Citizens Willing to Work With Queen's Park to Meet Budget Challenge

Tuesday, April 27, 2004 – Ontario citizens taking part in an unprecedented pre-budget deliberative dialogue exhibit a striking consensus on key values they feel should guide Queen's Park's choices. They also express a keen interest in a new relationship with a government they can trust.

More than 250 Ontario citizens took part in day-long dialogue sessions organized by Canadian Policy Research Networks (CPRN) in six cities across the province between January and March 2004. An additional 52 persons attended a pilot session. All participants were randomly selected by a professional polling firm to reflect an unaffiliated cross-section of voting aged adults.

The purpose of the dialogues was to provide advice to the government on:

- the values and principles that should guide budgetary decisions,
- how it can achieve the best outcomes from the money it collects and spends, and
- how and when the government should eliminate the deficit.

Trust and Balance – Citizens' Dialogue on the Ontario Budget Strategy 2004-2008, by Judith Nolté, Judith Maxwell, Mary Pat MacKinnon, CPRN, is an analysis of the dialogue results. It also includes a full description of the dialogue methodology.

As participants discussed approaches to developing a budget, a consensus emerged around six core guiding values:

- *Accountability* – government should be accountable, ethical and transparent.
- *Efficiency* – government should manage public funds wisely.
- *Shared Responsibility* – if government is efficient, Ontarians are prepared to pay their share.
- *Fairness* – all changes must protect vulnerable people.
- *Conservation* – government should promote conservation of natural resources by charging full cost of services and providing penalties or incentives to conserve.
- *Balance* – budgets should be driven not simply by fiscal logic, but take a long-term holistic approach.

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Those values are implicit in the citizens' advice regarding the budget strategy:

1) Increase discretionary taxes, fees, user fees and fines, but do so fairly.
2) Eliminate waste, find efficiencies, but don't sell the LCBO or TVO.
3) Price natural resources to reflect true cost of provision. Use penalties and incentives to foster conservation. Develop alternative energy sources.
4) Reform service delivery – health care, labour force training, education.
5) Balance the budget over the course of the mandate, but protect the vulnerable.

While citizens are prepared, under certain conditions, to pay more for public goods and services, there is no green light to raise income or retail taxes at this time. Ontarians first need to see proof of good management – increased accountability, efficiency and transparency.

"These citizens took the task of advising the government seriously," says CPRN President, Judith Maxwell. "What they provide here is the value structure, or the architecture for the Ontario budget strategy. They are now looking for proof that the government has heard what they have to say."

You can access or download a copy by clicking here.

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