

# Public Consultations on Canada's Democratic Institutions and Practices

A Report for the Privy Council Office



**FRONTIER  
CENTRE**  
FOR PUBLIC POLICY

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## **Executive Summary**

### **Background**

- ❑ This document reports on findings from the Government of Canada's public consultations on Canada's democratic institutions and practices. The consultations involved in-depth discussions across the country with groups of citizens (a total of 466) that were roughly representative of the larger population. Consultations also included a Canada-wide telephone survey on the role of the citizen in the democratic process, the House of Commons, the Senate, political parties, and the electoral system among 2471 general public respondents, forum participants after the completion of their gatherings, and a targeted over-sample of First Nations, Métis, and Inuit respondents.
- ❑ The project was commissioned by the Privy Council Office through a tendering process to fulfill a commitment in the April 4, 2006 Speech from the Throne. The assignment was carried out against a backdrop of moderate discontent with our democratic institutions and practices and moderate concern about the public's disengagement from the democratic process.

### **Role of the Citizen in Democracy**

- ❑ Two broad themes were explored in the forums and survey interviews—(a) how citizens involve themselves in the democratic process (e.g. by voting) and in society (e.g. through voluntary organizations) and (b) how the federal government does and should consult with citizens.
- ❑ In a tradition attributed to Alexis de Tocqueville, many scholars and commentators link participation in voluntary organizations to participation in the democratic process. Forum participants perceived both types of participation as regrettably in decline, but saw little intrinsic link between the two.
- ❑ Most forum participants believed that governments do not consult people regularly and felt that consultation was often not genuine. As remedies for



encouraging public engagement in the democratic process, forum participants tended to recommend better, more respectful consultation and stronger civics education to give young people a greater appreciation of our system. A desire for stronger civics education emerged spontaneously in discussions of all topics.

- ❑ The survey data revealed exceptionally high levels of interest in more government consultation. Survey data also revealed moderate levels of knowledge of how our democratic system works. Self-reported knowledge of how the government consults is especially low. Self-reported knowledge of how the system works tends to be uniform across Canada except among First Nations/ Métis/Inuit respondents. Causal modeling reveals that all of the lower knowledge among First Nations/ Métis/Inuit is a byproduct of generally lower levels of education.

### **House of Commons**

- ❑ Forum discussions leave an impression that Canadians know more about the House of Commons than the Senate and other institutions and practices, and yet feel that they ought to know more. According to the survey data, Canadians appear to know more about Question Period, which they value less than other facets of Commons work, than about committee work and how MPs undertake consultations, which the public values highly and of which it would like to see a lot more.
- ❑ MPs figure prominently in how Canadians assess the House of Commons and how they perceive our democratic process. Mistrust of MPs and frustration with the operation of the House of Commons figure emerged repeatedly in forum discussions. Recurrent themes are that what MPs say and do are little understood. The public is skeptical of Members' ability to follow through on promises. When MPs consult, they are often seen as having limited influence because of the importance of party discipline. Crossing the floor emerged as one of a number of factors intensifying mistrust in some of the forums in Western Canada.
- ❑ Though not unanimous on the issue, Canadians have some serious reservations about tone and demeanor in Question Period. A majority (64%)



believe that “Debates in Question Period are often disrespectful, reducing public respect for the House of Commons.” They would like to see the Speaker exercise stronger control.

- ❑ A need for more public knowledge emerges from the survey data. Respondents as a whole would like to know more about how the Commons and how MPs consult Canadians. They would also like information to be readily accessible when they want or need it. Forum participants believe that the public would benefit most of all from greater knowledge of how Committees and Members’ constituency offices work.

### **Senate**

- ❑ Evidence that Canadians know little about the Senate emerges from both the forums and the survey. Lack of knowledge may be a factor in misgivings about the Upper House voiced by forum participants and survey respondents. Self-reported knowledge of the Senate seems especially low among Quebecers, the young, and First Nations/Métis/Inuit.
- ❑ Some of the misgivings heard in forum discussions have their roots in concern about the patronage basis of appointments. Some qualms are also rooted in concern about Western Canada’s perceived under-representation, felt across the country and especially in the West. Participants were nonetheless averse to major constitutional changes requiring provincial consent, such as seat redistribution, for fear of opening up a Pandora’s box.
- ❑ The survey data show that Canadians favour Senate elections by large margins (79%) and believe in parity of representation by region. Forum participants seemed as favourable to parity of representation by region as survey respondents while somewhat ambiguous in their view of Senate elections and appreciative of the traditional and varied roles of the Senate.

### **Political Parties**

- ❑ The general image emerging from the forums is one of political parties losing attention and respect from citizens. Parties were generally perceived as not interested in recruiting members or hearing from ordinary citizens, not



good at communicating, not accountable, somewhat secretive, and not sufficiently honest in their communications, promises, and platforms.

- ❑ In the spirit of their skeptical views of political parties, forum participants were generally unenthusiastic about public funding for party-affiliated foundations that would engage in policy development and undertake outreach programs to youth or other low participation voters. Participants nonetheless felt these functions were valuable and needed encouragement.
- ❑ According to the survey data, Canadians feel that they understand parties at least as well as other aspects of the democratic process. They have clear ideas about what they want parties to emphasize—reaching out to Canadians and developing fresh policy ideas, not explaining how they differ from each other or organizing for elections.

### **Electoral System**

- ❑ The discussion of the federal electoral system focused on the criteria for choosing the rules that should govern how ballots are cast to choose MPs. For ease of analysis and discussion, participants were asked to consider three main options: (a) today's plurality or first-past-the-post system; (b) a mixed system (part plurality, part proportional representation; and (c) a preferential or Single Transferable Vote (STV) ballot in multi-member ridings.
- ❑ Given the broad scope of the consultations, forum participants were not asked to choose one electoral system over another though they were free to convey system preferences. They were asked to identify the broad principles, values, or criteria that should guide the rules that govern how ballots are cast and counted, for example, fairness vs. stable or effective government. As previously noted, forum participants were not entirely pleased with political parties and other components of the democratic system, but they did not express much frustration or disappointment with the rules governing how ballots are cast to choose MPs.
- ❑ Survey respondents were asked to score the value of six electoral system criteria. In their opinion, the ideal electoral system should above all produce



clear winners so that voters can make politicians understand how they feel. In a similar spirit, survey respondents tended to agree that a system with local constituencies represented by a single MP is a good idea because it makes it easier for people to know their MP and get their MP's help in solving problems.

- We also undertook multivariate statistical analysis (factor analysis) to reveal the structure of Canadians' thinking on these electoral system outcome issues. The factor analysis of their evaluation scores yields two factors or two ways of thinking: a pro-reform factor representing a desire to make it easier for small parties to get elected, favourable feelings towards coalition governments, and other pro-reform ideas vs. a pro-status quo factor representing the idea that majority governments, producing clear winners, and other status quo ideas are desirable. The emergence of these two factors lends support to the idea that Canadians have a good understanding of the arguments pro and con even if they lack the detailed knowledge available to experts.



## **1.0. Introduction**

### **1.1. Background**

This document reports on findings from in depth citizen discussions across the country that were roughly representative and a large-scale survey among a representative sample of Canadians. Both the citizen discussions and the survey interviews explored the views of Canadians on the role of the citizen in the democratic process, the House of Commons, the Senate, political parties, and the electoral system.

The project was commissioned by Privy Council Office through a competitive tendering process. The project fulfilled a commitment that was made by the government in the April 4, 2006 Speech from the Throne. That is the formal background to the project.

The informal background to the project has two aspects—moderate discontent with the operation of Canada's democratic institutions and moderate concern about the public's gradual disengagement from the democratic process.

All political parties in Parliament have conveyed some discontent with the operation of at least some aspects of our representative system. The Government itself initiated efforts to bring about fixed dates for general elections along with term limits and popular consultations for the appointment of Senators.

The number of possible concerns about our representative system is potentially limitless. These could include (a) discontent over the adequacy of representation for various regional and socio-demographic groups and (b) perceptions that our representative institutions have become less effective at reflecting the democratic expectations of the electorate.

For any given concern about our representative institutions, there may also be limitless alternative explanations. For example, in seeking to explain any public affairs dilemmas of the Senate, some would point to the appointment-





rather than election-based method of choosing Senators. Others would attribute such dilemmas to widespread unawareness of the character and contributions of Senators.

