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Youth outline vision for country

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They're rude, cynical and self-absorbed. They join gangs and pack guns. The vast majority don't vote or get involved in their community. They may be the most disengaged generation Canada has ever produced.

That is the picture of the nation's youth that emerges from this newspaper or any other. It's what teachers, police officers and social scientists say. It's what everybody thinks.

Except the kids.

Last fall, 150 of them were contacted, out of the blue, and invited to Ottawa — all expenses paid — to talk about the kind of country they wanted.

They'd been randomly selected by a polling firm to take part in a three-day dialogue for 18- to-25-years-olds, organized by Canadian Policy Research Networks (CPRN). They were assured the think-tank had no axe to grind and no agenda to promote. It simply believed young people's voices were missing from the national debate and it wanted to hear what they thought.

Most had never been to the nation's capital. Some had never flown. They arrived at the Marriott Hotel on Nov. 24, excited and wary.

Judy Watling, assistant director of the think-tank's public involvement program, remembers the opening session. "They were more confused than cynical," she said. "They weren't sure why they'd been picked. They didn't know what to expect. They'd never heard of anything like this.

"But when they realized no one was going to tell them what to think, they became more confident. It was a very respectful process."

She thinks that might be why the kids stepped so completely out of their stereotype. They shared their frustrations and ideas. They listened. They grappled with what they'd once considered adult issues. Watling was a bit surprised herself at the way their enthusiasm built over the three days.

The participants came from all parts of the country. They were roughly split along gender lines. Six were aboriginal, 22 belonged to visible minorities, 24 lived in rural communities and six had disabilities. They spanned the education spectrum, from high-school dropouts to PhD candidates. Some were studying, some were working and some were unemployed.

If it wasn't a perfect microcosm of Canadian youth, it was pretty close.

A workbook outlining the topics for discussion — learning, work, health, environment and their role in society — was sent to the participants in advance. Some had read it. Some hadn't.

But they quickly began to find themes around which they could coalesce:

- They felt they were being short-changed by an education system that prepared them for a job, not for life.
- It bothered them to see kids they knew — newcomers, aboriginal young people, students with disabilities and those from low-income families — falling by the wayside.
- They didn't understand why governments found it so difficult to clean up pollution, invest in renewable energy, promote green technology and get serious about conservation.
- They wanted an honest health-care debate, not one in which everybody tiptoed around issues such as privatization, user fees and rising costs.
- They found the political system impenetrable. The civics courses they took in school were no help. Neither were the candidates who popped up at election time, then vanished.
- They were willing to get involved in shaping their country if someone would show them how and take their ideas seriously.

"What they kept saying was we don't know who to talk to or how to get the doors open or even where they are," Watling said.

"It's not dissimilar from the message we hear from other groups." (CPRN has held roundtables, workshops and citizens' dialogues for 10 years.)

The think-tank has just published a 39-page report, outlining what young Canadians want and how they think it can be achieved (available at <http://www.cprn.org>).

None of their aspirations is unreasonable, none of their recommendations outlandish.

They want a pan-Canadian education system, in which students can move freely and have their credits recognized anywhere in the country.

They want the minimum wage increased so working people can lift themselves out of poverty.

They want to be taught how to get into the political system, not how boring and complicated it is.

They want bold action, not baby steps, on the environment.

There were differences and disagreements within the group. But no one went home feeling stifled or sidelined. In fact, most of the participants were eager to keep the dialogue going and to bring in their friends.

Maybe these were 144 highly unusual kids. Or maybe a lot of people are wrong about their generation.

Carol Goar's column appears Monday, Wednesday and Friday.

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