

# Synthesis Report

## CPRN Connecting with Canadians Conversations

November 2007 to January 2008

**Connecting with Canadians**  
 *shaping our future*

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### Introduction

Canadian Policy Research Networks (CPRN), established in 1994, is an independent, not-for-profit national public policy think tank. CPRN's mission is to create knowledge and lead dialogue and debate on the issues that are critical to the social and economic well-being of Canadians. Its goal is to help make Canada a fairer, more prosperous and more inclusive society.

CPRN is launching a new research framework, *Connecting with Canadians*, based on the priorities and values of Canadians as identified in CPRN deliberative dialogues and research. At the core of the framework is the relationship of Canadians with their government(s) and the expectations and obligations that underlie it.

### Methodology

Dr. Sharon Manson Singer, CPRN President, held a series of conversations with community and business leaders in centres across Canada from November 2007 to January 2008. A local member of the CPRN Board of Directors hosted each conversation. Dr. Manson Singer provided an overview of the *Connecting with Canadians* framework and the five policy challenges that CPRN identified as critical to shaping Canada's future:

- **Citizenship** – Engaging more Canadians, especially young people, in civic affairs.
- **Diversity and Canadian values** – Celebrating and enriching Canada's diversity through Canadian values that support working and living together in safe and vibrant communities.
- **Productivity and skills** – Providing Canadian youth and adults with the lifelong learning opportunities needed to prepare them for careers to fulfil their aspirations.
- **Health and aging population** – Achieving better integration of health and social services, especially to meet the needs of our aging population.
- **The environment** – Making Canada a green leader successfully balancing environmental, economic and social goals while ensuring that all Canadians can participate in the greening of our communities.

Participants then shared their thoughts and advice on the framework and the challenges. This report synthesizes the key themes of these conversations. The following conversations were held:

- November 9, 2007 – St. John's, NL
- December 3, 2007 – Victoria, BC
- December 4, 2007 – Vancouver, BC
- December 5, 2007 – Montreal, QC
- December 11, 2007 – Toronto, ON
- January 8, 2008 – Edmonton, AB
- January 11, 2008 – Halifax, NS
- January 15, 2008 – Toronto, ON

## Summary of Key Themes

### Overview

Participants in these conversations are leaders in their communities who care deeply about Canada. They want to see action to achieve a more prosperous and inclusive society.

There was general support for the *Connecting with Canadians* framework of citizen expectations and obligations and for the importance of the five policy challenges that CPRN had identified. The challenges of youth engagement, diversity, and productivity and skills development elicited the most discussion.

Participants felt strongly that governments need to pay more attention to research evidence in formulating policy, and that they need to act to address long-standing issues. Participants urged CPRN to be innovative and proactive in conducting and disseminating its research to bring issues to the attention of elected officials, senior public servants, community and business leaders, media and the general public.

### Leadership

An overriding consideration expressed in all conversations was a perceived lack of leadership to address the five challenges in a manner consistent with values that Canadians hold. Canadians want their leaders to act to address the challenges we face. A number of participants suggested Canadians needed to be prepared to move forward and add their voices to push our leaders into action.

Time and again, participants expressed disappointment in the lack of leadership by governments on issues such as productivity, skills development and training, and health care reform. They noted that these and other issues had been intensively studied, but concerted and effective action by governments to address these challenges had yet to take place. This lack of action has contributed to growing disengagement in public affairs, especially amongst young people.

### The Role of the Public Sector

Participants placed a high value on the role of the public sector. Major issues like climate change, congestion, and Aboriginal poverty cannot be dealt with through individual responsibility. Rather, they require a leadership from the public sector in enabling meaningful solutions.

### Canada's Place in the World

Participants were conscious of the importance of Canada's place in the world. The values that drive domestic policy decisions reflect on Canada and its place and role in the international community. Addressing the five challenges requires an "international lens" in terms of the policy directions that are developed and implemented. Further, the policy responses to the challenges need to consider globalization as a continuing and powerful economic and social force.

## Aboriginal People's Issues

Many participants expressed concern at the lack of significant progress made on Aboriginal issues. They recognized the failings of government and communities to find workable policy solutions to support Aboriginal communities. CPRN was urged to incorporate Aboriginal issues into its research agenda.

## Key Comments on the Five Challenges

### 1. Citizenship

Participants expressed a great deal of concern about the failure of our governments to engage young people in the political process. Participants urged political leaders and institutions to engage youth “in their language” and use their technology.