In addition to misgivings about some aspects of our representative system, there has also been concern about the level of engagement of the Canadian public. Particular concern has been expressed about a long-term decline in voter turnout and precipitous drops in the participation rates among young adults.<sup>1</sup>

Concern about declining engagement in the political process is not unique to Canada. It is widespread among the democracies. Four broad cross-national concerns have emerged, namely declining

- ❑ Turnout—proportionately fewer voters are casting their ballots, thereby possibly undermining the legitimacy of democratically elected governments;
- ❑ Interest—the public interest in and knowledge of the representative system is abating, thereby representing a potential challenge for the legitimacy of democratic systems;
- ❑ Trust—public mistrust of elected officials has been on the rise; and
- ❑ Networking—clubs, societies, and other voluntary organizations appear to be in decline, thereby possibly limiting citizen opportunities to acquire the skills and networks vital for exercising their civic responsibilities.

Concern about civic disengagement and reform of democratic institutions has intensified in Europe<sup>2</sup> and mushroomed in the United States.<sup>3</sup> In Canada,

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<sup>1</sup> Helpful overviews of these issues appear in Henry Milner, “Are Young Canadians Becoming Political Dropouts?” *IRPP Choices* (June, 2006) and *Final Report and Recommendations of the Commission on Legislative Democracy* (New Brunswick, 2005), especially chapter 5. A useful source on the topic is the series of publications launched by the IRPP’s civic engagement research program.

<sup>2</sup> See Anne Muxel, *Les jeunes et la politique* (Paris : Hachette, 1996) and *L’expérience politique des jeunes* (Paris : Presses de SciencePo, 2001). A contributor to our project, Anne Muxel is also author of *Les jeunes d’Europe du sud et la politique. Une enquête comparative France, Italie, Espagne* (Paris : L’Harmattan, 2001).



several provincial governments have sponsored research and discussion of engagement and reform ideas.<sup>4</sup>

## **1.2. Objectives**

The objectives of the project included substantive and process aspects. From a substantive perspective, the goal was to identify the values that Canadians use to guide their opinions on the role of the citizen in the democratic process, the functioning of the House of Commons, the functioning of the Senate, the role of political parties, and the choice of desirable electoral systems.

From a process perspective, the goal was to gauge Canadians' values and opinions in two ways:

- ❑ By means of conventional survey interviewing without providing respondents with substantial background information; and also
- ❑ Through in depth, deliberative discussion groups led by professional moderators and accompanied by specially prepared background information to assess the opinions of Canadians when presented with considerable background information.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> See Peter Levine, *The Future of Democracy: Developing the Next Generation of Citizens* (University Press of New England, in press) and *The Deliberative Democracy Handbook: Strategies for Effective Civic Engagement in the Twenty-First Century* (Jossey-Bass, 2005). A contributor to our project, Peter Levine is Director of the National Consortium of researchers in civic engagement known as CIRCLE. He is author/editor of seven books on the topic.

<sup>4</sup> Emulated in other provinces, the British Columbia Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform was a path-breaking example of deliberative democracy. A representative sample of B.C. citizens met, studied, held public meetings, and deliberated over the course of a year, ultimately recommending a preferential ballot for provincial elections. Designer of the BC experiment in deliberative democracy, Gordon Gibson was an active contributor to our project providing video content on Parliamentary Institutions for forum participants and helping to facilitate the B.C. and Alberta sessions.

<sup>5</sup> For classic portraits of the deliberative discussion or "deliberative polling" technique, see <http://cdd.stanford.edu/polls/docs/summary>.



### **1.3. Dual Methodology—Forums and a Telephone Survey**

To meet the objectives of the project, deliberative assemblies were conducted across the country in parallel to Canada-wide survey research. Both the deliberative and survey methods were structured to allow inter-provincial comparisons and give expression to the opinions of young people and individuals from First Nations, Métis, and Inuit communities.

Separate deliberative assemblies were held in each province, one in the Northern territories, and one in Ottawa for young people.<sup>6</sup> Separate regionally based forums made it easier to recruit a more representative group than otherwise. Separate regionally based forums also made it easier for participants to give expression to concerns of a regional nature if they so wished. In practice, those citizens who agreed to participate in a forum tended to see the subject from a nation-wide perspective. They often highlighted the potential contribution of provincial governments through ministries of education to the public's ability to understand the democratic process.

The content and processes of the forums were guided and monitored by an independent Methodology Committee, which also provided interim, mid-term, and concluding feedback.<sup>7</sup>

This document reports the views of forum participants as expressed at each of the forums, twelve in all. All events followed a similar agenda and explored identical topics. Video presentations by subject matter experts were presented at the forums.<sup>8</sup> Each topic began with a presentation, typically involving a video and brief questions and answers. This was followed by extensive discussions in breakouts. Breakout groups then re-assembled for concluding discussions. The

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<sup>6</sup> Forums took place in March and April in Greater Vancouver, Edmonton, Yellowknife, Regina, Winnipeg, the Greater Toronto Area, Montreal, St. John's, Halifax, Fredericton, and Charlottetown. A special national forum for young people (aged 18-26) was held in Ottawa. Each extended over a period of approximately 24 elapsed hours.

<sup>7</sup> Committee members were Professors Richard Nadeau, Susan Phillips, and Evert Lindquist.

<sup>8</sup> Videos were prepared and hosted by Gordon Gibson, André Blais, Paul Howe, and Guy Laforest. See the *Participants' Workbook*, a companion document, for a list of author contributors.



five topics were the role of the citizen in Canadian democracy, the House of Commons, the Senate, political parties, and the electoral system.

Participants in the forums did tend to share a Canada-wide focus. The Canada-wide focus was especially strong when participants were invited to think of the House of Commons and other Canada-wide institutions.. The Canada-wide focus was less evident at the very beginning of each session, when participants were asked to talk about how people involve themselves in society and the democratic process. Such conversation often had a local or provincial flavour

Discussions of representation in the Senate also had a provincial and regional flavour. Participants in the forums in Atlantic Canada and especially the West expressed a desire to assure adequate provincial and regional representation in federal institutions by means of the Senate selection process.

Some subtle inter-forum differences came to the surface. Participants in the territorial forum seemed the farthest removed psychologically from the activities of the Government of Canada (“Ottawa”) and least alert to how citizens can participate in or be consulted by federal institutions. Participants in forums in the North, in B.C., and in some of those in Atlantic Canada were especially inclined to perceive involvement in federal institutions through the prism of local experiences (e.g. local cabinet ministers, local MPs, and in the case of Newfoundland and Labrador, Senators). The overwhelmingly French language participants in the Quebec forum were especially alert to cross-national developments abroad (U.S., France, Europe, and Israel).

The document reports the views of forum participants not only as expressed at the gatherings but also as conveyed in response to a survey conducted weeks after the forums. The survey among forum participants resembled closely a telephone survey conducted among the general public. The survey was intended to complement findings from the forums about the views of Canadians on the topics under study.

Sampling of respondents in the survey of the general public was structured to achieve the same objective as the forums—to allow inter-provincial and provincial-territorial comparisons and to gauge the views of young adults and



First Nations/Métis/Inuit communities.<sup>9</sup> In practice, the smaller provinces and First Nations/Métis/Inuit communities were over-sampled. When findings are reported for the country as a whole, these are based on an inter-provincial re-weighting to reflect Statistics Canada population data for 2006.

#### **1.4. Organization of the Report**

The document reports the views of forum participants and the public serially on the themes of the role of the citizen in democracy, the House of Commons, the Senate, political parties, and the electoral system (e.g. proportional representation). Each theme has its own chapter structured as follows:

- ❑ a very brief introduction to the substance of the topic;
- ❑ a brief overview of the forums as a whole and a separate report on what was said at each with the individual forum-specific reports downplaying common themes previously highlighted in the cross-forum overview; and
- ❑ a discussion of the quantitative data from survey interviews with the public and forum participants weeks after the forums.

Extensive survey tables appear in Appendix I. The tables in the Appendix I present survey responses for Canada as a whole, each province, the territories as a whole, and First Nations/Métis/Inuit as a whole. The tables also contain the responses of forum participants responding in survey interviews by telephone weeks after the forums took place. A small number of full or partial tables appear prior to the Appendix.

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<sup>9</sup> The sample sizes and margins of error for each segment are as follows: Territories, Alberta, Saskatchewan, Manitoba and each Atlantic Canada province (each  $n > 150$ , considered accurate to within 8.2 percentage points 19 times out of 20); B.C. ( $n > 197$ , considered accurate to within 7.1 percentage points 19 times out of 20); Ontario ( $n > 572$ , considered accurate to within 4.2 percentage points 19 times out of 20); Quebec ( $N > 362$ , considered accurate to within 5.4 percentage points 19 times out of 20); First Nations, Métis, and Inuit ( $n > 267$ , considered accurate to within 6 percentage points 19 times out of 20). Excluding forum participants and the First Nations, Métis, and Inuit over-sample, the total  $N$  was 2471. Down-weighted to reflect actual proportionately in Statistics Canada data, the Canada-wide data can be deemed accurate to within 2.5% percentage points 19 times out of 20.



