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Revitalizing Democratic Participation: Engaging Citizens for Change

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“Democracy – Updating the owners’ manual”

Good evening,

It really is a pleasure to be here tonight. I am looking forward to reconnecting with former colleagues and to meeting today's SPC leaders.

I am also very pleased to be sharing the podium with Alex Munter.

In the brief time I have, I'll offer some reasons why I think democratic participation is important, then share some insights and learnings flowing from our public involvement work at Canadian Policy Research Networks and close with some questions for discussion.

Right off the top- I have to say that I am both inspired by and concerned about tonight's topic – for reasons that I hope will become clear.

I am motivated to work in this field because I believe that real sustainable change leading to a more just, prosperous and caring community, country and world starts with the individual. And this means valuing and nurturing the role of the individual citizen in democracy. More than anything else, the 21st century calls out for individual conscience harnessed to collective action. [We need to overcome our addiction to leadership that fails to nurture the leader within all of us.]

I am a believer – I have faith that the power of individual reflection, individual conscience and informed judgement in democratic society can lead to transformative change. Democracy is an evolving, but far from a fully evolved, institution. It'll never be perfect because we're not perfect but it can be a lot better. We need a revitalized 21st century representative democracy whose institutions truly respond to people's needs not vice versa.

Global imperatives and ever growing interconnectedness could result in two very different scenarios: one - characterized by more deliberative forms of democracy

and effective global governance - features respect for human rights, reduced poverty, and healthier planet. The other scenario is less encouraging: superpower dominance, further weakened global governance structures and greater disparities (both between North and South and within the hemispheres).

Democratic participation has a key role to play in bringing about and sustaining the first scenario.

Democracy cannot evolve to a higher state unless we as individuals are prepared to engage in making it better. It is not just elected leaders who need to change, to reach out, to be more open, and to share control. A stronger democracy calls for more mature relationships between citizens and the leaders they elect – and among citizens. More about this later.

In the late 1980s, I was intensely involved with a SPC campaign seeking public support for initiatives aimed at improving social assistance and reducing child poverty. At that time, our strategy was premised on the belief that politicians would respond to public pressure. We did make some headway but as you know all too well, we fell short of our goal. That experience taught me the limitations of traditional public education methods and the importance of deeper engagement.

From the SPC I moved on to a decade of work within the co-operative movement - which is premised on a belief in the power of collective action to improve the lives of ordinary people in Canada and abroad. It was here that I became more and more interested in and convinced of the importance of connecting people and policy – tapping into the experiential wisdom and values of 'ordinary' people and understanding the importance of mobilizing people to make change at the local level.

I went on to CPRN to lead the newly formed Public Involvement Network whose work is guided by a belief that involving the public helps make decisions more legitimate and sustainable, leading to better policy outcomes. CPRN's overall mission is to create knowledge and lead public dialogue and debate on social and economic issues important to the well-being of Canadians.

Why should we care about democratic participation?

Before I go further, let me take a moment to clarify what I mean by citizen engagement (CE) in democracy.

To summarize, I'll use the CE attributes described by Frances Abele. They are:

☆ **participate** as individuals as well as groups

☆exchange of views, **deliberation**, learning

☆**information** provided and **responsibility** to inform themselves

☆open, inclusive and **respectful** process

☆long enough for deliberation and usually not a one time event

☆**accountable** and transparent¹

Of course there are many sceptics and cynics (some vocal, some silent – I prefer the vocal ones) who criticize or dismiss citizen engagement.

Their criticisms include:

- Public involvement encourages elected leaders to avoid tough leadership decisions that must be taken.
- Reliance on public involvement is a tactic used by politicians to by pass or discredit civil society groups (representational politics).
- Most people are too busy to engage- that's why we elect leaders – to take care of these things – voting is enough; we are suffering from consultation fatigue and we don't have time for engagement – policy decisions happen in real time.
- Most people are too ill informed to make useful contributions – they offer no value added on policy issues. All we need are experts and the affected stakeholders. These critics take a dim view of the capacity and inclinations of the 'person on the street'.
- Citizen engagement can lead to the dominance of majorities over minorities, a kind of crude populism that threatens minority rights.
- It is the flavour of the month.

