

Citizens' Dialogue on Canada's Future: A 21st Century Social Contract

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Executive Summary

“...today that pride of being Canadian was rekindled. I didn’t realize to what extent we actually do have many shared values which are really high values and I think we are truly a unique people and we should be proud of ourselves...” (Thunder Bay)

In the fall of 2002, CPRN and its partner in this project, Viewpoint Learning, invited a representative sample of Canadians to participate in a unique experiment. We invited these citizens to take part in one of ten day-long dialogue sessions to consider Canada’s future and to create their own vision for “The Kind of Canada We Want” – looking ten years ahead. Then we asked them to reflect on how that vision could be achieved and to tell us who should be responsible for making it happen. This report describes what they said and shows that Canadians are ready to revise the roles and responsibilities of governments, business, communities and citizens themselves to suit the circumstances of the 21st century.

These updated roles and responsibilities form a new unwritten social contract to shape Canada’s future. What is new about it can be summarized in four key points:

- 1. Markets are no longer seen as separate from and even opposed to civil society – an assumption that helped create the welfare state. Instead, to a surprising degree, markets are now seen as an integral part of a working society, serving public as well as private interests, with market values being integrated into Canadians’ notions of civil society and social equity in a unique and compelling way. At the same time citizens are pragmatic about the limitations of both markets and governments.**
- 2. Citizens see themselves as more active participants in governance. They have moved toward greater self-reliance and beyond deference to demanding a voice. Hidden beneath a thin crust of cynicism lies a keen desire for more active citizen involvement in public affairs. Citizens insist on greater accountability on the part of governments, business and other institutions and are willing to assume greater responsibility and accountability themselves. They want to see more responsive governments that foster ongoing dialogue with and between citizens.**
- 3. Canadians’ support for diversity is repositioned in light of the experience of the last two decades. People are searching for a “moral compass.” They have learned that when diversity is treated as an end in itself, it can conflict with core Canadian values. So, their respect for diversity is strongly affirmed, but is now seen as an important part of (and limited by) a broader set of core Canadian values.**
- 4. Canadians share a remarkably consistent set of values from coast to coast. In a number of respects these values are also distinctively different from those of the U.S. - for example, with respect to the role of government, the balance between individual and community, the attitude to the rest of the world, and Canada's reliance on social**

norms rather than legalism and litigation. This distinctive values base provides an essential foundation on which Canadians and their governments can build a different community north of the 49th parallel, notwithstanding the economic integration of North America.

This project used the ChoiceWork Dialogue methodology, developed by Viewpoint Learning based on the research of its Chairman, Daniel Yankelovich. This methodology is designed to probe how citizens' views evolve as they work through difficult policy choices in dialogue with each other and seek to reconcile those views with their deeper values. It is described briefly in Box A (on the next page) and in Chapter 1 of the report.

To help stimulate citizen dialogue, each dialogue group (with about 40 participants) was invited to consider four possible future directions for Canada, and to engage in

dialogue on how well each future matched their own value orientation. The four scenarios (see Chapter 2) were:

1. Emphasize the market
2. Emphasize civil society and social equity
3. Emphasize traditional values and accountability
4. Emphasize diversity and choice.

To make their dialogue more concrete, citizens also were asked to concentrate on four specific policy areas:

- Economic development
- International development
- Poverty and social marginalization
- Environmental and health risks.

Their conclusions are summarized in Chapter 3.

Box A: The Methodology

Viewpoint Learning's ChoiceWork Dialogue methodology differs from polls and focus groups in its purpose, advance preparation, and depth of inquiry.