## **2.0. The Role of the Citizen in Democracy**

### **2.1. Introduction**

The 12 forums across the country and the national survey explored two broad aspects of the role of the citizen in democracy—the engagement of citizens in their society and in democratic institutions on the one hand and the efforts of the federal government to consult and involve citizens in its decisions.

As in the case of the other themes, we strove to limit areas of inquiry to federal terrain as defined by the Constitution. Citizens attending the forums nonetheless tended to stray onto provincial terrain by bringing up the role of the educational system in teaching young people how the system works and the value of democratic institutions.

### **2.2. Forums**

#### **2.2.1. Overview**

All the forums were presented with essentially the same substantive introduction to the subject of the role of the citizen in democracy, as detailed in the *Participants Workbook* (see companion document). At the sessions themselves, moderators and facilitators highlighted two broad themes for consideration—(a) how citizens engage themselves in society, often through voluntary organizations, and in the democratic process and (b) how the federal government does and ought to consult with the citizens.

At all forums, participants saw much value in citizens participating in both voluntary organizations and in the democratic process but did not see much relation between the two. Participants saw voluntarism as meritorious in and of itself, albeit in decline. Unlike many scholars and commentators writing on the issue, forum participants tended not to see a connection between voluntarism and a participant democratic society.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> See National Commission on Civic Renewal, entitled *A Nation of Spectators* (Washington, DC, 1998); Robert D. Putnam's classic, "Bowling Alone: America's Declining Social Capital," *Journal of Democracy* (January, 1995) and his best-seller, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and*



At all forums, participants saw genuine government consultation as highly desirable but voiced unawareness that government actually consulted people. To the extent that they perceived government consulting the public, participants did not perceive the consultation as genuine. Participants were frequently skeptical, occasionally cynical. They wanted governments to report back to the public on actions take or not taken following consultation exercises. They want to see results or feedback or both, and also more respect. To the extent that they were aware of MPs' constituency offices, they tended to see potential for such offices to play a helpful role in consulting the public.

Apart from the recurring theme of better, more respectful consultation, another recurring theme was better education. The schools ought to make a stronger effort to teach young people how our democratic system works. This view emerged at every forum, usually eliciting much support.

### **2.2.2. Territories (Yellowknife) Forum**

Participants in the territorial forum saw voluntarism to be long-term decline with their own region of the country as a kind of last refuge for the voluntarist ethic. "We have more of a community ethic [here than in the South]," commented one participant. "People will talk to people...You get down South and...it's chase the almighty buck."

Participants in the Northern forum perceived the federal government as consulting with people in uneven ways. "The government listens to the North on some issues and it doesn't on others," commented one person. "The gun registry would be an example of the latter. [The] pipeline is probably an example of the government listening to what some people do have [to say]."

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*Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon & Shuster, 2000); Constance Flanagan and Lonnie R. Sherrod, "Youth Political Development: An Introduction," *Journal of Social Issues* (Fall, 1998); David O. Sears and Sheri Levy, "Childhood and Adult Political Development," in the *Oxford Handbook of Political Psychology*, edited by David Sears, Leonie Huddy and Robert Jervis, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 60-108; and Peter Levine, *The Future of Democracy: Developing the Next Generation of Citizens* (University Press of New England, 2007).



The federal government was often perceived disrespectful or as just going through the motions. "Most of us would not go and say their views about things," said one participant, "because they don't feel as if they're going to get anything done about it or the respect." Besides, the government often just pretends to consult. "Traditionally," declared one participant, "the government says, 'this is what we're going to do, what do you think?' and that's not really consultation."

Some feel that the North has a special problem of too little Parliamentary representation. The territories are so large and diverse that "there's no way that one MP could handle everything," observed one participant.

Asked specifically what the federal government could do, many respondents volunteered that the schools should strengthen their existing efforts at civics education. The need and desire for stronger civics education emerged spontaneously at every forum. One self-described Aboriginal participant attributed her daughter's excitement about being involved in the democratic process partly to her education at school. There was a general sense that the school system, families, the media (including government advertising), and better quality politicians ("role models") can all help increase public knowledge, enthusiasm, and ultimately participation.

### **2.2.3. British Columbia Forum**

As in other forums, attendees at the B.C. gathering acknowledged the value of voluntarism and civic engagement while perceiving it as in decline. Participants saw the public as skeptical, apathetic, disengaged, and uninformed, driven in part by central Canada's subordination of the West—"What's the use...Quebec and Ontario make all the decisions."

Several participants saw the media as encouraging cynicism. A jaded public is "taking its cues from the media," according to another attendee. This problem has been confounded, said one participant, by the decline of the information-laden print media. "Not enough people read the newspaper and a newspaper is a great way to synthesize the information."

As at other forums, there was disagreement about what if anything could be done. Some believed that voluntary activity should be encouraged with incentives. Other demurred: "then, it's not volunteerism." Some attendees were aware of federal government youth programs, which they praised.





As at other forums, attendees were divided about the quality of the federal government's consultation efforts. Some were bewildered at the thought that the federal government consulted people—"Government consults citizens?"; "I didn't know the government ever consulted with citizens"; "I don't think they do it at the grassroots level like they used to." Some felt that MPs do an adequate job of consulting people but they are constrained "because there is a party line."

The principal recommendations for encouraging civic participation involved more civics education in schools and information campaigns by government. "I think that Canadians need to be...better educated about this country and about what it means to be a Canadian citizen," opined one participant. "[Civics courses] could be instituted in grade eight to grade 10," declared another. Several participants recommended that government launch websites to inform the public about impending programs or laws, apparently unaware of the sites that exist.

#### **2.2.4. Alberta Forum**

Like others, the Alberta forum participants saw voluntarism in decline and believed that participation in the democratic process is vital for the health of democracy. Compared to the past, voting is seen today as less of a duty and more as an optional exercise in self-interest. As one participant put it, "Well, you know my vote doesn't count. One vote is not going to make a difference." Neighbours in small towns and parents used to convey a sense of duty but less today, said a number of participants. As a result, "we have lost our sense of responsibility," in the words of one participant.

Young attendees at the forum underlined the phenomenon. "We don't really feel that it's our job to be active in the community," said one. "Youth don't understand there's a need for volunteers," said another. Still another confided that he was the first to vote in the family. "No one voted... no one and now I make everyone vote. Because I just think it's an obligation."

One factor depressing involvement in the democratic process is the public's limited knowledge, said many participants. Even people who actually vote "don't even know who the MP is; they go and vote for the party," affirmed one attendee. Another participant confided, "I don't even understand the way that laws become laws in Canada." "I don't...know where to go and talk to the government really," said a third.



Participants in the Alberta forum felt very strongly that schools should give greater emphasis to civics education. "I really do think that our schools need to become involved in the process of educating the citizens about democracy," said one attendee, reflecting the views of many. A forum participant of school age contributed a personal note: "In my school you can get extra credit for volunteering and you can get extra credit for me coming to this thing [forum], I can get a credit for that."

The federal government and Parliament could do many things to ignite public enthusiasm. The federal government could "inspire the kids" to become involved in the democratic process by sponsoring national debate contests, declared one attendee.

### **2.2.5. Saskatchewan Forum**

Participants in the Saskatchewan forum felt that the voluntary ethic remains at least somewhat alive in rural areas. Voluntarism, in their view, is under pressure because of a rise individual self-interest. "Every time you go out and volunteer it's costing you some money. You're volunteering for nothing but it's costing you money to do that job," said one participant.

Reversing the decline in voluntarism and civic engagement requires, said participants, a focus on education and youth. Efforts should begin in school. As one participant noted, "They have student council bodies and stuff like that so it gives them an idea of an election and how they campaign and stuff." Students' opportunities to have a say in the life of their school should be paralleled by more formal, civic education. "Kids need to start learning at a much younger age about Parliamentary procedures." Students learn "very little" about our democratic system in school, according to one participant. According to another, "it's kind of sad."

Many want a more active role for the federal government. As one attendee put it, "the federal government never hesitated to put money into multiculturalism, to our bilingual aspect of our country and the metric system... Why wouldn't they put some money into this [civic education]?"

A retired teacher had the following observation about past federal efforts:

I was interested in [the *Participants' Workbook* reference to teaching teachers about Parliament]. It says one-week



courses are provided to school teachers on civic education.  
I was an educator for 40 years; I never heard of that.

