

## **Fostering a Culture of Engagement in Canada**

The arguments for engaging Canadians at all stages of the policy process are clear and overwhelming.

Citizens demand a more meaningful role in policy development. Engagement is a powerful antidote to voter disaffection with political institutions. It means greater policy effectiveness and legitimacy, and it fosters inclusion and social cohesion.

So why isn't citizen engagement built into Canada's policy processes? What do we need to do to create a "culture of engagement" among our policy elites – politicians, public servants and stakeholder groups?

Two new papers from CPRN's Public Involvement Network address aspects of these crucial questions.

***Assessing the Impacts of Public Participation: Concepts, Evidence and Policy Implications***, by Julia Abelson and François-Pierre Gauvin, explores what we know about assessing the impact of citizen engagement on both the policy process and on the subsequent political and civic behaviour of the citizen participants.

***Fostering Canadians' Role in Public Policy: A Strategy for Institutionalizing Public Involvement in Policy***, by Lori Turnbull and Peter Aucoin, looks at the structural, cultural and practical barriers to making citizen engagement a natural and permanent part of our policy processes.

To document the benefits of citizen involvement in the policy process, and for accountability, we need accurate and comparable data. Despite progress in Canada and elsewhere on evaluation frameworks, a commonly accepted set of evaluation criteria has yet to be established. Abelson and Gauvin make suggestions for refining evaluation (evaluating context more rigorously, making use of real world deliberative experiments, and using multidisciplinary perspectives) and propose strategies to move evaluation from a "frill" to an "essential" practice in engagement initiatives.

Turnbull and Aucoin argue it is wrong to assume that low voter turnout for elections and low levels of membership in political parties mean public interest in politics is waning. Citizens are interested in participating in politics, but only if their input will make a difference. What is needed, they say, are opportunities for "meaningful" involvement.

Therein lies the case for institutionalizing public involvement.

To be meaningful, it must include citizens in defining policy objectives, choosing between policy alternatives and developing implementation strategies. And it involves an interactive exchange among citizens and between citizens and decision-makers.

Turnbull and Aucoin set out four criteria as a litmus test of institutionalized public engagement:

- Public involvement is a core element embedded in the policy process
- Public input is given substantial weight in policy development
- The commitment to institutionalized public involvement is government-wide
- Institutionalized public involvement includes the public service and parliament

They propose that Canada's current policy structures be overhauled "to make room for the public at the policy table." They recommend that:

- parliamentary committees be the institutional link between citizen engagement efforts and Parliament;
- the public service be the primary source of the information citizens need to participate knowledgeably;
- the public service also develop the expertise to conduct meaningful deliberative engagement on a regular basis;
- a culture change be instilled in policy elites through public pressure, by political parties that themselves encourage public engagement, and through improved civic education;
- financial and geographical barriers to engagement be addressed.

After a review of experience with public engagement initiatives here and abroad, Turnbull and Aucoin conclude that few, if any, policy areas are "off limits" to public involvement and that the demand for meaningful involvement is an irreversible trend.

"Institutionalization of citizen engagement is an ambitious, but achievable goal."

- 30 -

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