



Connecting Young People, Policy and Active Citizenship



Research Report National Dialogue and Summit Engaging Young Canadians

Mary Pat MacKinnon
Judy Watling

Executive Summary

May 2006

CPRN  RCRPP

Canadian Policy Research Networks Inc. www.cprn.org

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Canadian Policy Research Networks Inc. (CPRN) is a national not-for-profit research institute whose mission is to create knowledge and lead public dialogue and debate on social and economic issues important to the well-being of Canadians, in order to help build a more just, prosperous and caring society.

“Since my appointment as Governor General...I am moved to see just how strong and vibrant a country we are.

I have been particularly struck by the words of our young people and by their wealth of ideas. Young people who are looking to carve out their place and be heard. The new generation of Aboriginal entrepreneurs who are creating new opportunities. Young people in our Canadian Forces who, through their extraordinary efforts, offer a promise of hope for the oppressed. More than ever, our young people represent not only the promise of a brighter future, but also the vitality of our present.”

Her Excellency Governor General Michaëlle Jean, Speech from the Throne, April 4, 2006.

“We see Canada as a dynamic place to live in, full of activism, participation and inclusion. We want the government not to be something untouchable, but rather a community in which we not only hear what everyone has to say, but we truly listen and care about issues relevant to our people. We want citizens to know why they are paying taxes, to understand how the system works and to have the chance to have their voices heard in decision-making.”

Quote from Dialogue and Summit participant – November 2005

Foreword

When 144 randomly recruited young participants from all parts of Canada arrived at CPRN's Dialogue and Summit in Ottawa in late November, 2005, many thought they had little to offer to a conversation on government, learning, work, health and the environment. They didn't see the relevance of these issues in their lives. But as the days unfolded, that changed dramatically.

When provided with solid background information which laid out some context, and given some space and respect to have an informed discussion about public policy issues that were important to them, they began to see the many connections between policy decisions and their everyday lives. It was fascinating to watch as their confidence in their ability to contribute grew during the dialogue process. They realized that by exercising their rights and responsibilities as citizens, their voices could, in fact, be heard.

In short, they got the political bug. Over 90% said their experience was overwhelmingly positive and over 80% said they were more likely to become involved with public issues. At the end of the event, 80% wrote a letter to themselves making commitments for how they would try to build a better Canada. About 75% of those commitments involved becoming more politically engaged.

One participant told us after she returned home that she was sharing her experience with students in her community, and talking to them about the importance of staying in school, voting and enacting change. She also indicated she would be running for Parliament sometime in the future – incumbent beware! Several participants indicated they would be going back to school to finish their education. One said, "I need to know more to be able to understand what is happening in the country and to look after the future of my son."

They deeply appreciate how fortunate we are to be Canadian, but they don't see this country as perfect. They do want to be part of making it an even better place. And they are highly interested in the world around them, aware of the global impact of our decisions and actions, and concerned about those in need around the world.

Canada's next generation has a lot to offer. They have a heightened sense of responsibility for themselves and future generations. Their view of what *can be* is not radical, but the positive change they believe must happen to make the Canada they want requires action on the part of all actors in society - individuals, governments, businesses and communities.

CPRN is very grateful to all those young people who were part of the Dialogue and Summit. We wish we could have bottled that energy and enthusiasm which crackled through the hotel ballroom at the closing session on Sunday afternoon. We hope we have captured some of that in this report, and in two companion documents on access to education and youth entrepreneurship. We believe readers will see the value of tapping into the voices and perspectives of this next generation of Canadians as your organization, whatever its objectives, conducts its affairs. Policies and practices will be better, organizations will be healthier; and communities and society stronger. There is no down side.

Apathetic youth? No way! Our youth are engaged, passionate about Canada and have great ideas about what goals we need to have for Canada.

Sharon Manson Singer, Ph.D.
President

Executive Summary

Dialogue and Summit: context and objectives

Prompted by concern about an apparent democratic malaise in Canada, especially among younger citizens, Canadian Policy Research Networks (CPRN) brought together 144 young people aged 18 to 25, randomly selected, for a deliberative Dialogue and Summit with 40 community, public and private sector leaders. The November 24 -27 2005 event, facilitated by a team of experienced dialogue professionals working with younger facilitators, invited participants to talk together about the kind of Canada they want, what choices and trade-offs they are prepared to make as citizens and what they and others need to do to make their vision happen. Participants discussed four issues that young Canadians had identified as especially important: learning, work, health and the environment.