To a degree not evident at other forums, participants at the one in Regina engaged in some dispute about the degree to which civic non-engagement was attributable to the failure of the system or that of the non-engaged individuals.

### **2.2.6. Manitoba Forum**

Participants in the Manitoba forum share the desire for more civics education expressed at other forums. "The kids being educated today need to understand how parliament works," opined one participant. "[They don't] even understand the basics of our government," said another.

A skeptical young attendee seemed to concur. "I'm 19. I know nothing," said the young man. "I don't put myself out and learn about it. I know nothing about government. But nothing attracts me to learn more about it. It's all old people's politics to me...And I could care less. Because it doesn't affect me. It never did. I wasn't taught enough about it in school."

An improved civic education curriculum would be a necessary but insufficient condition for engaging the public. Government must learn to "be more forthcoming." Government needs to convey "information in a format citizens will understand and to have more consultations so that citizens do feel that they're consulted," according to another. The key is "plain English," declared one participant. "The government should invest heavily in explaining to youth how the system works." The House of Commons should elect a larger number of MPs so that each would be responsible for a smaller area, according to one participant. According to another, "forums like this one should proliferate across the country."

### **2.2.7. Ontario Forum**

A participant at the Ontario forum captured the enthusiasm of the gathering for civic engagement in the following words: "The whole thing about volunteering is to make someone a more rounded person. That is what Canada is all about, be democratic, be part of your community, be involved with your next door neighbour, that is the whole point of what Canada is." For this participant, as for others, the challenge is that participation has been in decline.



The root cause for one attendee is the computer, which alienates people from each other.

Thinking specifically of disengagement from the democratic process, some attendees attributed it to inadequate government consultation. People feel ignored. But not everyone agreed. A defender of government had this to say: "You have to ask yourself which policies do you want them to consult on... What's important to me is not necessarily important to you or to you." For another participant, consultation is a false issue because the Internet makes it easy to know what's going on: "I can go on [the internet] at any time and look up what announcements are happening...it's a matter of getting up and doing it."

### **2.2.8. Quebec Forum**

Participants in the Quebec forum gave expression to themes heard across the country—for example, that voluntarism is important but in decline except perhaps in rural areas.<sup>11</sup> As at other forums, some attendees had misgivings about excessive encouragement of voluntary activity. "It's not the role of government to force people to make a contribution."<sup>12</sup> As in the case of the Toronto forum, some participants in the Montreal forum point to technology as the root problem, albeit TV rather than the Internet. "People don't have enough free time because of work, television, which takes up a lot of time, or the family."<sup>13</sup>

As for government consulting the public, Quebec forum participants were at least as skeptical as attendees at other forums. "They consult us? When?" asked one attendee.<sup>14</sup> Governments have a "credibility problem when it comes to consulting," said another.<sup>15</sup> "They only consult us at elections," said a third.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Je sens beaucoup de plus d'implication bénévole dans les petites communautés, du fait que les gens sont beaucoup plus près, donc ils échangent beaucoup plus entre eux.

<sup>12</sup> Ce n'est pas le rôle du gouvernement de forcer les gens dans le bénévolat.

<sup>13</sup> On manque de temps, en termes de disponibilité, de loisir. Soit à cause du travail, ou soit à cause de la télévision qui absorbe beaucoup de temps, et aussi la famille.

<sup>14</sup> Ils nous consultent quand ? Puis, comment ? En tant que citoyen, on n'est pas consulté.

<sup>15</sup> Je pense qu'il y a un problème de crédibilité au niveau des consultations.

<sup>16</sup> On n'est pas sûre qu'ils consultent sauf lors des élections.



Proposed remedies included greater use of the Internet to share information with the public and MPs' use of teleconferences for reaching their electorates.

As elsewhere, the Quebec participants volunteered a desire for more civic education, albeit with an admonition from some that education remains a provincial responsibility. "I find that our education system misses out on having enough civics education," said one attendee.<sup>17</sup> "The federal government could give the provinces monies for civic education," suggested another.

### **2.2.9. New Brunswick Forum**

Participants in the New Brunswick forum seemed widely aware that engagement in both the voluntary sector and the democratic process are down. The problem is that "it...is not valued"<sup>18</sup> and, in rural areas, "it can be difficult to get around."<sup>19</sup> "People are really eager," declared one participant, but "there [is] so [much] red tape, people have to pass so many tests and answer so many questions that they decide just to forget about it."

Being involved in the democratic process poses additional problems. "You [hear] horror stories," said one person, "of people who really want to participate, [but who find it very difficult] to get their name on the [electors'] list." Furthermore, people avoid discussing politics because "[it's] a taboo subject that could lead to heated arguments."

Young people have a special aversion. "Youth have lost all interest in the subject,"<sup>20</sup> affirmed one attendee. "The newest generation is less aware of the benefits of living in a democracy,...and they know more about what is happening abroad than in Canada,"<sup>21</sup> said another.

Attendees at the Fredericton gathering had many suggestions: (a) Elections Canada should invest heavily in door-to-door contact efforts to boost turnout;

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<sup>17</sup> Au niveau des écoles,...je trouve que ça manquent.

<sup>18</sup> Ce n'est pas annoncé, ce n'est pas valorisé.

<sup>19</sup> Dans les petites communautés, [le bénévolat] est très difficile parce qu'il faut se déplacer.

<sup>20</sup> Les enfants perdent tout intérêt.

<sup>21</sup> La nouvelle génération est moins consciente de la chance qu'ils ont de vivre dans un pays [...] démocratique. [...] Les jeunes sont plus informés de ce qui [se] passe [ailleurs] qu'au Canada.



(b) The federal government should emulate the provincial government's commitment to public meetings ("I've never seen or heard about that from the federal government"<sup>22</sup>); (c) "Forums like this one...should become a routine for the government"<sup>23</sup>; and (d) Schools should introduce "compulsory courses to educate young people on how democracy works."<sup>24</sup>

#### **2.2.10. PEI Forum**

As in the case of Saskatchewan and Northern forum attendees, PEI participants perceived voluntarism to be more alive and well at their location than elsewhere in Canada. "Volunteer activity in PEI," insisted one attendee, "is pretty good." According to another, "It's amazing how much the [PEI] students do volunteer already. Yearbook Club, Student Councils, Environment clubs..."

As elsewhere, attendees at the Charlottetown forum perceived government consultation as poor. "Accountability of government is not good," declared one Islander. "Government does not consult the public very well," opined another.

A number of recommendations emerged from the forum: bursaries for university based on a record of voluntarism, pervasive use of mock elections in schools, strong civics curricular in schools, and federal model Parliament based on PEI Junior Legislature model.

#### **2.2.11. Nova Scotia Forum**

Participants in the Nova Scotia expressed frustration with the democratic process in the same spirit as other forums. People are disengaged in part because they "feel kind of helpless." They believe that "[government] doesn't listen," and they feel ignored.

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<sup>22</sup> Le gouvernement fédéral a des choses à apprendre du gouvernement provincial. Au Nouveau-Brunswick, le gouvernement provincial fait des sessions d'informations, des sessions de consultation [aux sujets de politiques]. [Au niveau] fédéral, j'en n'ai jamais vu ça, jamais [en] entendu parler.

<sup>23</sup> Je pense qu'un exercice comme-ça (break-out group discussion) devrait être fait le plus souvent possible. Ça devrait devenir un routine pour le gouvernement.

<sup>24</sup> Au niveau de l'éducation, je pense que ce serait indispensable qu'il ait des cours qui soient obligatoires pour informer les jeunes de comment [la] démocratie fonctionne.



As for the voluntary sector, people are offering their services less than in the past because of the increasingly professional expectations of voluntary organizations. For example, people “now have to pass all kinds of police and other checks, which they just don’t want to be bothered doing because it’s a pain in the butt.”

A wide range of remedies for encouraging engagement in either the voluntary sector or the democratic process included: hot lines for the elderly to get help to assist them to go out and cast their ballot; Internet voting, especially for the young; in each constituency, a general meeting each year attended by federal, provincial and local politicians; and greater government assistance to voluntary organizations, including the provision of meeting places.

#### **2.2.12. Newfoundland and Labrador Forum**

Participants in the Newfoundland and Labrador forum seemed less concerned about declining turnout than attendees at other forums. In Newfoundland and Labrador, conversation focused on the quality of consultation. Participants expressed doubt about the authenticity of government desire to consult, wondering how much government truly cared and to what extent the government’s own polls were rigged—after all, they only “give you the [policy] options that they put forth, and I think that’s a little misleading.”