- **Purpose.** ChoiceWork Dialogues are designed to do what polls and focus groups cannot do and were never developed to do. While polls and focus groups provide an accurate snapshot of people's current thinking, ChoiceWork Dialogues are designed to predict the future direction of people's views on important issues where they have not completely made up their minds, or where changed circumstances create new challenges that need to be recognized and addressed. Under these conditions (which apply to most major issues), people's top-of-mind opinions are highly unstable, and polls and focus groups can be very misleading. ChoiceWork Dialogues enable people to develop their own fully worked-through views on such issues (in dialogue with their peers) even if they previously have not given it much thought. By engaging representative samples of the population in this way, ChoiceWork Dialogues provide unique insight into how people's views change as they learn, and can be used to identify areas of potential public support where leaders can successfully implement policies consonant with people's core values.
- **Advance Preparation.** ChoiceWork Dialogues require highly trained facilitators and above all, the preparation of special workbooks. The workbooks brief people on the issues. They formulate a manageable number of research-based scenarios, which are presented as a series of values-based choices, and they lay out the pros and cons of each scenario in a manner that permits participants to work through how they really think and feel about each one. This tested workbook format enables citizens to absorb and apply complex information quickly.
- **Depth of Inquiry.** Polls and focus groups avoid changing people's minds, while ChoiceWork Dialogues are designed to explore how and why people's minds change as they learn. While little or no learning on the part of the participants occurs in the course of conducting a poll or focus group, ChoiceWork Dialogues are characterized by a huge amount of learning. ChoiceWork Dialogues are day-long, highly structured dialogues – 24 times as long as the average poll and 4 times as long as the average focus group. Typically, participants spend the morning familiarizing themselves with the scenarios and their pros and cons and developing (in dialogue with each other) their vision of what they would like to have happen in the future. They spend the afternoons testing their preferences against the hard and often painful tradeoffs they would need to make to realize their values. To encourage learning, the ChoiceWork methodology is based on dialogue rather than debate – this is how public opinion really forms, by people talking with friends, neighbours and co-workers. These 8-hour sessions allow intense social learning, and both quantitative and qualitative measures are used to determine how and why people's views change as they learn.

Source: Viewpoint Learning Inc., 2003

I. Integrating Market Values and Social Equity

Citizens no longer see markets as separate from and even opposed to civil society (an assumption on which the modern welfare state was based). Instead, they see the market as serving public as well as private interests. Markets enable citizens to earn a living and to take care of their own; they enable communities to thrive. Healthy markets, in turn, depend on well-educated and trained people, stable communities and families, a basic level of trust reinforced by reliable systems of laws and accounting, supportive social policies, adequate market incomes and much more. This is not the view of the market championed by some classical economists or business advocates. Rather, citizens see economic development as a bottom-up enterprise, requiring collaboration by governments, business, education institutions and communities themselves.

At the same time, citizens are pragmatic about the limitations of both markets and governments. There is no support, in any region of Canada, for government subsidies to industries that do not meet the market test. Instead, citizens suggest that communities should be given support to develop economic projects only so long as they can meet that test and, if communities are not economically sustainable, people should be supported to move to areas of better opportunity. At the same time, citizens have no confidence in the ability of markets to self-regulate when issues of

environment, health and safety are at stake. They are clear that governments have a fundamental responsibility that cannot and must not be delegated to markets whenever public health or safety could be endangered.

The market ethic has also influenced the way Canadians think about social issues. As they worked through the scenarios and policy issues, citizens abandoned the language of rights and entitlements, which has dominated public discussion since the 1970s. Instead they constructed a set of societal relationships based on **both rights and responsibilities** – giving and getting. In their view, citizens, governments, business and civil society are connected through mutual responsibility. Individuals have a responsibility to give back, to contribute to society and in return each one can expect to be supported to make that contribution. Thus, individual rights are bounded by citizens' responsibilities to each other and to their shared community.

Citizens articulated a vision of a “working society” where everyone who can work gets a chance to earn a living wage. They believe that social programs should be better designed to help Canadians participate fully in work, community and family. Programs should give people a “hand up not a hand out”, reduce dependency and overcome barriers to participation in work and community life. This means that education and training must be more affordable and accessible – not only for reasons of social mobility but also because that is the way to ensure a strong economy.

“There was general support in the group for a working society, a society that does encourage people to work, but also supports people to work, meaning that...you should be able to live off your income and that involves either raising minimum wages or giving extra support for people at the lower end of the income scale. We want to encourage work – we also want to make work something that gives people dignity and a living income.” (Ottawa)

II. Toward Active Citizens and Accountable Governments

Citizens began their day of dialogue by expressing a weary scepticism, even cynicism, toward governments and other large institutions. However, over the course of the day, as they realized how many of their fellow citizens shared their concerns, cynicism grew into resolution and a demand for action. Accountability and transparency were seen as imperatives – citizens focused mainly on governments, but applied the same standard to private institutions and themselves. This imperative was driven by two motives. The first was disappointment with the failures of governments, combined with indignation about corporate misbehaviour in Canada, the United States and elsewhere. The second driver was a genuine desire to be better informed about what governments are doing and to have a voice in shaping public policy decisions. Fundamentally, they say, governments, other institutions and individuals must take responsibility for their own actions and citizens must become more involved in the public realm.