A number of participants suggested that the school system is contributing to the disengagement because it is not adequately interesting young people in civic affairs.

*We are not talking to youth in their language. It is more than getting them to vote; we need to get them engaged in issues from their perspective. We need to spend more time identifying the perspective of youth.* – St. John's

*We need to do politics differently to engage young people; the youth mode of relating with world and their values are different from ours.* – Montreal

*Kids are not disengaged; political leaders are not talking to them. There is a need to show young people what's in it for them.* – Edmonton

*Civic literacy is appalling in Canada.* – Toronto

### 2. Diversity and Canadian Values

Participants stressed the importance of fostering and maintaining an inclusive society, but several cautioned against using the word “accommodation.” It is about all living together.

Many felt that in order to move forward we need to define what it means to be a Canadian today. We need to build a new vision of citizenship in Canada.

There was a great deal of concern about the difficulty that new immigrants often have in finding jobs that match their skills and experience. We need to do better to help new immigrants obtain recognition for their qualifications.

Some participants raised the issue of maintaining the vibrancy of rural communities as part of a broad concept of a diverse society. People recognized that out-migration is making it very difficult for some communities to survive, and that the trend of people moving from rural to urban Canada is likely to continue, but some participants argued that there are opportunities for innovative economic development in rural Canada.

*There are no more grateful citizens than new ones – we can learn a lot from them, yet we don't make life easy for them.*

– Halifax

### 3. Productivity and Skills

Participants expressed frustration that governments have not taken concerted action to address seriously productivity issues and skills shortages. Many called for a comprehensive, national strategy that provides Canada's young people and adults with the lifelong learning opportunities needed to prepare them for careers to fulfil their aspirations throughout their lives. Failure to address these issues also reduces Canada's economic capacity to support its social programs.

Given our demographics (aging population, labour shortages) and the value of the Canadian dollar, there is an imperative to increase productivity.

Areas where participants felt Canada needed to do better included:

- Making productivity a high priority;
- Fostering innovation, both in industry and in social policy;
- Improving access to and quality of early childhood education (which wastes the potential of our children and also can make it difficult for women to participate fully in the labour market);
- Improving adult literacy;
- Improving access to education and training in rural and remote parts of Canada;
- Reducing earnings inequality;
- Anticipating future skills needs better, so that people can get the education and training that the economy needs; and
- Retraining older workers, especially those laid-off as a result of the recent downturn in the manufacturing sector.

*There is a productivity gap – (we're) getting cleaned by our competitors.*

– Halifax

*Productivity needs to be a higher priority.*

– Victoria

*We have fallen down in the apprenticeship and skilled trades. We are going to Mexico to get people to do work.*

– St. John's

*Early childhood development is needed as a start to eliminating poverty.*

– Vancouver

## 4. Health and Aging Population

Canadians place a high value on sustaining a high quality, publicly-funded health care system. However, some participants in our *Conversations with Canadians* felt that, despite past studies and ongoing debate, we do not have a shared vision for health care and health promotion in Canada.

Many participants expressed a view that the critical issue is not private versus public health care delivery: we already have a mix, and most physicians are private practitioners. What is missing is public delivery of multidisciplinary preventive care, and better coordination among different parts of the health system.

Some participants also questioned whether public funding of health care should remain sacrosanct – whether there isn't room for some private funding.

*The public/private funding issue is a red herring that makes us forget about everything else; it's not the issue.*  
– Vancouver

## 5. The Environment

Concern over climate change and its potential social and economic impacts has made the environment a “top of mind” issue in Canada. Among participants in the *Conversations with Canadians*, the strongest concerns were expressed in Vancouver, where people noted the possibility that climate change could destroy the city's suburbs.

Participants expressed a number of different ideas about how to address climate change including implementing a carbon tax and promoting “green” innovations in the agriculture sector.

Some participants raised questions about how quickly we can expect industry to adjust its practices: quick adjustment may mean higher costs for business and for consumers. Are we ready for that?

*Business can be engaged in going green; the question is how green.* – Vancouver

Overall, the *Conversations with Canadians*, like the deliberative dialogues that CPRN has conducted with randomly selected citizens, illustrate a great deal of commonality across the country about the kind of Canada that Canadians want. They also indicate a strong desire for action by our leaders to address the challenges facing the country today.