MPs are no better than government departments, according to a number of participations. After MPs adopt a position, they do not “come back to give us a reason why they are going in a certain direction.”

#### **2.2.13. Youth Forum in Ottawa**

To an amazing degree, attendees at the Youth forum in Ottawa gave voice to opinions resembling closely those of participants in the individual provincial and territorial forums across the country. Youth lamented the decline in involvement in society and in the democratic process. Some attributed the decline to social isolation. As one participant put it, “it is too easy to stay home and not be active as a citizen. There’s the Internet, television, and all sorts of



other things that allow people to be in contact with the world but not with people.”<sup>25</sup>

As at the other forums, some participants saw no link between civic-minded engagement in voluntary activity and civics-related engagement in the democratic process. “I think there is a [...] disconnect between the two... There [are] quite a few people that don't [...] have knowledge of what goes on in politics, but [they] do still feel the need to take part in [their] community.” But some attendees saw a link. As one put it, “Providing voluntary service to society and being involved with people can only help improve the democratic process.”<sup>26</sup>

Participants were not sure how to encourage volunteering. A participant from central Canada reported that the Ontario schools require voluntary activity, as a result of which students “hate it.”

Like attendees at other forums, youth participants saw value in high turnout but some of them highlighted the risks of overemphasizing turnout for its own sake. The quality of voting also matters. “The first time I vote, I voted haphazardly without thought.”<sup>27</sup>

Economics may be a factor in low youth turnout. According to more than one participant, young people are less apt to vote because they are preoccupied with getting and holding gainful employment. Young people “don't pay taxes [and therefore] don't feel like there is a stake in politics.”

Several attendees noted a kind of catch-22 in any effort to encourage more turnout among the young. “If young people don't get involved, the government has less interest in making promises to them... The young don't form part of the voting electorate, and so there will be fewer programs for the young.”<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> De plus en plus [...] c'est [plus] facile de ne pas partir de chez soi, de ne pas être actif comme citoyen ; on a l'Internet, on a la télévision, on a toutes les choses qui nous permettent de rester chez nous, d'être en contact avec le monde, mais pas nécessairement avec [...] des autres citoyens [...] On n'est pas impliqué, on ne se fait pas partie des clubs et du bénévolat.

<sup>26</sup> Le fait de faire du bénévolat, ou de se retrouver en société [et] avec des gens qui nous entourent, ça ne peut que faire améliorer le processus démocratique.

<sup>27</sup> La première fois que j'ai voté, j'ai voté n'importe comment.

<sup>28</sup> Si les jeunes ne s'impliquent pas, [le gouvernement] n'aurait plus d'intérêt à faire des promesses aux jeunes parce qu'il sache qu'ils ne votent pas, [ils] ne font pas partie de l'électorat et il y aurait encore moins programmes pour les jeunes.





As for remedies, youth participants spoke at length about opportunities for both schools and government to play a constructive role. Governments should make more effort to consult youth. “This is the first time I’ve ever seen any movement by the government to actually find out the opinions of the youth,” declared one attendee. Schools ought to strengthen their civics educational programs, encourage model Parliaments, and give students more opportunities to have a say at school itself. Schools would encourage students to become engaged later in life by “giving [them] the right to have a say as well as an impact at school,”<sup>29</sup> according to one participant.

## **2.3. Survey Findings**

### **2.3.1. Public Opinion**

A necessary but insufficient condition for people to feel engaged in the democratic process is for them to feel they know and understand it. Respondents in the survey were asked to self-report or score their own knowledge of many aspects of our system, as shown in table 26 in the Appendix. Given the widely held view that Canadians, like citizens of other democracies, are not intensely engaged in the democratic process, one would expect moderate levels of self-reported knowledge.

That is what the data show. On a 7 point scale from 7=a lot of knowledge to 1=almost none, the average score for knowing how government consults is 3.8 and for political parties 4.6. Among respondents with extreme scores, people saying that they know almost nothing (score of 1) are twice as numerous as those who claim that they know a lot (score of 7)—12% vs. 6%.<sup>30</sup>

To get a sense of what accounts for Canadians’ knowledge, we undertook multivariate statistical analysis of the drivers of knowledge of the rules and laws

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<sup>29</sup> Il faut donner [aux étudiants à l’école] le droit de se prononcer [et] il faut aussi que ça ait un impact.

<sup>30</sup> We conducted a factor analysis of the self-reported knowledge scores in order to reveal the structure of their thinking. A two-factor structure emerged: an electoral process factor reflecting knowledge of electoral rules, parties, the Commons, and the Senate along with a machinery of government factor reflecting knowledge of the government of Canada as a whole, democratic institutions, and how the government consults people.



of the electoral system.<sup>31</sup> Causal modeling revealed three drivers—education, age, and place of birth. Knowledge was higher among the educated, older citizens, and citizens born in Canada. It is as if Canadians acquire their understanding of the democratic process partly as a result of formal education and the habits associated with it and partly as a result of a kind of osmosis, absorbing information in the course of living in the country.

Canadians want more consultation. Asked if the government should consult a lot more or a lot less on a 7 point scale, Canadians say they want more by an overwhelming margin—76% want more and 11% less with an average score of 5.6 on the 7 point scale, as shown in table 4 in the Appendix. Newfoundland and Labrador as well as New Brunswick residents feel especially that way, but Canadians differ little from each other on this or on any other issue explored in the survey.<sup>32</sup>

Irrespective of the category of knowledge, First Nations/ Métis/Inuit respondents tend to score their own knowledge lower than do other Canadians. However, causal modeling reveals that all of the apparently lower knowledge among First Nations/ Métis/Inuit is a byproduct of lower levels of education. Once the lower level of education is taken into account statistically, First Nations/ Métis/Inuit respondents no longer differ from Canadians as a whole.

### **2.3.2. Forum Opinion**

Prior to attending their events, forum participants resembled closely other Canadians in their self-reported knowledge, as detailed in Appendix table 26. The one difference is a tendency of forum participants to report greater knowledge of the Commons prior to their event than the does the public at large. Forum participants differ sharply in their self-reported knowledge after the forums took place. As a result of their forum experience, their self-reported knowledge jumped two full points—from a mean of 3.6 to 5.6—in the case of knowledge of the Senate; somewhat less for other aspects of our democratic system.

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<sup>31</sup> Knowledge of the electoral system was chosen because it is most highly correlated with the electoral process factor, described in the preceding footnote.

<sup>32</sup> Compared to others, First Nations/ Métis/Inuit express a slightly greater enthusiasm for public meetings and discussion groups (see Appendix table 6b).



## **3.0. The House of Commons**

### **3.1. Introduction**

Both the forums and the survey research explored two main sub-themes—what people know about the House of Commons and the roles played by Members of Parliament, and what people think ought to be the priority roles for MPs.

### **3.2. Forums**

#### **3.2.1. Overview**

The general sense is that people tend to know more about the House of Commons than the Senate and some other topics, and yet feel that they ought to know more. A desire for more civics instruction in school re-emerges as a theme. Media-reported Question Period figures prominently in what they know. They have mixed feelings about how much priority Question Period should have among the roles played by MPs. On the one hand, some forum participants felt strongly that the open debate of Question Period is essential to democracy. On the other hand, quite a number of participants called for more decorum, substance, and to some extent cooperation among Members speaking in Question Period. Many participants wanted a stronger hand by the Speaker in ensuring decorum.

When discussing the House of Commons, forum participants placed special emphasis on Members, far more than on the Chamber as a whole or on its Committees. Mistrust of MPs and the House of Commons as a whole figures prominently in what forum participants said. A recurrent theme is that citizens do not always understand MPs, what they say, or the nature of their motives. Another recurrent theme is skepticism about MPs' willingness and ability to follow through on promises. MPs are often seen as powerless because of the importance of party lines or merely un-genuine. Quite a number of participants highlighted a conflict between Members' obligations to their constituents and their obligations to their party line.



Crossing the floor—leaving one party for another—emerged as one of a number of factors arousing mistrust, especially in some of the Western forums. Participants weighed the right or duty of Members to leave a party in principled disagreement vis-à-vis the desire of Members to leave a losing party for a winning for career-building considerations. One recommendation was to allow Members to become independent but require them to win in a general or by-election before joining another party.

### **3.2.2. Territories (Yellowknife) Forum**

The principal themes emerging in the Northern forum were mistrust of politicians, lack of awareness about how to communicate with or follow the activities of MPs, misgivings about the tone of Question Period, and a desire for a stronger role for the Speaker.