Citizens held themselves up to scrutiny, and decided that they must become more informed and more involved in public discourse. They gained confidence in their ability to participate and contribute and began to visualize a world where citizens would be able to engage in three-way dialogue (citizen to citizen and citizens with government) as part of a regular way of conducting public business. They acknowledged that this will take time and energy on their part, but they also insist that public institutions and the policy process should open up to give unorganized citizens like them a say in decisions that affect their lives.

Citizens do not expect governments to talk directly to 30 million people. But they do want existing institutions – Parliament, legislatures and their committees, as well as the public service – to provide opportunities for people to participate in public discourse on policy issues. Currently, these institutions engage actively with experts and opinion leaders in formal public settings. Citizens are asking for a space where they can be included – not in debate, as typically happens in town hall meetings, but in dialogue, learning from each other and contributing their own ideas. Chapter 3 lists some issues where dialogue is needed now.

“ ...my feeling is that we, in Canada, are becoming less responsible, and that the citizenship aspect is perhaps a lesser concern. I would like us to be aware that we are citizens and as such, that we have responsibilities and not just rights.” (Montréal)

III. Integrating Diversity with Traditional Values

Citizens yearn for a positive statement of Canadian values to serve as a moral compass, but at the same time are not

willing to accept the expression “traditional values” (presented in the third scenario) because it implies a paternalistic and hierarchical society, which they also reject. In all 10 dialogues, they therefore switched to the idea of “core Canadian values” and began to construct their own list, which is summarized in Box B.

Box B: Citizens’ Core Values

Shared community – despite their differences, Canadians have a unique bond
Equality and justice – each person is respected, valued and treated equitably; fairness for all
Respect for diversity – valuing contributions of all Canada’s cultures/traditions
Mutual responsibility – getting and giving within community; balancing rights and responsibilities
Accountability – taking responsibility for one’s actions; making actions more transparent
Democracy – citizen-centred government; citizens taking ownership of government

Source: Citizens’ Dialogue on Canada’s Future – A 21st Century Social Contract

Citizens emphasize respect for diversity as a core Canadian value. However, it is clear that Canadians are going through an important shift. They have tested the limits of individualism, and are now repositioning diversity as one essential value within a broader set of core Canadian values. They are very clear that diversity is not an end in itself. One good example, often mentioned in the dialogues, was that of gender equality. Citizens believe that all Canadians, no matter what their cultural or ethnic tradition, must respect gender equality.

Canadians are deeply aware of the ethnic, regional and language differences that divide the country, yet they are able to describe a set of core human values they hold as citizens. These values are held in

common by citizens of all origins across the country – binding them in a community of shared values from coast to coast.

Citizens did not see the list above as definitive – not yet. They wanted a cross-Canada dialogue where more people could participate in deeper conversations about core Canadian values. They see families, schools, and civil society as the agents to transmit these values to all citizens, so that they will become recognized by all as the expression of “who we are and what we believe in.” They want governments to foster that dialogue and to help make these core values a visible and ongoing part of public discourse.

“...your social programs,...your strong market, ...your accountability, all these points that every group has made makes up the (mortar) that holds the mosaic together, Everybody’s little tile shows an individual but it’s the mortar that holds us together as a country. Unification of Canada, be it east, west, north, south.” (Calgary)

IV. Kindling a Sense of Shared Community and a Canadian Identity

Some citizens began the dialogue by voicing concern and uncertainty about Canadian identity and whether it could survive. But the dialogue experience itself crystallized their sense of community as 40 randomly selected strangers in ten different parts of Canada heard others express the same values, hopes and worries. They could not help but notice the diversity of the group – business and professional people, mothers on welfare, homemakers, minimum wage workers, farmers, and retired military officers, with some clearly representing different races and creeds. They gained insight into each other’s realities and experience as they talked and listened. As they found common ground, they gained a sense of community. And this community came to represent for them what Canada could be.

Citizens often reported that they were reassured and more confident in Canada’s future as a result of their experience. Many spoke about the need for more Canadians to have the opportunity to engage in a dialogue about important issues as they had just done. This kind of three-way dialogue is one way to strengthen democracy and attachment to Canada.

