
A Growing Appetite for Citizen Engagement in Canada and Abroad

By

Judy Watling, Assistant Director

Public Involvement Network, Canadian Policy Research Networks

There are encouraging signs lately of a growing appetite for meaningful citizen engagement in shaping public policy. Last month, CPRN attended two events in Canada that shone the international spotlight on public involvement. Both brought together researchers, practitioners and policy-makers to share knowledge and discuss public involvement initiatives.

The first event – a co-sponsored conference about Value-based Electoral Reform by Queen’s School of Policy Studies and the Ontario Citizens’ Assembly on Electoral Reform – attracted both Canadian and international experts in electoral reform. The Ontario Citizens’ Assembly (with its parallel Student Electoral Assembly engaging high school students across the province) and the British Columbia Citizens’ Assembly that took place last year, are innovative citizen engagement initiatives that are being followed with great interest by international communities in the fields of political science, citizen participation and deliberation practices. Find out more about this conference and the Citizens’ Assemblies in Ontario and British Columbia at www.cprn.org/en/doc.cfm?doc=1589.

The second event, the International Association of Public Participation’s (IAP2) annual conference (Montreal, November 12-14, 2006) brought together over 300 people from across Canada, the United States, Australia, Africa and the United Kingdom. IAP2’s mandate is to help “organizations and communities around the world improve their decisions by involving those people who are affected by those decisions.” Members are motivated by their vision where “public participation is a dominant feature of the political, economic and cultural life of all nations.” See www.cprn.org/en/doc.cfm?doc=1590 for more information about this conference and IAP2.

In addition to these initiatives in Canada, CPRN is following citizen engagement practices in other countries including a multi-phased initiative in the European Union that involves randomly recruited citizens from all member states. The EU and its partner foundations are bringing citizens together to inform policy-makers as they chart a new course for Europe. In October 2006, eight randomly selected citizens from each of the 25 countries were brought together for a weekend to determine which issues were most important to them and to identify their expectations of Europe. The top three issues identified by the participants are: Environment and Energy; Social Welfare and Family; and Global Role, Outside Borders and Immigration. These issues will be discussed in-depth by citizens in each member state during winter 2007. In May 2007, citizens from

all states will gather to share their insights, and explore common ground and differences in the national outcomes. Results will be shared broadly with the public. Read more about this exciting approach to decision-making at www.european-citizens-consultations.eu.

CPRN was recently contacted by the Hope Institute Foundation, an independent think tank in South Korea, led by Park Won Soon, recipient of the 2006 Ramon Magsaysay Award for Public Service (see www.makehope.org). Similar to CPRN, Hope works to convene ordinary citizens to “devise pragmatic, policy-oriented ideas to guide and strengthen South Korea’s ongoing democratization.” We are exploring opportunities to learn from each other’s work in our efforts to encourage and support greater citizen engagement in public policy.

CPRN is excited about the growing interest in citizen engagement. We have long been a strong promoter and practitioner of bringing the public’s voice into policy decisions¹ and see this as a necessary part of a robust and modern democracy. Our deliberative dialogues with randomly recruited citizens have covered a range of important issues that have serious implications for society today and for future generations. The dialogue results provide decision-makers with citizens’ value-based choices on tough policy issues. We also commission and conduct research to strengthen our collective knowledge and capacity for public involvement. Our research papers and dialogue reports are all available free of charge on our Web site at www.cprn.org.

In the near future, we’ll be telling you about our new research program with leading Canadian academics designed to better understand youth civic and democratic engagement.

¹ Recent CPRN dialogues include the future of health care (for the Romanow Royal Commission), the long-term management of nuclear waste (for the Nuclear Waste Management Organization), and how we share public funds between different levels of government through equalization and other transfer programs (for the Council of the Federation Advisory Panel). We have asked Canadians of all ages, and young people in particular, about their vision for Canada and how to achieve it.