

Ordinary people have lots to say

The crust of cynicism was 4,500 kilometres wide and a centimetre deep.

It crumbled, province by province, as citizens gathered to talk about the kind of Canada they wanted.

Last fall, an Ottawa think tank and a California organization that specializes in public dialogue, teamed up to conduct a countrywide experiment. They invited 408 randomly selected Canadians to participate in one of 10 day-long dialogues to see if they could agree on what Canada stands for and what it should look like in the year 2012.

Yesterday, they revealed the results. Not only did a remarkable consensus emerge; the participants discovered that they liked being part of the democratic process.

It was the second time that Canada Policy Research Networks (CPRN) and Viewpoint Learning Inc., had worked together. Their first collaboration was a series of citizens' workshops for the Romanow Commission. That experience proved that ordinary people were quite capable of grappling with national health-care challenges and making reasoned choices.

So the partners decided to try something bigger.

They set a goal of developing a new social contract, one that would take into account the changes that had occurred in the last 20 years in the makeup of the population, the role of government, the reach of the marketplace and the nature of the North American economy.

Between Sept. 20 and Nov. 17, they brought together groups of 40 citizens in every region of the country. The participants gathered at 7:30 on a Saturday or Sunday morning in a centrally located hotel and stayed until 5:30 p.m. wrestling with some profoundly difficult issues:

★ Should Canada become a more market-oriented society, relying on competition and productivity to improve its citizens' standard of living?

★ Or should it seek to regain its rep-



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utation as a nation in which the benefits of economic success are equitably shared and no one is left behind?

★ Should it make diversity and personal choice the hallmarks of its way of life?

★ Or should it reinforce traditional values and stress the importance of individual responsibility?

Professional facilitators led the discussions, urging participants to respect other points of view, be willing to rethink their own assumptions and be prepared to make trade-offs.

Most participants were skeptical when they arrived. They doubted that anyone cared what they thought or shared their concerns. But as the day worn on, their attitude changed.

"That was what was so encouraging," said Mary Pat MacKinnon, director of public involvement for CPRN, "The dialogues restored participants faith in an inclusive political process. In fact, it whetted their appetite."

Not surprisingly, all 10 groups rejected the simplistic scenarios set out in the questions. What was surprising was the consistency of their answers.

No matter where they lived or how long they'd been in the country, participants agreed that the old "welfare state" in which the governments shielded citizens from economic upheavals, personal setbacks and regional inequities, was obsolete.

They accepted that markets had assumed a much greater role in their lives. They were prepared to entrust business with primary responsibility for providing employment and en-

abling individuals to be contributing members of society. But they had little confidence in the private sector to protect the environment, provide health care or ensure public safety.

They believed social programs should equip citizens to participate in the workforce, not encourage dependency. They wanted their tax dollars used for education, job training and child care, not regional development grants or unconditional handouts.

They were proud of the way that Canada had embraced multiculturalism. But they saw no need to tolerate some of the baggage – ethnic quarrels, gender inequality, and caste distinctions – that immigrants brought with them.

They blamed both themselves and governments at all levels for their lack of engagement in civic life. They felt governments owed it to Canadians to provide clearer information about their actions, their spending and the results of their policies. They acknowledged that they had to take the time and make the effort to become better informed.

"We thought there would be regional differences, but even in Quebec, the same core values emerged," MacKinnon said. It was a uniquely Canadian set of values, she contended, but one that had shifted to accommodate the realities of the 21st century.

The organizers hope that the government will use their 50-page report (available at www.cprn.com) to map out policy in fields ranging from education to international development.

But more than that, they would like to see politicians use their process as a model for involving citizens in policy-making.

People do care about the future of their country. They are willing to contribute their thoughts and ideas. The reason they profess to be disengaged is that no one seems to be listening.

Carol Goar's column appears Monday, Wednesday and Friday.