social contract over the past four and a half decades. The result is a fascinating exploration of the ways in which Canadians have managed the unavoidable trade-offs between political, social and economic goals in an ever-changing environment. It's a very good beginning for the conversation to come.