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Mary Pat MacKinnon, Speaking Points
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Citizen Engagement: Balancing Expectations and Realities Panel

“Citizen Engagement – Changing realities and balancing expectations”

In my brief remarks, I’ll speak to why engaging citizens in public policy is vital to improving public trust and confidence in governments – in my view a first order question, then share some of CPRN’s experiences with citizen dialogues. I prefer the title *‘changing realities and balancing expectations’* to balancing expectations and realities. Engagement should encourage changes in our realities but only if citizens and their governors can have a mature conversation that balances the imperatives of governing with the rights of citizens to participate in their governance in a more meaningful way – hence the need for changed realities. The status quo will not suffice.

Why citizen engagement

- CPRN’s research is informed by public values as articulated by randomly recruited groups of citizens. {We see citizen engagement as a good (democratic theory – procedural good) in its own right but we also think that it improves legitimacy of public policy. Not only is it the right thing to do in democracy – on normative grounds – but also if done with the right intent and well supported – it should also contribute to better policy making and implementation of those policies.}
- CE is needed because: (1). a well functioning and resilient democracy needs a well informed and engaged citizenry, (2) it makes for better policy outcomes and greater legitimacy and (3) citizens have a right (and a corollary responsibility) to participate – there is a stewardship notion here

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as well. We have a responsibility to future generations to pass down as good a democracy as we can create}

What is Citizen Engagement?

- Meaningful citizen engagement looks something like this:
 - citizens participate as individuals (as well as in groups) By citizens we mean people who are not there to represent organized interests or organizational agendas – they are there as individuals open to considering a range of possible policy directions – not to explicitly and consciously advocate for pre-established positions.
 - Credible, accessible information is provided and people take responsibility to inform themselves
 - there is an exchange of views, and learning and deliberation happens;
 - there is an open, inclusive, respectful and well designed process
 - accountability and transparency are evident - the voice of citizens is respected and responded to
 - there is a real opportunity to influence the policy outcome - not a 'x' in the consultation box to say its been done

CPRN's experience with citizen dialogues

- {In CPRN's infant days, some 10 years ago, the late Suzanne Peters, Family Network director, inspired by the work of Daniel Yankelovich (in particular his Coming to Public Judgment book), produced "Understanding Canadian Values". This was an early version of our citizen dialogue work.}
- **Since 2000**, CPRN has engaged well over 2000 randomly recruited individuals in deep conversation on important issues such as the future of health care in Canada (this done for the Romanow Commission), {a social contract for Canada's future, budgetary policy, the long-term management of used nuclear fuel, and privacy.} Next month we are bringing young Canadians between

the ages of 18 and 25 together with influential leaders to talk about what citizenship means in relation to the vision that they will create for Canada in the areas of learning, work, health and environment.

- { Our dialogues feature:
 - random recruitment of participants,
 - full day or longer sessions,
 - workbooks with factual information and value-based policy options,
 - pre and post questionnaires,
 - professional process design and facilitation,
 - qualitative and quantitative analysis and
 - transparent reporting to policy makers and participants.}
 (Optional time permitting)

- **The dialogues are designed to insert public values and policy preferences into the policy process and help decision makers define the policy space within which decisions should be taken.**

- As Janice Gross Stein notes “..if accountability itself is not connected to the fundamental human and social values underpinning our social institutions but is left in its own self-referential orbit of technical measures referring to technical values such as efficiency, the whole business can become little more than fiction. A crisis of accountability becomes a deeper crisis of meaning.” (H. Menzies quoting J..Gross Stein Page 9 - No Time: Stress and the Crisis of Modern Life.)

What have we learned – this links to the question about what are the drivers for CE.

I'll highlight 5 learnings

1. there is a large untapped potential for CE. People want to be more involved in public policy decision making for a variety of reasons, not the least of which is they think this involvement will improve policy. People want different ways to engage and are not satisfied with casting a vote every 4 years.

2. People reaffirm the role of government as a guardian of the public interest on the condition that citizens are given active and meaningful roles in informing decisions AND that accountability is

improved. {People are reasonable – they recognize that governing is not easy and understand the complexity of public policies}

3. People want a higher standard of governance and greater accountability.
4. They want to see their values and ethical behaviour reflected in public life
5. The public may be readier to make tough choices than politicians realize. When given an opportunity to go beyond wish lists and venting, and learn more about the complexity of choice making, they seem prepared to confront difficult public choices and accept the need for change.

What are the barriers?

- Status quo mentality – fear of change, fear of giving up power, fear of what might emerge
- Experts' scepticism about citizens' contributions and citizens' scepticism about motivation and intent. The lack of civility in Parliament and the lack of substantive policy debate is eroding public confidence in political institutions
- Inadequate resources (human + financial)
- Unrealistic, unworkable time frames
- Lack of know how: capacity issues
- Media culture that is good at generating shared ignorance, fear and outrage but not so good at generating shared understanding, shared compassion and commitment to justice (Woodruff)
- Civic literacy (formative years and beyond)

What's the road map

– to paraphrase– it's the journey itself as much as the final destination that has meaning.

- CE is about creating and sustaining relationships between decision makers (elected and non-elected) and citizens and among citizens.

It's about creating the conditions that allow it to develop and take root - building trust and respect among the governed and the governors. We conceptualize it as an ongoing journey that is part of the evolution of democracy. What we really need is a **political culture** shift that **values citizens' role and values** in democracy. And values the contributions that public office makes to our quality of life.

- Therefore there are a number of maps that we might follow and the choices about which maps we follow should be informed by the citizens themselves because it is their journey too.

Let me conclude with some sign posts that we'd like to see on the route:

- Parliamentary reform that reaches beyond Parliament to build the capacity and role of the individual MP and his/her constituency office- empower MPs to engage their constituents in public policy choices.
- Parliamentary reform that also makes much more creative use of the committee process to open up opportunities (on line and face to face) for citizens and / or **citizen representative processes** to feed into committee work on policy directions. Foster a more constructive relationship between parliamentary committee and the public service to collaborate on citizen engagement.
- Institutionalize CE within the public service so that it is a normal part of the policy process whereby public servants think through what are the appropriate reasons for and ways of engaging citizens
- Reinvigorate political parties: making public policy a central focus of party work- making them more attractive
- Making civic literacy a priority – part of our human capital investment – within schools and as part of adult life
- Civic journalism – linked to civic literacy – note Henry Milner's comparative work on civic literacy and lessons from the success of Scandinavian countries

To conclude and link back to my preferred panel title – changing realities and balancing expectations and why CE matters – which is really about how we govern ourselves- let me paraphrase Paul Woodruff whose recent book on the first democracy has some lessons for 21st century practitioners

Democracy is hard to achieve....it is impossible to make perfect. But democracy is not a utopian ideal, because it takes human imperfection into account better than any other ideal of government.