

The Youth/Ballot Box Disconnect

What's up with young Canadians and the ballot box? Young voters are particularly reluctant to take part in the electoral process. You might think that the stereotypical description of youth as apathetic or irresponsible is the reason behind this. But CPRN's experience with young people paints a very different portrait.

On March 7, 2007, CPRN held a workshop with a diverse group of young men and women to explore what participation and citizenship means to them and hear their ideas about what can be done to encourage and support more young adults to participate in civic and political activities.

The workshop probed a range of questions including: *What does participation mean to you? What does it mean to be a citizen? What opportunities and barriers encourage and discourage your participation?*

The spark for this workshop came from CPRN's 2005 National Youth Dialogue and Summit with 144 randomly-recruited young Canadians, which led to the realization that our participation models and practices need to change if they are to support young people to become and remain civically and politically active.

Here's a taste of what we learned from the workshop:

- Developing a **personal identity** gives confidence to engage – you need to know who you are and where you stand. Identity is shaped, in part, by connections with others.
- Young people are **feeling the burden of mistakes** by generations older than them. They feel they are expected to save the world, reverse climate change and find a way to make health care sustainable. To paraphrase one participant – “we're told to fix things but the tools we get are a few nails and no hammer.”
- **Participation should bring results.** Volunteering for a cause or a community need gives immediate results in contrast to formal politics.
- Young people are turned off by **politicians fighting to score media points** instead of focusing on the real issues with the people who elected them.
- They feel a **personal responsibility to be informed** about issues in order to be active. As one participant said,

“Politics is about everything...you cannot escape it so you might as well understand it.”

- **Families and peers** are important influences on active involvement. Many young people see the Internet as a sub-peer group.
- **Political parties are seen as boring**, old, partisan and not at the forefront of taking action on society's challenges.
- Politics should be more about the challenges we face and that **engagement between elections is missing the mark.**
- **Media can be as much a barrier as an incentive** to participation because of superficial or negative political coverage.



Participants from the Youth Civic and Political Participation workshop held at CPRN on March 7, 2007.

Here's what they think needs to change:

1. **How youth learn about and are prepared for active citizenship: « Il faut ouvrir nos horizons! »**
 - Civics education needs to start earlier, be part of all courses and linked to real issues that are important to youth and their communities.
 - Schools should be a safe place to **openly** discuss challenging issues, learn about different points of view, and develop skills for critical analysis and problem solving.



- Education should focus on responsibilities as well as rights.
- Learning by doing works better than lecturing. As one participant noted, “You cannot educate an interest – you can only nurture it.”

2. Political institutions and practices

- Political institutions need to better reflect youth, women, Aboriginal people, and our ethnocultural diversity. Have an electoral system that makes everyone’s vote equally meaningful.
- Political parties need to proactively reach out to youth AND focus more on policies and less on the electoral machine.
- Politicians need to be visible and involved face to face with their communities and not only at election time. Discuss real issues with young people and not just harp on the need to vote.

3. Supporting Indigenous youth engagement

- Our political institutions and processes need to do a better job of reflecting the Indigenous perspective.
- Much can be learned from Indigenous values in addressing societal challenges (e.g. environment, human rights, community governance).
- Students need better education about Indigenous peoples’ history, traditions and realities and their role in Canada.
- Youth-led groups need resources and mentors to provide active spaces, not just run-down buildings, for youth to interact with each other and their communities.

4. How we think about and support youth participation

- Youth need to have real responsibilities and opportunities to influence decisions. Token engagement only leads to frustration and alienation.
- Governments and other organizations need to demonstrate they care about the issues youth are interested in and use language and tools that youth can relate to.
- Young people are not a homogeneous group. Different options and approaches are needed to appeal to youth in the city or rural areas, and youth with different backgrounds and different interests.
- Families need to ensure exposure to news, discuss current affairs and help youth develop critical thinking skills.

These young people had much more to say – many found the day too short. We hope to build on their ideas and offer some concrete recommendations for policy and community actions to support young people in becoming active citizens. In the coming months you will see these ideas reflected in a

series of research papers CPRN commissioned to explore a variety of issues related to youth civic and democratic participation.

For more information on the project, contact Mary Pat MacKinnon at mmackinnon@cprn.org.

What Does a Good Job Look Like in the 21st Century?

Many Canadian employers are pondering the answer to that question. The issue for them is rapidly becoming how to attract and retain good workers. It is a question they have only recently begun to ask, because not that long ago, Canadians were worried about unemployment and economic insecurity.

Over the past decade, Canada’s economy has strengthened. Governments are now boasting about surpluses and unemployment is relatively low. Employers are facing the challenges posed by an ageing workforce and the inevitability of slower growth of the labour force. These factors combine to make it a perfect time to talk about quality of work – not just good pay and job security – but the elements that make a job truly satisfying for the person doing it.

CPRN made a first move into the area in 2001 with the report *What’s a Good Job? The Importance of Employment Relationships*. Our research at that time showed that high-quality jobs are good not only for workers, but also for business and society. This also led to the launch of CPRN’s www.jobquality.ca Web site, which provides information on the quality of employment in Canada.



But as Canada’s economy and labour markets continued to rapidly evolve, it is evident that fresh research is needed in order to make the quality of work-life a strategic focus for business and a public policy priority.

To meet these challenges, CPRN is launching a new project called 21st Century Job Quality Trends: New Opportunities to Achieve What Canadians Want. It will examine these issues:

- Work values within and across generations
- Stress and work-life balance
- Healthy workplaces and productivity
- Careers and job security
- Corporate culture, ethics and values
- Trust, loyalty and commitment
- Skills, knowledge and learning
- Work-retirement transitions



The research team is led by Graham Lowe, president of The Graham Lowe Group Inc., former Work Network Director and author of several CPRN publications including *What's a Good Job? The Importance of Employment Relationships* (with Grant Schellenberg, 2001). The project will be overseen by Ron Saunders and research assistance will be provided by Richard Brisbois.