CPRN's objective was to bring the voices of young adults into Canada's national conversation about our future together. Our hopes - to come away with a better understanding of what would motivate young people to become more engaged in public life (including what needs to change within our institutions to encourage more active citizenship); insight into what is needed to better engage them in decision making processes and effective policies that reflect their values; and guidance for CPRN's future research agenda and efforts to engage young people in our work - were realized.

This Report

This report complements "*Towards an Action Plan for Canada*", (March 2006), which captures participants' vision and values and their recommended actions for all of society's actors, including themselves (the complete document is available at www.cprn.org). Building on their Action Plan, this report identifies six cross cutting themes emerging from the Dialogue, offers our perspectives on related implications, and suggests policy and research actions for consideration by policy makers and community leaders. It also outlines CPRN's intentions and commitments post Dialogue. The Appendices provide additional information on participant demographics, a matrix of actions, roles and responsibilities, pre and post questionnaire and evaluation results, and research references.

Participants' Vision for Canada

Their created vision is ambitious and compelling.

In our Canada:

- More is expected of citizenship and citizens are taken seriously.
- Everyone in society (citizens, students, workers, employers, educators, businesses, politicians) accepts responsibility to contribute to a more equitable, sustainable, healthier and more knowledgeable society.
- All Canadians can access quality public services that meet national standards and also address provincial/territorial needs.
- People don't face barriers in education, work and health care when they move across provincial/territorial boundaries.
- Our two official languages and our multicultural character are embraced and we have the ability to communicate with ease across cultural communities.
- We value diversity among Canadians while reinforcing our common bonds of citizenship.
- We take a long-term view of what's needed and are prepared to invest in tomorrow as well as today.

Their vision was informed by the following guiding values that were interwoven throughout their deliberations: **accountability and responsibility, long-term sustainability and prevention, equity and efficiency.**

Key Themes: policy and research implications

The six cross-cutting themes that emerged from the participants' action plan are presented in the table below.

Key Themes

- *Build connections for a stronger Canada*
- *Update Canadian governance: responsibilities, accountabilities, inclusion and participation*
- *Sustainability – strive for holistic, long-term policy decisions*
- *Achieve equity and efficiency in the federation*
- *Connect education, quality of life for all and productivity*
- *Knowledge and information as catalysts for active citizenship*

CPRN offers its perspectives on related implications and suggests policy or research actions for consideration by policy makers and community leaders.

Build connections for a stronger Canada

While, participants are clearly proud of their provincial, territorial, or cultural identities, their passion for Canada took centre stage, reinforced by the discovery that despite their diversity, they share so much in common. However, they believe that much more should be done to promote connections among Canadians. This led to a desire to improve bilingualism and increase opportunities for inter-regional travel and learning.

- *Increase support for pan-Canadian experiences.* Governments should partner with communities and the private sector to offer opportunities for exposure to and learning about Canada's rich diversity.
- *Treat bilingualism as a national and personal asset.* More research is required to assess the limitations of our current approaches and promote best practices from Canada and abroad.

Update Canadian governance: responsibilities, accountabilities, inclusion and participation

There is a deep sense of reciprocity embedded in this group of participants despite their self-professed lack of knowledge about how Canada is governed. In their view there cannot be rights without responsibilities. While they emphasized the individual citizen's role to act responsibly, they are also looking for a re-structuring of political practices and institutions to foster public participation.

- *Make democratic renewal a necessity.* Political institutions, especially parties, should seize this opportunity to respond to this younger generation's desire for more relevant politics.
- *Foster citizenship skills through a revitalized civics education strategy.* The Council of Ministers of Education of Canada (CMEC) is well placed to convene a national working group to develop a strategy to strengthen the role of the education system in preparing and supporting students for active citizenship.

- *Look to youth for leadership.* Governments should develop action plans to ensure that policies and programs promote the full integration of young Canadians into society and report regularly to legislatures on progress in implementing plans.