While there may be some truth to some of these claims, most misrepresent citizen engagement. Let me try to make the case for the importance of greater democratic participation.

The following 4 elements provide a framework for how I think about citizen engagement in the context of democratic renewal.

¹ Frances Abele, commentary on the Social Union Framework Agreement, 1998

1. ***Democracy is far from perfect but to paraphrase Churchill, it is the worst form of government except for all the others.***

Our mistake is in taking it for granted, for failing to invest in it – the same could be said for any relationship that we care about (family, spouse, neighbour, work etc). We fail to heed the lessons of history when we assume it requires little vigilance. The 20th century, with its horrific atrocities, illustrates the awful consequences of democracies transformed into killing machines. We have also seen the consequences of complacent democracies falling to take action when action was needed. At the close of the last century, we witnessed Rwanda in our living rooms and as Romeo Dallaire so poignantly lamented: the world's most powerful democracies sat on the sidelines watching as 800,000 men, women and children were slaughtered. And today's manmade horror is Dafur – we aren't learning from our mistakes.

At home, there are warning signs that we need to pay attention to.

- Declining voter turnouts and even lower youth participation.
 - Almost 40% of Canadians chose to not exercise their franchise and only 22% of first time eligible voters cast a ballot.
 - Likewise, political party memberships have been dropping.
- Couple this decline with rising levels of public mistrust in political leaders as documented by EKOS, Nevitte, Pammet, CRIC², and others. If we ignore this trend, we run the risk of having fewer and fewer Canadians determine the kind of Canada we have. And we know that much of the western world is experiencing the same trend.

And yes, it is important to put our democratic challenges into global perspective – compared to many countries we are doing quite well. But we can't afford to ignore the warning signs – as Jane Jacobs says in her recent book (Dark Age Ahead):

“any culture that jettisons the values that have given it competence, adaptability and identity becomes weak and hollow. A culture can avoid that hazard only by tenaciously retaining the underlying values responsible for the culture's nature and success. That is the framework into which adaptations must be assimilated. ...I know of no better expression of its core values than the words voiced by Lincoln: that the government of the

² CRIC data (2002) reveal that 77% of Canadians rated political leaders' honesty and ethical standards low or very low. Phillip Haid, Canadian Democracy: Bringing Youth Back into the Political Process (Dec. 2004)

people, by the people, and for the people shall not perish from the earth (p. 176).

2. ***A well functioning democracy requires a well informed and engaged citizenry.***

Poorly or misinformed and disengaged citizens are less likely to make good electoral and policy choices and society will suffer the consequences.

We know that education equips people with the cognitive skills needed for meaningful participation. And we know that our levels of education in Canada are higher than ever. And yet as Blais and Nevitte say, we have a paradox: “unprecedented numbers of Canadians are graduating from university and yet turnout to vote has declined precipitously since the 1988 federal election” (7, 2004).

Policy complexity is increasing and we need more than ever to be clear on the choices and the implications of choices. Based on CPRN's experience, it is heartening to see how well people do deal with complex policy issues when given a chance to learn together and deliberate.

Thomas Jefferson's words are as relevant today as they were in the 18th century.

“I know of no safe depository of the ultimate powers of society but the people themselves; and if we think them not enlightened enough to exercise their control with wholesome discretion, the remedy is not to take it from them, but to inform their discretion by education.”

In today's terms this would be a call for investments in civic literacy³.

In preparing for this evening, I reviewed recent SPC publications. The SPC mandate (2002 Annual Report) connects very directly with this point:

Our mandate is to provide residents of Ottawa with the means to exercise informed leadership on issues affecting their social and economic well-being. We believe that the exercise of informed leadership is based upon access to high-quality research and greater opportunities for people to share ideas and work together for improvements in their quality of life. (2002, 3)

³ Brenda O'Neil's research shows that today's youth are less knowledgeable and politically informed than previous generations. (Youth Participation – what we know, and what we don't) CRIC op cit. p.2. Gina Bishop and Rebecca Low's research suggests that we need to understand “the things that are of interest and value to them [youth] and to define and make meaningful the concept of democracy and the role of both citizens and the public service in making it work” p.8 CRIC op cit.

