
Hear! Hear! For Citizen Input

Op-ed Commentary in the *Globe and Mail*

**By
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Sometimes politics gets in the way of democracy.

This week, CPRN released the results of a dialogue with a randomly selected group of 250 Ontario citizens on the province's budget strategy for the next four years. Because it had been commissioned by the government, it was rejected as useless in the Ontario legislature.

This partisan style explains why so many Canadians – especially young people – are turning off politics. Non-voters say they don't participate because politicians are irrelevant to the lives they live and they have no opportunity to contribute to conversations on public policy. The Ontario dialogue is an attempt to change that.

Dialogue is an essential ingredient for representative government in 21st century Canada. It is not direct democracy, where individuals cast their votes in referenda. It is about governments listening to a sustained conversation among citizens themselves on the issues that matter most to them as citizens. It is designed to build a constructive relationship between citizens and political leaders.

Denmark is currently the leader in deliberative democracy. Governments there use a variety of techniques but the process is built into the Parliamentary system in ways that engage both politicians and the public service. The UK, Australia, Brazil and other countries have committed significant resources to these conversations with citizens.

Canada is becoming a much more polarized society across many divides – economic class, faith, age, and ideology as well as the long standing fault lines of region and language. If we do not bridge those divides, then our democracy will continue to deteriorate.

What happens in a citizen dialogue?

Dialogue requires a neutral space where people feel safe to speak out. It requires clear and objective background information, well-trained facilitators, a thoughtful process and an important

policy question – one that matters to ordinary Canadians. Typically, it is a public policy issue which is at a major turning point – where a government faces decisions that may break with the past.

A representative group of citizens is recruited (we commission opinion research firms to use their random selection methodology). Other initiatives use other techniques. The Citizen Jury on Climate Change convened by the National Roundtable on Environment and Economy was composed of a diverse group of people who had received the Order of Canada. The BC Citizen Assembly members were chosen from electoral lists in each riding. However chosen, the group must reflect a diversity of gender, age, ethnicity and socio-economic backgrounds.

The CPRN dialogues require a full day with groups of 40 people. They read the background materials while they eat breakfast. When they call the group together, the professional facilitators invite each one to introduce their initial views on the issue at hand. The facilitators then provide a thorough background briefing. When all the questions are answered, the facilitators explain the “rules of dialogue” which call for collaboration, careful listening, mutual respect, discovering new possibilities, etc.

The next step is to outline the possible choices – usually four different ways to solve the problem, designed to cover the spectrum of possibilities. People then rate each choice in a questionnaire, before they break up into four groups of 10 to talk the issue through in depth. These small groups are self-managed, so citizens are in control of the discussion. And they meet for a total of three hours.

After they report back their conclusions and listen to the reports from the other three groups, they work with the facilitators to identify the common themes, deal with contradictions, make tradeoffs and clarify their advice to government.

To close the dialogue, they rate the four choices again, and this time, they also write in the conditions they would attach to this choice. And then, the microphone is passed around the room so that each person can make a final comment to the decision-makers.

This very dry description of the process does not do justice to the intensity of the conversation, the struggle to make choices, or the passion with which they make their final comments. In all the dialogues we have convened to date, citizens have been surprised and pleased by how much they learned. They have spoken with emotion about the energy and self-confidence they have felt as they worked together with people who were complete strangers. Almost all of them are keen to do it again.

What are the outcomes?

Ordinary citizens do not become policy experts after nine hours of discussion. But they do make a unique contribution to policy – one that governments cannot derive from the experts and stakeholders whom they often consult.

First, citizens provide a framework of values and principles to guide decision-making. Second, they state the conditions under which they would approve a particular approach, which can help to

shape a controversial policy decision. In a very real sense, they define the boundary of possibilities – the political space in which governments can make decisions.

The Ontario citizens convinced each other, for example, that the government should be charging the full cost of services like water (and electricity) that consume natural resources. They know that conservation is essential. The only condition on this is that the new fee structure should be designed to protect vulnerable people. (In all our dialogues to date, we have discovered policy choices that are well ahead of what politicians consider possible.)

The final, and most precious outcome, is civic literacy. The citizens in the Ontario dialogue learned a lot about budget-making and about difficult processes. They began to understand how tough these big policy decisions are. They were astonished at how much common ground there is across our polarized society.

For one day, they were part of democracy. They can do much more in future.

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(April 30, 2004)