Citizens also expressed surprise and satisfaction at the level of agreement they had been able to achieve, and often wondered aloud why the perspectives

expressed in the room were so seldom reflected in the media. They also voiced concern, from time to time, about Canada’s growing dependence on the United States, and whether that would limit the ability to develop the kind of Canada they want. They believed that the values they had expressed and shared were different from those of the United States, and they want their public policy to reflect and maintain these distinctions.

This distinctive values base, further discussed in Chapter 4, provides an essential foundation on which Canadians and their governments can continue to build and sustain a different society, notwithstanding the growing economic integration of North America.

V. An Updated Social Contract

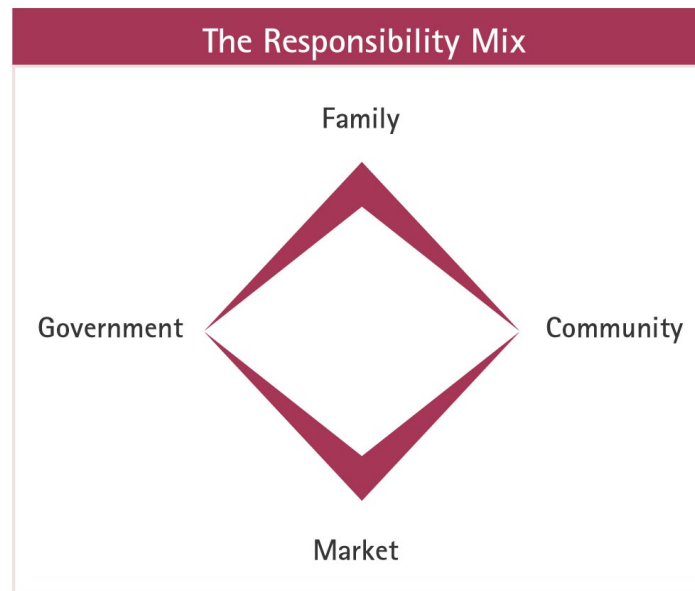
In the post-war years, Canada along with other industrialized countries forged an unwritten social contract that established governments as the motor of economic and social development. In exchange for taxes, people were protected against the risks of unemployment, old age, and poor health and promised a good public education. These were the underpinnings of the welfare state established by the 1960s. However, even at that time, it differed from the welfare states established in Europe, Japan, and the United States.

Clearly, citizens have moved on from the post-war consensus. There is continuity

with the past, but their thinking has been influenced by the searing experiences of the 1980s and 90s – deep recessions, intense global competition, growing individualism, and increased insecurity. In this dialogue, Canadian citizens were choosing their own distinctive path for the future.

“The Kind of Canada We Want” in 2012, as articulated by Canadians in their 2002 dialogue reflects the needs of a more urban, diverse, educated, confident, and more

sceptical Canadian public. Citizens have revised the responsibilities they assign to the key actors in the social contract – governments, business, communities and citizens themselves. Compared to earlier times, more responsibility falls on business, communities and citizens. But all four “actors” in society are interdependent, as shown in the diamond chart. Actions by one point in the diamond create either opportunities or stresses for the other three.



Source: CPRN Annual Report, 2001-2002

Governments have traditionally been seen as the actor with the capacity to pool economic, social, political, and security risks. Acting on behalf of citizens, governments are expected to defend the interests of Canadians and use tax revenues to provide the public goods and services needed by them.

Today, citizens attribute less influence to governments in some areas and more in others.

- Governments are no longer expected to create jobs across the length and breadth of Canada through direct investment or publicly owned

businesses. Instead, they are seen as catalysts for economic development in partnership with business, communities and education institutions.

- Governments are still expected to create an effective framework for business, to set standards and to hold businesses to account. While the trend is to use market instruments rather than command and control regulations wherever practical, this does not replace the ultimate responsibility of governments to act whenever public health or safety is endangered.