3. ***Democratic participation makes for better policy outcomes and more legitimate policy.***

Effective democracy and good public policy need the thoughtful contributions of a variety of actors: politicians, public servants, experts, stakeholders and the public. Public policy is ultimately about making choices among competing public goods or values – it is less about getting the technical choices right and more about what kind of society we want to have [tradeoffs around spending for health care, education and other public goods]. This is especially true when there are big choices to be made and when society is at a crossroad. Our governance knowledge and skills need to catch up with our technical and scientific knowledge. Witness the array of bioethical dilemmas that cannot be addressed through technical solutions. They call out for safe spaces for people to engage in respectful value-based dialogue.

We also need public buy in for legitimacy, effective implementation (e.g. achieving public health and environmental goals) and sustainability. We have too many examples of public policies (some good, some bad) that failed, had to be scrapped, or overhauled because the public weren't brought in at all or too late in the process. When people feel that they have had no role in shaping policy and a sense of powerlessness, they do feel disengaged. But this doesn't mean that they don't care about the issues.

4. ***Finally there is the normative argument.***

Democracy belongs to the governed not the governors – people have a right to participate. The corollary of this of course, is they also have a responsibility to participate. And to take this a little further, we should consider intergenerational and sustainability elements which have ethical implications – we have a stewardship responsibility to take care of democracy so that future generations are well served. It is not just ours because what we do will influence future generations' choices (e.g. environment, health, education).

Having laid out some arguments for democratic participation, albeit in abbreviated fashion, I'd next like to share some learnings, drawing largely on CPRN's public involvement work.

In the past 5 years CPRN has engaged over 2000 randomly selected Canadians in conversation on issues such as the future of health care, an updated social contract, the long term management of used nuclear fuel and budgetary policy. We are in the planning stages for a national dialogue with young Canadians to

better understand what public issues are most important to them, including barriers to active citizenship and to explore the policy implications. Our work is designed to insert public values and policy preferences into the policy process and help decision makers understand the policy space within which decisions should be made. We hope that we're a catalyst for improved civic literacy and strengthened democracy.

Our dialogues involve random selection of citizens by a professional polling firm, day-long sessions with about groups of about 40 people in 10 to 12 locations across Canada, carefully prepared workbooks with balanced and objective information that sets out value-based choices, professional facilitation, pre and post questionnaires, in-depth qualitative and quantitative analysis, and widespread dissemination of the results to participants and policy makers.

Citizen dialogues are not focus groups. Focus groups offer little opportunity for group deliberation and trade-offs. [I'd be happy to elaborate on this point in our discussion]

Here's some of what we have learned from Canadians:

1. There is a **large untapped potential and appetite** – people want more opportunities to become involved. They see this as both a responsibility and a right. But they aren't seeking direct democracy on specific policy issues. They are looking for meaningful opportunities to influence decision making and complement not replace the voices of experts and other stakeholders. And as I said earlier, their capacity for this kind of discussion is inspiring.
 - In a follow up survey with dialogue participants we found that 45% said that their public affairs activity (community meetings or meeting with elected reps) had increased and 69% had taken additional steps to keep themselves informed of public affairs.
2. **Reaffirmation of the role of government as guardian of the public interest** on the condition that citizens are given an active and meaningful role in informing decisions and accountability is improved. They do expect governments to govern – they are not clamouring for direct democracy. They do want to know that their voices have been heard and listened to. When decision makers take decisions that do not reflect their direction, they expect an explanation.
3. **Accountability demands are growing.** Citizens link accountability to 3 concepts: transparency, trust and citizen engagement, all of which are at the core of healthy democracy.
 - Deepening mistrust of government's ability to manage public funds efficiently and responsibly. They worry that short term expediency

usually trumps longer term holistic planning, leading to poor choices.

- Transparency needs to be pursued with careful thought as to what types of info are needed, for what purposes, by whom and for whom.

4. **Values and ethical behaviour are key** and there is more public agreement on them than disagreement. Canadians share a consistent set of values which provide an essential foundation on which to strengthen our democracy.

