Citizens Portray a Distinct Canada

April 17, 2003 – An exciting experiment in citizen engagement confirms Canada's distinctiveness despite growing global economic and strategic integration.

Canadians participating in an unprecedented dialogue from coast to coast paint a remarkably consistent vision for Canada in the 21st century, whatever their background, region or walk of life.

These citizens were a randomly chosen, representative sample of the population. They took part in one of ten day-long dialogue sessions across the country organized by CPRN and its partner, Viewpoint Learning. In all, more than 400 citizens gave up a Saturday or Sunday to participate.

We asked participants to paint a picture of "the kind of Canada we want" ten years down the road. We then asked them to think about how to achieve that vision and what role individuals, communities, governments and the market should play in bringing it about.

"The result," says Mary Pat MacKinnon, Director of CPRN's Public Involvement Network, "is a restatement of the unwritten 'social contract' that governs how we view our rights and responsibilities as individuals, governments, communities and businesses in today's context."

"Our values have clearly shifted over the past fifty years, but the emerging social contract is still uniquely Canadian."

Citizens' Dialogue on Canada's Future: A 21st Century Social Contract, by Mary Pat MacKinnon, Judith Maxwell, Steven Rosell and Nandini Saxena, presents and analyzes the results of the dialogues. Among its highlights:

- Canadians express a more pragmatic attitude to the market as a tool for both economic and social objectives, but a tool with limitations.
- Citizens demand a greater role in public affairs. They want greater accountability from governments, businesses and other institutions and expect to assume more responsibility and accountability themselves.
- Canadians prize diversity, but *within* a core set of Canadian values. Their desire to clarify and sustain those values increases as diversity increases.

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- That set of distinctly Canadian values, shared by citizens from coast to coast, differentiates us from our neighbours – with respect to the role of government, the balance between individual and community, our attitude to the rest of the world, and our reliance on social norms rather than legalism and litigation. This is a source of pride and a basis for building our distinctive community in the future.

There is much more of interest in the results of the dialogues, but content is only part of the story. Equally important is the impact of the dialogue experience on the citizen-participants.

“The dialogue demonstrates the role citizens can play,” says MacKinnon. “These intensive exchanges with other Canadians restored participants’ faith in an inclusive political process. In fact, it whetted their appetite.”

The authors of the CPRN report see the dialogues as a template for citizen engagement in policy formation - an example governments, politicians and policy makers would do well to emulate.

“Canadians may be cynical about the responsiveness of traditional institutions to their views,” says CPRN President, Judith Maxwell, “but don’t assume this reflects a lack of interest in the political process. Quite the contrary.”

“Citizens want an ongoing relationship with their governments that fosters this kind of dialogue. They have never been better equipped to contribute,” Maxwell says. “They expect to be involved and they have much to offer.”

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