

Fostering Canadians' Role in Public Policy: A Strategy for Institutionalizing Public Involvement in Policy

Executive Summary

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Citizen engagement is at the apex of the public involvement pyramid. In basic terms, it means that citizens are full-fledged participants in the policy process and that their input is given substantial weight toward policy outcomes. In Canada, citizen engagement is not a regular part of the policy process. Public consultation exercises such as town hall meetings are common, but they usually invite citizens' input only in the final stages of the policy process, when main objectives have already been defined and alternative solutions discarded. To be meaningful, public involvement must: occur *throughout* the policy process, before major decisions are taken; reflect the diversity of the population; provide participants with credible, balanced information about the issues in question; use a fair process; and communicate the results to the public at large.

Survey data indicate that Canadians want to play a more meaningful role in the policy process and are less willing to defer to the expertise of policy elites. In light of the growing voter apathy, evidenced by low voter turnout and declining membership in political parties, it is in the best interest of both citizens and governments to embrace innovative methods of public participation that give citizens a more powerful role. To that end, we argue that citizen engagement exercises, which invite citizen participation and input at the various stages of the policy process, should become a regular, institutionalized part of policymaking in Canada.

Public involvement in policy strengthens rather than threatens representative democracy. Public involvement enables, even requires, that citizens become informed, formulate considered opinions, and discuss them with others, especially with those whom they would not otherwise interact. In the process, social capital, social trust and civic knowledge are strengthened. It helps political leaders to gain better insight into the public's opinions, values, and priorities which supports them in their roles as the people's representatives.¹ It can make for better public policy, as citizen feedback on the successes and failures of previous policies can better inform policy decisions.² And, the inclusiveness of the process better legitimizes the policy outcome, as groups with diverse opinions have been given a fair chance to engage.

A review of OECD case studies and a series of interviews with Canadian policy makers identified four key criteria for successful institutionalization of public involvement in policy:

- Public involvement is a core element in the policy process;
- Public input is given substantial weight in policy development processes; it cannot be a "token" effort, in perception or reality;

¹ Peter Levine, The New Progressive Era: Toward a Fair and Deliberative Democracy. Rowman and Little Field, USA, 2003.

² Phillips 11.

- The commitment to institutionalized public involvement is government-wide as opposed to concentrated in certain departments; and
- The effort to institutionalize public involvement includes the public service and parliament. The goal of institutionalization has proven to be an elusive one, for Canada and for other OECD countries. While many governments hold frequent public consultations, no government has made citizen engagement a regular part of the policy process.

Predictably, policy elites - politicians, public servants, and stakeholder groups alike – are resistant to increased public involvement, and for a number of reasons. Many are reluctant to give up control over the policy agenda and some believe that citizens are not sufficiently informed to make a valuable contribution to policy discussions. Canada's parliamentary system of government, with its excessive concentration of power in the executive branch, makes it difficult to carve out a place for public involvement in policy.

To institutionalize meaningful citizen engagement in the policy process, Canada must overcome a number of structural, cultural and practical barriers.

First, current policy structures must be revamped to make room for the public at the policy table. In our view, this effort must start with Parliament itself, especially through greater use of parliamentary committees to engage the public. Parliamentary reform is only a matter of time: the government needs greater checks and balances on its exercise of power and a good measure of that must come from Parliament. In any event, citizen engagement, in the absence of parliamentary reform will remain on the margins.

The collective experience suggest that there are few, if any, policy areas that are “off limits” to public involvement. That being said, models of public deliberation vary in terms of their capacity to deal with particular sorts of policy questions. There is no one best way for all situations. The diversity of approaches is an asset and not a liability to the enhancement of citizen engagement. The professional public service must develop a critical mass of expertise on citizen engagement so that different methodologies for engagement exercises are appropriately deployed and citizen participants are well served in terms of their information and educative needs and the requirements for well conducted deliberations. A public service that is dedicated to institutionalized public involvement will help to nurture among political elites, policy experts, and stakeholders an appreciation of the value of public input.

Cultural and attitudinal barriers present a daunting challenge to institutionalization, especially since the resistance to public involvement among elites and the public is mutually reinforcing. It is likely that policy elites' resistance to public involvement fuels feelings of voter apathy. Further, voter indifference vis-à-vis low voter turnout permits elite indifference to public input, and the cycle continues. To break this cycle, it is necessary to target the attitudes of both the elites and the masses. Citizen engagement requires that those in positions of authority relinquish or diminish some of their power to make decisions in order to share power with citizens. Political parties, vehicles that are

meant to link these two groups, can be a fundamental starting point. Political parties need to better engage their members and the public in shaping their policies. They must make a particular effort to reach out to young voters, who are increasingly disconnected from parties. Party policy foundations, if adopted by Canadian parties, could take a leading role in facilitating public involvement exercises. Further, by producing new research and publicizing the results, they could improve civic education, which is a necessary step in cultivating public interest in politics.

Evidence shows that the sense of civic duty - at least in relation to voting - is significantly lower among young Canadians, in contrast to many European countries. To address this, serious consideration should be given to lowering the voting age to 16 as a way to help them form the habit to vote.

Practical obstacles, such as cost considerations, can be dealt with through the reallocation of some budgetary resources now devoted to polling and advertising and some portion of parliamentary committee budgets. This could go some way to kick start the institutionalization of citizen engagement. However, this would require solid support for public involvement among government elites. There is widespread agreement that participants of deliberative policy exercises find their experiences to be positive and fulfilling, with most indicating interest in becoming more involved in public affairs, including participating in other dialogues. There is always some element of self-selection in this regard, but the hopeful sign, for those wishing to promote democratic participation, is that most citizens who have not previously been engaged come away from these exercises with an increased interest in participation. This finding alone should justify the resources committed by government to such exercises.

Greater use of the Internet is critical to the institutionalization of meaningful public involvement in the policy process. There is no technological fix here and it is not appropriate for all occasions, but technology is necessary to overcome the practical barriers of cost, accessibility and geography to citizen engagement. An insistence by MPs that parliamentary committees spend more time out of Ottawa will also help address geographic barriers.

It is obvious that the demand for meaningful public involvement is a trend that will not be reversed. While traditional consultation will continue to be an important part of public involvement, it is clear that more is expected. Our recommendations on how to institutionalize public involvement build on the conclusions of a 2005 Institute of Governance roundtable on the democratic deficit: building an “infrastructure” for citizen engagement within governments is a necessary next step.³

Low voter turnout and declining and low party memberships must not be taken merely as evidence that public interest in politics is waning. Rather, they suggest that current mechanisms for public involvement are unsatisfactory. Consistently, countries that have

³ Institute on Governance. “Rapporteur’s Report: Roundtable on the Democratic Deficit: Citizen Engagement and Consultation.” March 2005.
http://www.ioq.ca/publications/2005_dem_deficit_roundtable.pdf.

undertaken citizen engagement exercises that are linked to the policy process have reported high rates of participant satisfaction. Evidence indicates that citizens are more interested in participating in politics if they feel that their input will make a difference. Institutionalizing public involvement could reinvigorate the Canadian polity by providing regular opportunities for citizens to have a meaningful input on salient policy issues.