Mistrust was often conveyed as a *chicken and egg* dilemma—“politicians are not often trusted because the parties aren’t trusted,” as one participant put it. This particular participant expressed a sentiment heard at this and other forums that an MP’s “follow-through” could not be taken for granted even if a citizen was able to reach a Member. Many attendees would not know how to reach a Member. People feel about MPs the “way they feel about lawyers.” According to another, “floor crossing...really inspires the mistrust in the public.”

For a number of attendees, Question Period alienates the public. As one participant put it, “as portrayed, [it’s] a turn off [and] sets a bad example for kids.” If people watch “CSPAN [CPAC]”, they quickly realize that “governments are a joke.” The problem with Question Period, according to another participant, is that it too often seems like a “high school debating society.” A somewhat unique recommendation was for communications efforts by Parliament to help the public learn how they can communicate with their MP.

### **3.2.3. British Columbia Forum**

Participants in the forum held in North Vancouver shared the generalized mistrust of politicians, MPs, and the House of Commons. They devoted much thought to remedies.

One remedy involved improving the quality of debate in Question Period. “Why can’t you have decorum and a lively Question Period?” asked one



participant. "There's rude people, lots of heckling, lots of banging of fists, name calling," noted another.

Another remedy involved improving the quality of information being transmitted to the public. The public's limited willingness to invest time and effort in following the House of Commons is part of the problem. Parliament can nonetheless help reduce public suspicion by improving public understanding of how the Commons works. "One of the reasons we sometimes don't trust them," opined one participant, "is we don't know what the thought process is....you have no idea the process that went in...nothing is ever explained."

Still another remedy is to encourage pride in our system. Canada has much to be proud of, insisted one participant. "One of the things that I do appreciate about Canadian politics is the idea of seeing politicians, even the Prime Minister, standing up and talking across – it doesn't happen in the majority of the world... This is a strength that Canadian politics has to share with the world."

As for improving the internal functioning of the Commons, individual participants recommended (a) having more policy experts advising Committees, (b) the Commons and MPs communicating more information about the institution's success stories, (c) more forums like the one attended, and (d) wider dissemination of information about bills before Parliament.

#### **3.2.4. Alberta Forum**

Participants in the Alberta forum also offered a lot of insights. "I think [the party line is] why they're not trusted as much as they could be" was an assessment that elicited some agreement. Over-promising is another factor. "You can promise the world and then after [election] then well we can't do this. That's probably why they're not trusted," observed another participant.

While over-promising is a root cause, so is poor decorum. Mistrust arises from "the negative, the controversial, the fighting that comes out [in the media]," according to still another participant. Added another: "You won't even let your children behave this way." Question Period elicited some negative comment, but some positive comment too. "I enjoy listening to it. I think there's some humour there and some very good quips. Sometimes they get carried away but..."



The various remedies included (a) having politicians reach multi-party agreements more often, (b) having the Speaker enforce better decorum in Question Period, (c) more free votes, (d) more honesty in party platforms, and (e) greater resources being assigned to Committees, which should travel a lot across the country, giving people an opportunity to have their say. Another remedy involved prohibitions on crossing the floor. "If they're going to leave their party," remarked one participant, "they have to go independent. They can't just cross to another party. That's wrong."

### **3.2.5. Saskatchewan Forum**

Impropriety is at the foundation of much distrust, according to many of the attendees. As one participant put it, "they're caught too many times in scandal." According to another attendee, the issue is honesty. "It comes down to direct accountability in terms of election promises that are clearly defined and then the opposite occurs." According to still another, "They [MPs] have a problem saying what they mean and meaning what they say...they have this ability to answer a question without ever answering it."

The related issues of decorum and Question Period came up often but without leading to a consensus view. Critics among the forum participants expressed the view that persistent negativity and censure undermines public confidence in Parliamentarians. According to one attendee, public misgivings begin in "the election process, where they're so negative in their campaigns and they start running each other down, and [gets worse in] Parliament [when MPs] act like a bunch of two year olds fighting." "It's really embarrassing," offered one participant.

Some participants nonetheless approve of Question Period and its style of discourse:

I don't think decorum is a problem at Question Period, I mean that's what Question Period's for. It's to make noise and to embarrass and to bring to light and you know, you do that whatever [by] means necessary;

I think Question Period is very important. It is a showcase for transparency.



For participants in the Saskatchewan forum, the remedies for the House of Commons include more free votes, more resources for individual MPs, more resources for committees, and greater honesty in politicians' promises.

### **3.2.6. Manitoba Forum**

Participants in the Manitoba forum had much to say about remedies. Part of the problem is public ignorance, some said. "People don't have a realistic view of what an MP is or does." Less than honest communication is another factor. "Every time you see [MPs] break a little promise here and there," said one attendee, "it etches away at that trust." Another attendee spoke at length about conundra arising from party lines. "I think they [MPs] need to be honest about their opinions and if they ran on a platform and are going to have change their opinion based on the caucus or their party, then they really should be up front with their constituents."

As in the Saskatchewan forum, Question Period was the subject of much discussion and little consensus. On the one side, some felt that Question Period "is valuable for democracy," to use the words offered by one person. Yet, a lack of decorum troubled others. "I think there's a line between screaming...and healthy debate," said one attendee. The sundry recommendations included having MPs providing quarterly reports to their constituents, giving MPs larger budgets, and having committees communicate more often.

### **3.2.7. Ontario Forum**

While agreeing that MPs are mistrusted, participants in the Ontario forum disagreed about the degree to which mistrust was justified. One participant insisted that MPs deserve mistrust because they knowingly fail to carry out their commitments. Another believed that "politicians lie" but not always intentionally. Some participants felt that politicians were innocent victims, tarred by the misconduct of a few or the hyperbole of the media.

Question Period certainly drew some comments. As one attendee put it, in Question Period, "they're just childish." "I watch CPAC," confided another, "and it's absolutely ridiculous for grown people to act like children."



### **3.2.8. Quebec Forum**

Participants in the Quebec forum shared the misgivings about politicians expressed at other forums but may have been more nuanced and less inclined to find categorical fault. Some spoke of the tendencies of politicians to be vague about what they are saying. “For politicians,” said one participant, “it’s all about the art of talking around a subject.”<sup>33</sup> On the other hand, more than one stated simply, “MPs don’t keep their promises.”<sup>34</sup>

For some, the cause of mistrust was poor communication and consultation from Members. “It’s certainly a problem,” insisted one attendee, “...that they do all sorts of things, and then tell us after.”<sup>35</sup>

Not everyone agreed that the source of mistrust was poor communication. “Excuse me, there’s lots. There’s lots of stuff one can find in the French and English newspapers, on the Internet, and on radio and television. One can find whatever one wants.”<sup>36</sup> According to another, “there’s not much of importance that is secret. Things come out....There are lots of debates.”<sup>37</sup> According to still another, “[Question Period] does inform us a lot. It’s there that one can see the games they try to play and one gets to see debate. Democracy is on television.”<sup>38</sup>

One source of disrespect for MPs, said some, is the limited authority of individual Members. “MPs don’t have much influence,” observed one participant, “they’re there to back the party line.”<sup>39</sup> When a Member breaks from

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<sup>33</sup> Chez les politiciens, c’est l’art de broder autour d’un thème sans jamais répondre.

<sup>34</sup> Les députés ne tiennent pas leurs promesses.

<sup>35</sup> C’est justement un problème [...] qu’ils font toutes les choses, puis ils nous mettent au courant après.

<sup>36</sup> Je m’excuse [mais] il y en a beaucoup, il y en a beaucoup qu’on peut aller chercher dans tous les journaux français, anglais, Internet, radio, télévision. On peut chercher tout ce qu’on veut.

<sup>37</sup> Il n’y a pas grand-chose qui est secret. Ça sort assez bien. En plus, [...]il y a des bons échanges.

<sup>38</sup> [La période des questions], ça nous renseigne pas mal. C’est là qu’on voit les jeux qu’ils essaient de se faire, puis on voit les débats. La démocratie est à la télévision...

<sup>39</sup> [Les députés] n’ont vraiment pas d’impact, ils sont là pour supporter [...] la ligne du parti.





the party line, “he or she may be forced to resign,”<sup>40</sup> observed another. With a view to increasing the authority of the individual MP, some participants expressed an openness to considering changes to our political system. Some believed that the most honest debates took place within parties, and wanted caucus discussions televised. As one participant put it, “there is something missing—caucuses should be televised.”<sup>41</sup>

With an eye on arousing more public engagement in the democratic process, a suggestion was made to hold more referenda, especially by Internet because of the cost savings. This idea surfaced occasionally at other forums too.

