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Restoring Citizen Trust – The Heart of Accountability

The expectation that governments will be accountable to their citizens is a cornerstone of democracy. Growing calls for better accountability signal a democracy in need of renewal (Abelson et al, 2004, page v).

Successive governments have called for action, but despite the effort and public resources spent on accountability procedures and reporting to the public, citizen confidence and trust remain abysmal.

Why is public accountability to citizens so important? And why has this emerged as one of pressing concern for citizens, politicians, and academics? And why have efforts to date not improved the situation?

Why Accountability Matters to Citizens

Recent CPRN research explores what more than 1600 randomly recruited Canadians, participating in four different dialogues, had to say about accountability. The low level of trust they express is palpable. Just as clear is their desire to rebuild that trust. Also crucial, *Canadians do not see accountability as an end in itself, but only one of the essentials in rebuilding trust between them and their governments.*

Measures like improving political party and electoral financing rules, having transparent and merit-based public appointments and procurement systems, and giving committees and legislative officers like the Auditor General more resources and greater independence to provide oversight of government activities, are worthy and appropriate in their own right. However, they address only part of the puzzle and will not be enough to restore public trust.

Canadians want their democratic institutions and the actions and decisions of public office holders to reflect their values and priorities. They want a greater role in accountability, not only holding others to account, but by actively contributing to decisions. “Citizen engagement is not merely an input to, or a product of strengthened accountability, but a form of accountability in its own right” (Abelson, page vi).

Accountability for Today’s Canada

Existing accountability mechanisms in Canada are out of date. For one thing, they assume that public involvement is limited to election times. But numerous studies show that citizens are “no longer content to go to the polls every four years or so and then give government a free hand” (Savoie, page 9). Part of having more trust is having more say.

Improved accountability won’t happen without improved transparency. It goes well beyond simply posting more information on government Web sites and publishing more reports. Transparency means the public has easily accessible, understandable and meaningful information that makes clear what is being achieved for society with public funds and where the gaps are. It also involves governments giving the public a role in determining what constitutes meaningful information and facilitating its use of that information to influence the policy process.

The growing complexity of public policy and a more educated, less deferential and diverse population with higher expectations of governments, call for a more sophisticated relationship between government and citizens. We need to rethink our system of accountability. The one-way relationship between the elected representatives and the public is over. Instead, we have multiple relationships at play in the public sphere and we need to develop accountability mechanisms that support those relationships.

Lessons From Abroad

Canada is not alone in this regard. The report of the UK Power Commission, based on two years of in-depth study, concludes, "...the British political system is structured as though the lifestyles, expectations and values of the industrial era are still in place. Citizens have changed."

The Commission recommends three major shifts in political practice:

- rebalance power "away from the executive and unaccountable bodies towards parliament and local government";
- introduce "greater responsiveness and choice into the electoral and party systems" including replacing the first past the post system and encouraging the candidacy of more women, visible minorities and young people; and,
- create "a culture of political engagement in which it becomes the norm for policy and decision-making to occur with direct input from citizens."

The Commission warns against cherry-picking its recommendations. "The implementation of only one or two will not create the re-engagement with formal democracy which many people now want." (Power Commission, page 20). This is helpful advice for Canada as we reform our systems.

The Key: Engaging Citizens in Reform

Regaining trust calls for a political culture shift that reconnects politicians and the public. Democratic reform must reach beyond the corridors of Parliament and our provincial legislatures to engage Canadians. Rebuilding trust won't happen until politicians in their constituencies and in Parliamentary committees make space for the public at the policy table. It won't happen until parliamentarians and the public service work together for meaningful public involvement in policy development at all stages. It won't happen until political parties re-engage the public in serious policy discussions about the kind of Canada we want. Democracy is a contact sport and it is through meaningful engagement that politicians can get at the heart of the accountability dilemma and re-establish trust.

Sources

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Further Reading

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Interested in discussing this work or collaborating in research in this or a related area?

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