Democratic Reform Means Embracing Citizen Engagement

December 10, 2004 – Reforming political institutions will not be enough to renew Canadians' trust in their democratic process. Reforms will have to go further and include space for on-going citizen involvement in major policy decisions between elections.

That's a key conclusion of a new report from CPRN. ***Transparency, Trust and Citizen Engagement – What Canadians Are Saying About Accountability***, is written by Julia Abelson and François-Pierre Gauvin of the Centre for Health Economics and Policy Analysis at McMaster University, in collaboration with Judy Watling and Mary Pat MacKinnon of CPRN's Public Involvement Network. It presents the citizens' perspective on accountability.

The authors draw on the findings of four recent CPRN citizens' dialogues, involving more than 1,600 randomly chosen Canadians from coast to coast, as well as a number of other sources. Their paper provides a reference point against which to judge whether current efforts to improve accountability meet citizens' expectations.

"The resounding message from this review is a reaffirmation of the role of government as guardian of the public interest," says Abelson. "But there are conditions. Citizens want to play an active part in contributing to decisions, and they want evidence of improved accountability."

Participants in CPRN's dialogues do not see accountability as an end in itself. Rather, they see it as the means for re-establishing trust in government. Their views on accountability are tied to three key concepts:

- *Transparency* – requires those who are accountable to answer for their decisions and actions, providing relevant and adequate information for the purpose.
- *Trust* – a relationship built on improved accountability by both elected officials and public servants and greater responsiveness to citizens' views.
- *Citizen Engagement* – accountability provides citizens with the information and knowledge they need to contribute more tangibly to public policy decisions. They don't seek to replace experts or stakeholders, but want an opportunity to influence decisions and evidence that their views have been taken into account.

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“Canadians see accountability and public involvement working together to produce decisions they will have more confidence in,” says Abelson, “transparent decisions in which they have played a part. It’s their prescription for a renewal of trust.”

If that trust is lacking, citizens tend to call for independent oversight bodies. Before moving down this path, the authors argue, thoughtful consideration should be given to the implications of such organizations and their potential to weaken direct government-citizen accountability.

CPRN dialogue participants express an interest in engaging more fully in public policy discussions. They view active participation in the democratic process, beyond simply voting, not only as a right, but as a responsibility of citizenship.

The authors argue that current initiatives designed to improve accountability and rebuild public trust must include mechanisms for citizen engagement if they are to succeed.

“This requires a defined space and processes accessible to interested citizens, credible and relevant information, and assurances that decisions have not been pre-cooked by the elites of society,” says Judith Maxwell, President of CPRN. “Citizens are a key part of the accountability equation. Democratic renewal efforts currently underway in a number of jurisdictions provide a valuable opportunity to create these spaces and engage citizens in a meaningful way.”

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