- Equality and justice
- Respect for diversity
- Mutual responsibility
- Accountability and transparency
- Intergenerational responsibility and stewardship
- Knowledge

5. Citizens are more ready to make tough choices than politicians realize. When given an opportunity to move beyond wish lists and confront tough choices, people do take a longer term view and accept the need for change.

Time doesn't permit more than a brief word on what's happening across our country. While not quite a groundswell, there are important democratic renewal initiatives underway that we can learn from, including:

- BC Citizens' Assembly process
 - Randomly selected citizens with mandate to decide on electoral reform. Decided on a method – single transferable vote- being decided by voters in May election
- Ontario's democratic renewal process
 - Citizens processes for electoral reform
 - Youth engagement – how institutions need to adapt to youth
- Federal government democratic reform
 - Parliamentary reform to enhance role of MPs and improve functioning of committees
 - Standing Committee looking at electoral reform
 - Consultations around the causes of the 'democratic deficit'
 - These are limited at present but offers some promise of greater scope

- An array of innovative municipal initiatives bringing citizens into policy, including participatory budgeting, citizens' panels and advisory committees. Alex can speak to this in much more detail

In closing let me highlight some issues that need a lot more innovative and focussed work:

- **How do we scale up to institutionalize democratic participation at all levels of government, within public service and parliaments?**
 - How do we capture the full effects of public involvement – how do we improve our ability to evaluate and communicate results to the public?
- Public participation is iterative and ongoing - it's about developing trust and relationships. It's messy and unpredictable and requires elected leaders and officials to let go of some control in setting public agendas.
 - **We need to be in this for the long haul but we also need some early signals that it is being taken seriously – what would be some effective early 'wins' that would build momentum?**
 - Note: doing it in bad faith is worse than not doing it at all
- **We need to better understand and distinguish between the symptoms and the causes of citizen disaffection and voting decline**
 - Refer to the Canadian Democratic Audit series (UBC and Mount Allison Centre for Canadian Studies), especially *Citizens* – Andre Blais, Neil Nevitte etc.
- The voluntary sector makes a huge contribution to civic literacy and citizen engagement.
 - **How do we better support voluntary sector organizations in these roles, especially in helping them put citizens at the centre?** ⁴
- **We need to develop a civic literacy strategy.** In doing so we need more insight into the barriers to and opportunities for greater citizen

⁴ As explained by Barry Knight et al in *Reviving Democracy: Citizens at the Heart of Governance* (2002, 61-62): giving citizens pride of place is vital to civil society... it is more than the collection and sum total of formal, institutional NGOs. Rather, it is about what citizens do, individually and collectively, to meet their needs and to advance their own interests, while advancing the general human condition. Civil society is about association, both formal and informal, with others – to do the things which need to be done and which are not cannot be, done by the state or by the market. And it is therefore about connection – between citizens and their institutions of government, and between citizens and their organizations and associations. The voices of citizens need to be at the centre...”

participation in democracy, especially for younger Canadians. We need to understand the interplay of other non-political factors such as the decline of deference, rise of individualism, weakening community ties.

- We need to work through with the media what are the appropriate roles for it to play in civic literacy?

Just before Christmas Ukrainian fervour for democracy inspired and galvanized people in the West. Recently Iraqi citizens risked life and limb in exercising their democratic right to vote for a better country – we would do well to reflect on their courage and think about what we can learn from them as we work to strengthen our own democracy.

Before closing I'd like to recognize and pay tribute to the historic and current contributions that the Council has made to nurture and sustain civic engagement and literacy in Ottawa. I read with interest Alan Moscovitch's article on SPC's 75 year legacy and was struck by its catalytic role on so many important social fronts.

Let me close with the words of two dialogue participants, one from Winnipeg and the other from Montreal:

"If we expect government to make change, and we expect industry to make change, then we have to end up changing as well. And that means we have to take an active role."

"My feeling is that we, in Canada, are becoming less responsible and that the citizenship aspect is perhaps a lesser concern. I would like us to be aware that we are citizens and as such, that we have responsibilities and not just rights."

Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you. I look forward to sharing ideas and learning from your insights, experience and knowledge.

Thank you.