

PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

Engaging

*"This dialogue experience helped citizens to discover their own capacity to make a valuable and responsible contribution on a range of difficult policy questions. They were able to go beyond venting and 'wish lists'... They listened, learned and contributed... And as they discovered how much they had in common the thin crust of cynicism gave way to a willingness to become more involved in governance and public affairs."*¹

National conversations about the things that matter in Canada are falling well short of potential.

Young Canadians and many of their elders are pursuing democracy in the workplace, in marriage, and in civic life. They face an uphill struggle against deeply engrained habits of employers and political institutions. (We shall set aside marriage as a private matter.) CPRN, now in its ninth year, is dedicated to helping people to have a voice in civic life and in the workplace. We call this engaging – taking part in the conversations that matter to quality of life.

The current drive to democracy is rooted in social and economic transformations that have been unfolding for some time now. Canadians are well educated, plugged in and full of questions. They have unprecedented capacity to take part in policy discussion in a fast-changing world, where the context is always shifting and policy decisions are complex.



Judith Maxwell

In this new environment, top-down, command-and-control systems are faltering. Organizations cannot function well without the ideas, skills and commitment of their own employees. Political institutions cannot flourish without the active participation of citizens.

"Your insights on the transformations occurring in Canadian society and their public policy implications stimulated a spirited discussion for the remainder of our retreat... I wish you and CPRN continued success in your work."

– Senior Federal Public Servant

Many young Canadians are actively engaged in civic life as volunteers in their community and in social movements. But too many are not turning out to vote in national elections. Turnout in the 2000 federal election declined to 61 percent – the postwar average is about 75 percent. If people under the age of 30 had turned out at the rates of earlier generations, the 2000 number would have been 71 percent.

The decline in youth participation is concentrated among those without a university education. Two recent reports have documented why young people do not vote. Both André Blais² and Elections Canada³ explain that the problem is not so much cynicism as it is a lack of contact and a sense that no political party represents their views. Often their names are not on the voter list, and they have difficulty getting on the list, when they try. Many complain they have never been contacted – they have no connection to the political process.

Meanwhile, we at CPRN know from our recent Citizens' Dialogues (see page 25) that the cynicism of Canadians is about one centimetre deep. When people are given the opportunity to participate in a deliberative dialogue on an issue that matters to them (such as the future of Canada), they discover that a) they have a remarkable capacity to contribute, b) they learn a lot, and c) they become keen to participate again.

Indeed, in a follow-up survey,⁴ 45 percent of participants said their public affairs activity had increased by attending community meetings or meeting with political representatives, and 69 percent said they had taken additional steps to keep themselves informed of public affairs by reading newspapers and magazines, and watching television.

For example, in reply to the survey, one respondent wrote: « Je m'intéresse pour la première fois aux plate-formes politiques, aux enjeux présents. Et, lentement, l'idée de m'impliquer plus directement commence à germer. » (For the first time, I am interested in political platforms – in current issues – and slowly, the thought of becoming more directly involved is taking shape. [Translation])

Politicians are aware of this thirst for participation, yet our institutions are not adapting. For example, legislative committees involve only organized spokespersons. Consultations are typically one-way discussions, with little follow-up to let people know what decisions were taken and why. Thus Canadians cannot see themselves in the national conversation, nor do they believe that the media reflect their priorities and challenges. They also reject the notion that their political voice is limited to a trip to the ballot box every four years.

Organized and Unorganized Citizens

Organized groups are often effective proxies for citizens when the issues are technical. But these groups cannot articulate the values of the Canadian population in a rapidly changing context, nor can they make the trade-offs and choices Canada must address in a globalized economy, an integrated North America, and a fragile ecosystem. Good public policy must be founded on the values of citizens.

“Judith’s presentation was excellent and added significantly to the success of the conference.”