### **3.2.9. New Brunswick Forum**

As at other forums, participants in the Fredericton gathering expressed concern about unfulfilled promises from politicians, politicians absent except at election time, and crossing the floor. “I believe that a politician should never use the word ‘promise’,” declared one participant. “We get to see politicians only during elections or when something special is happening,”<sup>42</sup> observed one attendee. Esteem for politicians suffers as a result. “You are more apt to trust somebody that you know,” noted one New Brunswicker.

Some participants seemed concerned at what they believed to be excessive control by the government of what goes on in the House of Commons. “The executive branch, the PMO and Cabinet,” declared one attendee, “probably control the [legislative] agenda too much in terms of telling [MPs] how to vote on issues.”

The thought of Question Period provoked some widely varying reactions, as evidenced in the following verbatims:

It gives me [a] feeling of total discomfort to listen to [the] noise that goes on in Question Period;

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<sup>40</sup> Souvent, il va être démit [...] de ses fonctions.

<sup>41</sup> Une chose qui manque, c’est que les coccus soient plus médiatisés.

<sup>42</sup> Quand il y a des élections [ou] quelque chose de spécial, c’est [seulement à ce temps-là] que tu vas voir [les politiciens].



Question Period is necessary because... we elect [MPs] to form an Opposition,...criticize the Government and even... sometimes embarrass the government;

I don't have a problem when [the Opposition is] asking hard questions [during Question Period]. I have a problem when [it becomes] personal;

[Question Period] is too adversarial...although...that impression is based on the TV coverage;

[Question Period] is 45 minutes of chaos [...] versus the other [hours] of work done in committees and behind the scenes [that] we don't see.

From individuals in the gathering emerged a number of individual recommendations—more free votes, fewer votes on confidence issues, more decorum, and more resources for individual MPs so that they can be more helpful and accessible.

### **3.2.10. PEI Forum**

For many Islanders, the root problem of disengagement is well-founded disrespect for MPs. “I find politicians often don't tell the whole truth of an issue,” insisted an attendee at the Charlottetown forum. “They only tell what they think people want to hear.” “My impression,” confided another attendee, “is...you don't get straight answers.” For another participant, the bottom line is that politicians “aren't trusted because they can't be trusted.”

Part of the problem, felt some participants, is the role of the Confidence motion in the House and the resulting need of the parties to keep their Members in line. “I wonder,” added this Islander, “if the political parties themselves are a bit to blame.”

Participants wanted more accountability and more authentic communication. “If [politicians]...cannot follow through, I think they should have to...you know, give reasons as to why they can't. And be accountable in that way.” Other participants certainly wanted consequences if politicians made promises that were not subsequently carried out because the promises were not made truthfully in the first place.



Attendees recommended a variety of remedies for increasing the effectiveness of and respect for the Commons: watch dogs for politicians; a probationary period for elected officials; fixed election dates; more power to the Speaker; more free votes; more consultation with residents of the local riding; and an explicit, written mandate from local voters on why they chose a given Member.

### **3.2.11. Nova Scotia Forum**

Nova Scotia forum participants were divided about why respect for MPs was in decline. Speaking for the critics, one attendee observed that politicians have “proven themselves to be untrustworthy in most cases [and] dishonest.” According to another, “[Politicians] say one thing and then they [...] do another thing, and our media loves to tell us about all the bad things they do.” Not all participants were unsympathetic to MPs. “Most [of the] time the public doesn’t have all the facts,” volunteered one participant. “[Voters] want too much for nothing,” said another, “and when they don’t get it, they’re disappointed.”

Some concern was expressed about decorum in Question Period. “Since cameras have been in [...] Question Period [...],” said one Nova Scotian, “all of a sudden, everybody’s an actor, everybody’s a stand-up comedian.” “I don’t think one needs to use childish and inappropriate language [or] nastiness [during Question Period],” offered another forum participant. Question Period nonetheless had its defenders. “It’s a great thing,” insisted one participant. “I want to see the personalities come out of the [MPs] that we vote in.”

The suggested remedies included more free votes and greater dissemination of information about how Committees work.

### **3.2.12. Newfoundland and Labrador Forum**

Newfoundland and Labrador forum participants seemed no more mistrustful of politicians than participants in other forums but the language of their comments sometimes betrayed an edginess:

I find that during the election period that MPs will promise you almost anything to be elected ...But after getting elected, they’re very difficult to get a response from;  
The deals [between] parties...That just helps feed the cynicism;



They promise what they can't deliver;  
[Politicians] manipulate their positions to suit themselves, or  
their friends, or [the] friends of their friends;  
If [MPs] are going to be...promising what they can [not]  
deliver, they should be held accountable for it.

Not all participants were ready to blame politicians. "I...think a MP's job is an impossible [one]," volunteered one attendee, "because [they] have got so many stakeholders who have so many issues that are priorities for them and want them to be priorities [for the] MP [as well]." Among the solutions emerging from discussion were suggestions for more free votes, more information shared with Canadians about how the system actually works, and an automatic by-election if an MP wants to change parties.

### **3.2.13. Youth Forum in Ottawa**

The Youth Forum discussions of the Commons were intense. Youth attendees shared the general view that MPs face a trust challenge. "Turnout is in decline," noted one participant. "...because people are mistrustful." "Politicians often seem a class apart," the participant continued. "People can't identify with politicians."<sup>43</sup> Besides, said another participant, "they have a history of broken promises." "People don't feel," said a third attendee, "[that politicians]...are telling [the public] all we need to know."

Youth participants do not place all the responsibility on MPs' own door steps. Promises can have an honest intent but turn out not to be "feasible." The nature of the political system does not always make it easy for politicians to deliver on their promises even if they resolutely wished to. For example, "a minority government [...] is not afforded [the] opportunity to fulfill [its] promises" in the same way that is available to a majority government, observed one participant.

Another factor in mistrust is party allegiance. "MPs are supposed to represent the voters vis-à-vis the government but in practice they are more apt to serve the government by seeking to persuade the electorate to back what the

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<sup>43</sup> [...] le fait que le taux de participation est en baisse, ...c'est ... que tu es méfiant. [...] Il y a une manque de proximité, souvent les politiciens sont une classe à part...On ne réussit pas à s'identifier aux [politiciens].



government has already decided to do. Roles are reversed. The public's loss of confidence stems from this; we don't know to whom the MP holds allegiance."<sup>44</sup> Another source of mistrust is a cynical journalism. "The media...play up the drama," noted one participant, "...and it really impacts our impression."

For some attendees, public skepticism has its roots in a poor understanding of how the Commons works and how reachable are its Members. As one attendee put it, "I don't think very many people realize that...your MP [is accessible]." Some responsibility should be placed on the doorstep of voters. "Being a citizen of Canada," declared one participant, means "you have a certain duty to be slightly informed." As for public dismay over broken promises, one attendee emphasized that "a lot of people's [expectations] of what politicians should [be doing] are higher than what [politicians] can do...We don't understand how hard it is [to be an M.P.]."

Other attendees would not blame the public. As one attendee said in rejoinder, "I don't think voters are as ill informed as that. It's not up to the public to try to understanding politicians. It's up to politicians to make an effort to be understood by the voter."<sup>45</sup>

It is likewise the responsibility of key conduits of communication like CPAC to do a better job of communicating. "[CPAC] is not a particularly [accessible] format, especially for young people," observed one participant at the Ottawa forum.

On the specific issue of youth engagement, a number of attendees point out that so much that matters to youth appears to have no bearing on politics and vice-versa. Youth are very preoccupied with their daily job-seeking and other responsibilities.

As at many other forums, the Ottawa participants had a lot to say about Question Period and were divided in their assessments.

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<sup>44</sup> [...] à propos de la ligne de parti [...] on se fait l'impression que le député dise au gouvernement qu'est-ce que leur électeurs pensent, mais [le député] est plutôt au service du gouvernement pour venir dire aux [électeurs] qu'est-ce que le gouvernement veule qu'il fasse. Le rôle est inversé. Je pense que la perte de confiance vient de là, on ne sait plus à qui va l'allégeance.

<sup>45</sup> Je ne pense pas que les [électeurs] soient si mal informés que ça. Je pense surtout que ce n'est pas aux gens de faire un effort pour comprendre les politiciens, ça serait plutôt aux politiciens de faire un effort pour que les [électeurs] comprennent.