- Governments still invest in social development to help people reach their full potential and to protect the most vulnerable, but now citizens want this to be done in a way that gives greater emphasis to self-reliance – enabling everyone to make a contribution to a working society, and to avoid dependency. Citizens also expect governments to design and deliver seamless programs that address the whole person who may need a variety of services – sometimes all in the same timeframe. This seamless delivery of programs demands much more coordination on the part of governments.
- Governments also have a more important information role – they need to provide information to make their own activities more transparent to citizens, in order to promote accountability and to enable citizens to determine how well the political system and civil society is functioning; and they also need to provide better information to help citizens make informed choices about what to buy and how to live healthy lives.
- Governments, on citizens' behalf, are still expected to play a strong role within the international community by contributing to democratic governance, economic stability and international development. But citizens want greater accountability and transparency in how aid funds are spent and greater assurance that international aid really gets to the people in need. Above all they emphasize that our aid projects should help people to help themselves, and should be consistent with **both** Canadian values **and** the values of the citizens of the recipient countries.

After the Great Depression of the 1930s, **markets (business)** were often placed in an adversarial role, which had to be countered by active governments. Today, markets are given far more credit for their contribution to economic growth and efficient resource allocation. Citizens no longer see markets in one corner as a generator of wealth serving private interests, and governments in the other corner as distributors of income serving the public interest. Instead they see the market serving public as well as private interests.

Canadians have begun to borrow market ideas to help address other complex problems – using pricing and other market mechanisms to manage environmental challenges, for example. And the market ethic has influenced their desire to balance rights and responsibilities.

In return for this greater acceptance of markets, however, Canadians now demand more of both small and large businesses as engaged actors in civil society. Businesses are now expected to be social partners to help communities to meet their social and economic goals and to demonstrate a social conscience as ethical members of civil society at home and abroad.

Community has always been the place for collective action, dating back to the founding of the village school in pioneer Canada. It continues to be the place where citizens exercise their values, coming together to realize their collective goals. But, with immigration, a communications revolution and urbanization, communities have become larger and more complex entities. Most Canadians today are members of multiple communities, not only local communities of place but also overlapping communities defined by work, shared interests, cultural background, professional affiliation and more. People are therefore in touch with the wider world in many ways. These more open, inclusive and vibrant communities can be prime movers in building the kind of Canada they want, and

citizens express confidence in the ability of Canadians, working together in these communities, to accomplish great things.

Communities are now the primary site for economic and social development, and the space where diverse populations settle and find ways to participate. Citizens want governments to support and act in partnership with these communities. They insist that all the silos of governments must be able to respond to the whole person and the whole community. In these modern communities, business is seen as a major agent of change, and is expected to partner with others to help achieve community goals.

Citizens (individuals and families) now see themselves as more than voters, recipients of government programs and possessors of rights. They wish to be more active participants in public business. Citizens are expected to contribute to Canada's quality of life through paid employment, family and volunteer work, and self-development. They are also expected to keep their skills relevant throughout their lives. Canadians are moving from deference to governments to demanding a voice and from unengaged citizens to citizens actively involved through dialogue.

This dialogue experience helped citizens to discover their own capacity to make a valuable and responsible contribution on a range of difficult policy questions. They were able to go beyond venting and "wish lists" in a setting which avoided the formalities and limitations of traditional consultations and town hall meetings. They listened, learned, and contributed, they looked ahead and examined issues from different points of view. And as they discovered how much they had in common the thin crust of cynicism gave way to a willingness (and a desire) to become more involved in governance and public affairs.

VI. Conclusion

As Canadians become more demanding of and more engaged with governments, the legitimacy and sustainability of important policy decisions will depend, more than ever, on how well they reflect the underlying values of citizens. In a democracy, citizen values define the boundaries of action, while experts and stakeholders provide essential technical input. These two roles are distinct. Experts do not have the legitimacy or capacity to replace citizens and citizens do not expect to provide technical expertise.

In this dialogue, citizens have defined their vision for Canada's 21st century social contract. The kind of Canada they want combines markets and social goals in a particular way, and places respect for diversity in a core set of values designed to create a more inclusive community and a shared purpose. These core values are consistently different from those of the United States in a number of important areas, and provide an essential foundation on which Canadians and their governments can continue to build and sustain a distinct community north of the 49th parallel.

Perhaps even more important, the kind of Canada they want is built on a more engaged citizenry, encouraged to take a longer-term perspective, defining what it means to be Canadian in a globalizing world and demanding stronger accountability from governments, business, other institutions and individuals in realizing that future. This is the vision of a Canadian democracy renewed for the 21st century.

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