– NGO Director

Roger Martin has said, for example, “Most people will self-regulate their behaviour to their values if given the chance. The issue is that we are increasingly not thinking of the system-wide implications of our actions while the traditional sources of our collective thinking on values have been weakened.”⁵

These deeper value choices can only be made when “unorganized” Canadians are invited to take part in national conversation. To make that happen, governments need to create a wider political space for Canadians to engage the issues.

CPRN practices engagement in every facet of its work.

- Experts and members of organized groups participate in our research projects, helping us to frame the questions, review the results, and ensure they pass the relevance test.
- Unorganized citizens – of all ages, origins, incomes, education, and both sexes – are the participants in national dialogues. Together they represent the Canadian mosaic.

Engaging is our watchword, as you will see in the account of our activities in 2002-03 that follows for each of our four Networks.

- The Family Network studies defining citizenship⁶ have emphasized that a full citizen is one that is able to participate actively in economic, social and political life.
- The Work Network studies of job quality⁷ highlight the gains to both morale and productivity when good communication and participation are embedded in the workplace.
- The Health Network is currently engaged in a major study, *Canadian Health Care: Is It Accountable to Citizens?*⁸ Its goal is to foster the exchange of information among citizens, governments and health care organizations to instill greater understanding and trust of the people who depend on the system and pay taxes to support it.
- The mission of the Public Involvement Network is to create opportunities for Canadians to engage in important policy discussions.

In the coming year, we will also be engaging our own funders, stakeholders and friends in an evaluation of CPRN’s influence and effectiveness over the past five years. The first external assessment of our performance took place in 1998.⁹ That review provided valuable strategic advice that has guided many of our decisions in recent years. Our hopes are high that this second review, under the direction of Human Resources Development Canada and Health Canada, will be just as fruitful.

“Your article in *The Globe and Mail* on low-wage work is a fine, thoughtful and helpful contribution to a needed discussion of how we neglect the labour and dignity of those whose services we depend upon.”

– University Professor

I encourage all of you to make your voice heard in this review. If you have not heard from us directly by the time you receive this report, we invite you to visit our Web site to complete the evaluation questionnaire. Let us know what you appreciate and what needs fixing.

CPRN produces a public good. People come to work here because they believe in our mission, that is, to help make Canada a more just, prosperous and caring society. The society we want is one that creates the public space where people engage in an ongoing national conversation about the big issues of the day.

Thanks to everyone inside and outside CPRN who make this public good possible.

Notes

1. MacKinnon, Mary Pat et al., 2003. *Citizens' Dialogue on Canada's Future: A 21st Century Social Contract*, www.cprn.org
2. Blais, André et al., 2002, *Anatomy of a Liberal Victory: Making Sense of the Vote in the 2000 Canadian Election*, Broadview Press, Peterborough, ON.
3. Pammett, Jon and Lawrence LeDuc, 2003, *Explaining the Turnout Decline in Canadian Federal Elections: A New Survey of Non-voters*, www.elections.ca
4. Saxena, Nandini, 2003, *Citizens' Dialogue Experience: Follow-Up Survey Results*, www.cprn.org
5. Quoted in Centre for Ethical Orientation, 2003, *Aiming High: Renewing Trust in a Time of Suspicion*, May, Toronto, www.ceo-ethics.com
6. See, for example, Jenson, Jane and Martin Papillon, 2001, *The Canadian Diversity Model: A Repertoire in Search of a Framework*, Discussion Paper No. F|19, www.cprn.org
7. Lowe, Graham and Grant Schellenberg, 2001, *What's a Good Job? The Importance of Employment Relationships*, CPRN Study No. W|05, www.cprn.org (See also www.jobquality.ca)
8. Maslove, Lisa and Cathy Fooks (forthcoming), *Canadian Health Care: Is It Accountable to Citizens?*, www.cprn.org
9. Canadian Policy Research Networks, 1998, *Final Report of the External Review Committee on Canadian Policy Research Networks Inc.*, www.cprn.org

