Canadians Committed to Social Programs and Internationalism

November 1, 2002 – Canadians may have become more conservative on fiscal and economic issues over the past decade, but their top priorities remain social ones: health care, education, unemployment and child poverty, and most think the country should invest in social programs rather than cut taxes.

Those are some of the findings of a new discussion paper released today by CPRN. ***Canada's Social Contract: Evidence from Public Opinion***, by Matthew Mendelsohn of Queen's University, provides a detailed synthesis of the last ten years of Canadian public opinion data on how Canadians view our social contract.

The data is drawn from commercial polls available through public archives, major academic surveys, research institute surveys and government surveys acquired through the *Access to Information Act* and available in the Parliamentary Library.

Mendelsohn's analysis questions generalizations about Canadians having rejected collectivist values in favour of individualistic market-based values.

"What we find in the data is a much more nuanced picture of the shift in Canadian values than current caricatures portray," says Mendelsohn. "For example, Canadians see no contradiction between embracing the challenge of the global marketplace and their continued commitment to our social programs."

"In fact, most Canadians think strong social programs make us more productive, more competitive."

Among the other key conclusions of the paper:

- Attachment to province is strong, but everywhere but Quebec, and possibly Newfoundland, attachment to Canada is greater. Canadians outside Quebec have developed a more pan-Canadian national identity in the past two decades.
- Support for equalization is high across the country and for the right of Canadians to schools and hospitals of comparable quality wherever they live. However, outside Ontario, Canadians feel their province isn't getting a fair shake from federalism.
- Maintaining a balanced budget has become a Canadian value, but not the neo-conservative prescription of cut-backs in social spending.

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- Support for traditional job creation programs has fallen, but support for "strategic investments" to help Canadians make the most of their own opportunities has increased.
- Most Canadians support bilingualism, multiculturalism and immigration and internationalism. They believe Canada has a moral obligation to the world and would like to see Canadian values adopted abroad.
- Canadians recognize our trade dependence on the U.S., but do not see why that should entail giving up our ability to make independent decisions. A strong majority believe we are different from Americans and think we have more in common with Canadians from other provinces than with Americans in neighbouring states.

The analysis of the public opinion surveys was prepared for CPRN's Public Involvement Network as a background paper for a series of citizens' dialogues on the social contract currently underway across Canada.

"These data have helped us to focus those conversations on areas of apparent contradiction, or tension between competing values," says Mary Pat MacKinnon, Director of the Public Involvement Network. "As a result we are getting a much clearer sense of how the values of Canadians are changing and the dimensions of those changes."

The *Citizens' Dialogue on the Kind of Canada We Want* takes citizen engagement to a new depth and complexity using Viewpoint Learning's "ChoiceWork Dialogue" methodology.

CPRN has conducted day-long dialogue sessions over the past month in Montreal, Calgary, Vancouver, Halifax, Moncton and Winnipeg. Future sessions will take place in Thunder Bay, Quebec City and Toronto. An analytical report on the collected results of the dialogues will be released in Spring 2003.

You can access or download a copy of this document by clicking here.

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