Citizen Engagement – Essential to 21st Century Democracy

Friday, March 26, 2004 – Recent reaction to the Ontario government's attempts to involve citizens in setting budget priorities is instructive.

On the one hand are the skeptics who doubt the government's motives and assume it is shifting responsibility for tough decisions onto citizens. On the other are those who applaud a government that recognizes citizens have a role to play in major decisions over priorities, and that seeks an outcome that truly reflects the values of citizens.

In some respects, the proof of which side is closest to the truth will be in the pudding. Nevertheless, the debate over whether citizen engagement is a sign of a maturing, modern democracy, or expensive window dressing and political buck-passing is likely to continue.

At CPRN, our experience with citizen engagement, in the form of intensive citizens' dialogues on critical social issues, leaves us in no doubt as to its important role in our complex democracy. The notion that governments can manage simply by relying on polling, feedback to MPs or MLAs, and consulting the citizenry at periodic elections seems increasingly inadequate to today's challenges. Citizens are demanding more of a role between elections and governments are recognizing that they need the social intelligence that citizens have to offer to govern effectively and credibly.

The Director of CPRN's Public Involvement Network, Mary Pat MacKinnon, recently made the case for citizen engagement in a presentation to a conference of the Canadian Centre for Analysis of Regionalization and Health (CCARH) in Vancouver. In ***Public Dialogue and Other Tools for Citizen Engagement***, MacKinnon reviews CPRN's experience with citizens' dialogues, the latest literature and experience elsewhere. She describes when citizens' dialogues are appropriate tools for engagement, the minimum conditions for their success, methodology, outcomes and follow-up with participants. She concludes with key "learnings" from CPRN experience - about citizens' values and expectations and the role of engagement in our democratic future.

You can download a copy of her presentation by clicking here.

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Deliberative Polling ® in Canada Workshop

In collaboration with CPRN's Public Involvement Network, the Public Policy Forum hosted a workshop with Dr. James Fishkin, Director of the Centre for Deliberative Democracy, Stanford University in November, 2003. Workshop participants included parliamentarians, Canadian experts and practitioners in public engagement. Following presentations by Fishkin on Deliberative Polling ® and Justice Canada on same-sex marriage, participants discussed the methodology and how it could be applied to this Canadian public policy issue. Deliberative polling ®, developed by Fishkin, brings together a random selection of citizens to take part in public opinion polling and group deliberations about public policy issues. To read the workshop report, please click on the link below:
http://www.ppforum.ca/ow/deliberative_polling_canada.pdf

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