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***Mapping the Links:
Citizen Involvement in Policy Processes***

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Executive Summary

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Executive Summary

How to involve citizens in policy making is at the core of discussions over modernizing governance and building a stronger civil society. The renewed interest in citizen involvement is not a passing fad, but stems from shifts toward more horizontal models of governance and toward a more organized, diverse and empowered civil society. In addition, advances in communication technologies have created new potential for how citizens might be involved.

While there is no shortage of talk about the need to reduce the democratic deficit and involve citizens in policy processes, there is seemingly little in the way of genuine progress at the federal level in Canada. Part of the problem is conceptual. Both citizen involvement and policy processes tend to be conceived of as one dimensional, so it is difficult to pinpoint which institutions are failing in what aspects of citizen involvement, or to consider multiple, complementary paths for involvement.

This paper seeks to develop a fuller understanding of the multidimensional nature of citizen involvement and to assess the adequacy of contemporary practices of citizen involvement in Canada. We do this by mapping the links between eight dimensions of citizen involvement, three key political institutions, and six stages of the policy process. For each stage of policy, we assess the adequacy of existing political institutions in providing for the dimensions of citizen involvement important to that stage. Based on this assessment, the paper explores, in a practical way, how Canada's institutions might be reformed to enhance citizen involvement.

The focus of the paper is on the involvement of individual Canadians in policy processes. Nonetheless, we also demonstrate that the participation of civil society organizations is a vital, complementary process.

It is evident from this analysis that Canada's primary institutions are not assuming as effective a part in citizen involvement as they might. In particular, political parties, Members of Parliament and parliamentary committees play an unnecessarily weak role in involving citizens. The intergovernmental machinery, while increasingly important as a player, is as closed as ever to non-governmental actors. Although the public service has undertaken considerable public consultation, the consistency and manner in which this is done varies enormously across departments. In addition, current efforts at informal relationship building are being hindered by high levels of mobility within the federal public service. This forces interpersonal connections to be constantly re-established and trust rebuilt. On major policy issues, the standard template of public consultation is deployed, complete with all the problems that have come to be associated with it – government controls the agenda and who is invited; information flows in one direction; and the process is episodic and *ad hoc*. In sum, there is a need for significant reform to produce more effective means of engaging citizens.

Multiple routes for representation and participation are and will remain one of the strengths of liberal democracy. No single reform or institution will create a magic formula that satisfies the current demands for citizen involvement.

Four types of reform are recommended. The first is for improving existing institutions and processes, and developing institutionalized mechanisms for funding citizen involvement. However, tinkering with existing institutions may not be radical enough to bring about sustained interaction between governments and citizens. The second type of reform is to create a new institution for citizen engagement, such as a civic forum. Its visibility could be just the kind of signal required from the political centre of government to departments and to citizens to show that there is genuine interest in realizing more effective engagement at all stages of policy making. Third, a change in culture within government is also vital to ensure that citizen involvement comes to be seen as an integral part of policy processes. The final reform is an investment in civil society. This includes the promotion of strong associational networks and the support of capacity building in voluntary organizations, which themselves serve as sites of citizen involvement.