Partnerships

The project is funded by Sun Life Financial, BMO, Bell Canada, Alberta Employment, Immigration and Industry, and Mr. Allan Markin (Chair of Canadian Natural Resources Limited). For more information on the project, contact Ron Saunders at rsaunders@cprn.org.

More Babies Please?

The days of worrying about a population explosion are gone. In Canada, the reverse is true – Canada's population is set to decline, partly because we're not having *enough* babies. When asked by pollsters, most Canadians say they think having two or three children is ideal – but in fact our families are having one or maybe two. With a birth rate of 1.5, Canada's population will begin to shrink by 2030.



This demographic reality means Canada faces a difficult future: our workforce is ageing, and seniors will outnumber children in a decade.

For years, immigration has been considered the best way to correct the imbalance. The level of immigration has never been higher – but most new Canadians are in their 30s, and Statistics Canada estimates it would take three million immigrants a year to have an impact on the age structure of the population. Later retirement has also been considered, but older workers remaining employed for a few years beyond age 65 is not a sufficient solution.

A third solution has been largely ignored by Canada, but actively pursued – with some success – by other countries: establishing family-friendly policies to encourage and support women who want to work and have children at the same time. France has put the breaks on declining birth rates, announcing in January 2007 that the total fertility rate is now 2 children per woman – a record high not seen in that country in over 30 years. Many interpret this as the result of a commitment by the French government to implement family-friendly policies that allow women to work (81% of French women work) and have children. Social scientists specifically cite financial incentives as playing a sizeable role in determining fertility decisions. In most Nordic countries, which also boast high rates of working women and family-friendly policies, the total fertility rates are in the range of 1.8.

The countries that have studied the problem of falling birth rates understand that there is no single policy prescription. The countries have found that it is a mix of policies that will ensure a sustainable population base. Canada has paid relatively little attention to the issue of sustainable population and – outside Quebec – none has been paid to the issue of fertility.

National Roundtable on Sustainable Population

CPRN is holding an agenda-setting national roundtable, tentatively scheduled for May 2007, to launch an examination of a comprehensive approach to sustainable population in Canada. In partnerships with the University of Western Ontario's Population Studies Centre and the Sprott School of Business at Carleton University, CPRN will host a day-long structured dialogue session to bring together a range of stakeholders dealing with all facets of population policy, in particular immigration, fertility and labour market issues.

If you are interested and would like to learn more about this project, please contact David Hay at dhay@cprn.org. Information about the project is available on our Web site at www.cprn.org/en/doc.cfm?doc=1628.

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In Their Space: A Commitment to Engage the Next Generation

Governments at all levels are facing an enormous challenge: how to connect with, and be relevant to, the YouTube, MySpace and Facebook generation. As we reported earlier in this edition of *NetworkNews*, CPRN's continuing dialogue with Canada's young people is turning out some interesting data which is, at the same time, both confirming and fracturing the generalizations applied to this generation.

This next generation of movers and shakers – the kids who today are clicking all over these social networking sites – has bent the technology to serve their wants and needs. As they move into voting age, they will be expecting the same type of technological interaction with their governments and elected officials. It will be their price for engagement in the political process. And they are going to be seeking real and direct involvement in decisions that affect their lives.

As soon as these teenagers and twenty-somethings have to contemplate paying more taxes, they will want to have a direct say in how their money is spent, and on-line accountability for program expenditures. They have come to expect the immediate information and instantaneous communication that today's technologies offer them – such as cell phones and the Internet. They are experts at recording and sending out their own ideas worldwide. When this next generation of leaders goes looking for accountability as tax-paying adults, they are going to want it fast, accessible and unmediated.

Governments have traditionally used limited means and old technology to connect with citizens to determine what their reactions are to particular proposed policies or programs. The tool kit ranges from passive information sharing (letters, newspaper notices, television ads, polling and Web sites) to direct consultations with stakeholder groups and sometimes even with citizen groups in forums such as "town hall" meetings.

The information and opinions collected from these consultations then often disappear into the black hole of governmental bureaucracy. Sometimes there is a thick and impenetrable public report, but often there is not. In this process, the voices of Canadians are distilled, interpreted and synthesized into something called feedback. At best it is a limited sampling of the views of those consulted; at worst, it is a highly filtered message that does not represent the true views of Canadians.

Governments are going to have to take their citizen engagement approaches to version 2.0, if they want to truly involve the next generation.

CPRN's experience in connecting with young people has validated our approach to policy research. They have told us they want to be engaged, but often don't know how. When they do put forward their views, they are most comfortable doing it in a neutral, non-partisan environment. CPRN's *modus operandi* is to ask Canadian citizens what they think about the inevitable trade-offs involved in choosing among policy options. Their response provides us with a unique base of knowledge on what the public believes is right for Canadians.

While a long way from being MySpace for research, CPRN is doing what it can to foster broad citizen engagement. Our Web site is "everyone's space," as all our research is freely accessible and easily downloadable. And to make our message even clearer, our new Web site will also offer video – so you can see me or our Directors of Research talking about our work. Other technology changes are in the works and we want your input about what would be most useful for you.

We think the next generation of leaders is vitally interested in our country, and has a lot to say. We are listening. Text me your response at 613-562-0396 – or you can e-mail me at: president@cprn.org.

Sharon Manson Singer, Ph.D.
President

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