Sustainability: strive for holistic, long-term policy decisions

These young Canadians recognize the interconnectedness of many issues facing society and appreciate the complexity of policy making. They are concerned that governments and business are trapped in short-term thinking and want decision-making to reflect longer-term, intergenerational and international dimensions.

- *Collaborative policy-making should be the norm.* Initiatives like shared government services and single window delivery offer opportunities for governments to be more responsive to citizens' needs and increase efficiencies.
- *Measure success holistically.* Regular assessments and reports should include a broad set of indicators that go beyond the GDP in order to put sustainability at the heart of decision-making.
- *Take bold environmental action.* This is a win-win scenario for business and public sector leaders. They should build on young people's appetite for stronger action now.
- *Explore different ways of managing the public-private delivery interface.* Governments should facilitate an open discussion that emphasizes importance of high quality, timely and effective health care – public or private. This discussion needs to explore with Canadians the balance we want to strike between what we value as individuals and what we value as a country.

Achieve equity and efficiency in the federation

The perceived lack of standards for employment practices, professional and trade accreditation, health care, primary and secondary education and environmental regulation struck participants as unfair and inefficient. For these young people, there should be no question about Canadians' rights to be able to move freely across the country to pursue jobs, learning or retirement options.

- *Develop common standards for critical public services.* Joint federal-provincial-territorial mechanisms and initiatives, which include firm timetables and agendas, tangible goals, and transparent reporting, are needed.
- *Policy frameworks that enable mobility.* Governments, educators, trade and professional bodies need to work together to develop common standards for accreditation that facilitate mobility of workers and for educational credits that support student mobility.
- *Improved mechanisms for governance of the federation.* Establishing mechanisms such as regular First Ministers Meetings, with a commitment to transparency, accountability and collaboration would go a long way to strengthen public confidence. Mechanisms are also needed to give legislatures a stronger role in the oversight of FPT agreements.

Connect education, quality of life for all and productivity

Participants' commitment to equality led to their insistence that the education system is failing far too many students. They see this inadequacy as not only a human rights issue but also one that affects overall quality of life and productivity.

- *Re-examine financial aid to ensure that no qualified students miss out on post secondary education because of financial limitations.* Governments need to collaborate to create a coherent and integrated system of post-secondary student financing. A new

balance in the funding of research and improvement of teaching may be needed to ensure that students are not being short-changed.

- *Enable human potential.* Governments need to lead efforts to eliminate unfair barriers that prevent newcomers from working in their chosen fields. Governments and employers need to improve the situation of low wage workers by acting on a balanced strategy that features increased minimum wages coupled with wage supplements and health benefits.
- *Increase the diversity of opportunities to prepare for jobs after high school.* Governments, educators and employers should partner to strengthen vocational and entrepreneurial options. This would help avert future labour market shortages, encourage innovation and provide young people with appropriate choices to match their diverse abilities and inclinations.
- *Promote higher quality workplaces.* Employers and governments are urged to create the appropriate conditions for increased investments in workplace training and the development of quality workplaces.

Knowledge and information as catalysts for active citizenship

Young citizens have high expectations of governments and business to provide reliable information to inform their personal choices and behaviour and to support active citizenship, including being able to hold governments and business to account. Participants believe that people who have access to good and timely information are more likely to make better life choices.

- *Public information and reporting should focus on citizens' needs.* Public and private institutions should engage the public to determine what information is meaningful and useful, and how it should be delivered and evaluated.

Post dialogue: CPRN commitments and activities

A key motivation underlying CPRN's interest in the dialogue was to apply what we learned from the young people to inform our policy research agenda. To that end, a number of research projects and initiatives are underway and planned. A snapshot of these include: identifying the characteristics of successful skills upgrading initiatives; assessing the state of career planning services in Canada; clarifying the distinction between 'private' and 'public' and between 'financing' and 'delivery' to inform ongoing discussion about how to sustain our health care system; supporting democratic renewal efforts in Canada through a series of research focused on youth and citizenship; and developing a CPRN youth internship program.

In conclusion, these young participants are intensely committed to Canada. They want to build a better country and they want to be part of that rebuilding process. All Canada has to do is open its doors to this new energy and talent.