From the extensive deliberations emerged a variety of recommendations, advocated by varying proportions of the attendees: far more effort by individual MPs to be seen and heard; more coverage of local MPs by local media “because the national media can’t cover every MP in every region”; annual reports to their electors by each MP on the MP’s accomplishments during the preceding twelve months; visible consultation with the public on promoting individual Members to the cabinet; significant increases in the budgets of constituency offices to enable MPs to do a better job at consulting with their voters; a strong consensus that schools must do a far better job of civics education; formal training for newly elected MPs on their democratic obligations to their constituents.

As for crossing the floor, Commons rules should allow MPs to leave their party but not sit with another until after a by-election or general election, thereby making it difficult for MPs to cross the floor just to be in the cabinet of the winning party.

### **3.3. Survey Findings**

#### **3.3.1. Public Opinion**

Respondents were asked what they know about the different roles fulfilled by MPs (e.g. Question Period vs. Committee work) and how much value they see in each of these roles.<sup>46</sup> According to the data, Canadians know less about the roles they value most and more about what the roles value least. For example, Canadians appear to know slightly more about Question Period than Committee work or how MPs consult the public (tables 3.3.1A and B; Appendix tables 12A and B). Yet the public apparently values far more MPs’ roles in consulting citizens and in Commons committees than MPs’ roles in Question Period (table 3.3.1B).

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<sup>46</sup> Self-reported knowledge is sometimes considered an over-estimate of what people actually know compared to measuring their knowledge with test-type questions. Self-reported knowledge nonetheless remains a relatively problem-free way of comparing topics about which people feel they know a lot with topics about which they feel they know little.



Table 3.3.1A: Self-Reported Knowledge of Aspects of the Commons: Canada-Wide and Segment Means (7=know a lot, 1=almost nothing)

Segment	House of Commons	Role of MPs <sup>47</sup>			
		Question Period	Work in Constituency Offices	Develop New Ideas	Participate in Committee Work
All Canadians	4.0	4.4	4.3	3.9	3.9
Territories	4.0	4.1	4.3	3.7	3.7
British Columbia	4.1	4.5	4.5	4.0	3.9
Alberta	3.8	4.4	4.1	3.8	3.9
Saskatchewan	4.2	4.4	3.9*	3.9	3.8
Manitoba	4.0	4.3	4.3	3.9	4.0
Ontario	4.1	4.4	4.4	4.0	3.9
Quebec	3.7*	4.3	4.3	3.9	4.0
New Brunswick	4.1	4.4	4.2	3.9	3.9
Nova Scotia	3.9	4.4	4.1*	3.9	3.9
Prince Edward Island	3.8	4.2	4.3	3.6	3.7
Newfoundland and Labrador	3.8	4.3	4.3	3.7	3.7
Youth (18-26)	3.5*	3.7*	3.8*	3.6*	3.4*
First Nations/Métis/Inuit <sup>48</sup>	3.5*	3.5*	3.8*	3.5*	3.2*
Forum-Before event	4.4*	NA	NA	NA	NA
Forum-After event	5.7	NA	NA	NA	NA

Though not unanimous or homogeneous on the issue, Canadians have some serious reservations about tone and demeanor in Question Period (table 3.3.1C). A clear majority (64% scoring 5-7) believe that “Debates in Question Period are often disrespectful, reducing public esteem for the House of Commons.” Yet, there is no aspect of House of Commons life that Canadians say they know more about.

<sup>47</sup> This question was asked of the general population only.

<sup>48</sup> This combines First Nation, Métis and Inuit respondents in the general population survey over sample.



*Table 3.3.1B: Desirable Roles of MPs – Canada-Wide Gap Analysis (Proportion Saying Lowest Priority Subtracted from Proportion Saying Highest)<sup>49</sup>*

	Highest Priority (%)	Lowest Priority (%)	Highest-Lowest
Consulting citizens on new laws, programs, or other issues	40	10	+30
Committee work examining new laws and government spending	23	11	+12
Helping people deal with government departments	17	17	0
Developing new ideas	11	16	-5
Debates in Question Period	6	42	-36

*Table 3.3.1C: Public Opinion on Question Period Canada-Wide Means (7=strongly agree, 1=strongly disagree)<sup>50</sup>*

	Mean	7	6	5	4	3	2	1	DNK
Debates in Question Period are often disrespectful, reducing public respect for the House of Commons	5.0	32	18	14	10	9	8	8	2
Question Period offers strong, energetic debates that are vital for democracy	4.3	17	14	19	15	12	10	13	1

### 3.3.2. Forum Opinion

The opinions of forum participants lend support to the idea that it would be valuable for Canadians to learn and know more about the various roles of MPs other than in Question Period. Forum participants were asked which aspect of Commons' life they learned most about at the forum (table 3.3.2A) and which aspect the public would benefit most from learning about (table 3.3.2B). They

<sup>49</sup> GenPop Q9-Q10, Forum Q9-Q10: "Of the following things that MPs do, please tell me which one should be the highest priority for MPs and which one the lowest?"

<sup>50</sup> GenPop Q12, Forum Q12: "Thinking of Question Period, which is often televised, please tell me how much you agree with the following opinions on a 7 point scale where 1 means strongly disagree and 7, strongly agree."





themselves learned about Question Period as well as about three other roles. Forum participants believe that the public would gain most from learning about MPs' work in constituency offices and committee work.

*Table 3.3.2A: Forum Participants - Which of the following activities of MPs did you learn most about during the forum? (Forced Choice)<sup>51</sup>*

	%
They participate in committee work, examining new laws or programs	39
They develop new ideas for government policies and programs	22
They work in their constituency offices in their home ridings, helping people deal with government on issues like passports and employment insurance	21
They ask the Government questions during the House of Commons Question Period	19

*Table 3.3.2B: Forum Participants - Which of the following activities of MPs would the public benefit most from knowing more of? (Forced Choice)<sup>52</sup>*

	%
They work in their constituency offices in their home ridings, helping people deal with government on issues like passports and employment insurance	37
They participate in committee work, examining new laws or programs	35
They develop new ideas for government policies and programs	22
They ask the Government questions during the House of Commons Question Period	7

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<sup>51</sup> Forum Q7: "As you may know, MPs or Members of Parliament are elected to the House of Commons. The following four activities are some of the things they do. Which of these activities did you learn most about during the forum?" This question was asked of the forum participants only.

<sup>52</sup> Forum Q8: "Of these four activities, which do you think the public would benefit most from knowing more about?" This question was asked of the forum participants only.



## **4.0. The Senate**

### **4.1. Introduction**

The forums and the national survey explored a common set of themes—the roles that ought to be played by the Senate in our democratic process, potential Senate reforms, and the values that should be reflected in its operation.

### **4.2. Forums**

#### **4.2.1. Overview**

Forum discussions of the Senate represented a marked change from discussion of the Commons. The key difference is how much less forum participants felt that they knew about the Senate than about the Commons.

Participants' previous lack of knowledge about the role and activities of the Senate led to some mixed feelings about the institution. Some misgivings about the utility of the Upper House were paralleled by separate misgivings about Senators being appointed by the Prime Minister instead of being elected. An underlying concern was apprehension about the patronage or partisan basis of selection. In discussing the Senate, many participants nonetheless embraced the idea of the Upper House as a chamber of sober, second thought and hence as a counterpoint to the Commons.

A sizeable number of participants, especially in the West, were concerned less about the absence of Senate elections or the role of patronage in selection than about the numerical under-representation of the West. Many would like Western representation increased to reflect demographic changes. Many would also like to see parity of regional representation to the benefit of Western and less populated provinces or regions. Yet they were often reluctant to embrace a multilateral process entailing provincial consent for fear of opening a kind of Constitutional Pandora's Box. "Moderate Senate reform or no Senate reform,"



said one Newfoundland and Labrador forum participant, “we don’t want big constitutional change.”

Participants in the western forums tended to be uniform in advocating stronger provincial or regional representation, albeit sometimes with different justifications. Attendees at the forums in Alberta and B.C. were apt to justify greater representation in order to reflect the reality of their increased provincial populations. Attendees at the forums in Saskatchewan and Manitoba were apt to justify their desire for greater representation in terms of the need to have their voice heard.

#### **4.2.2. Territories (Yellowknife) Forum**

Many at the Northern forum held in Yellowknife found the Senate puzzling. As in the case of participants at the other forums and respondents in the Canada-wide survey, participants at the Northern forum felt that they knew relatively little about the institution, perhaps too little to have a strong opinion. “There’s many more important things to be taken care of before they should even worry about the Senate,” declared one participant.

As at other forums, participants were asked for their views of various traditional roles of the Upper House—representing the regions, chamber of sober second thoughts, careful scrutiny of legislation, a check on the power of the Prime Minister, and protecting minority interests. None of these roles elicited much negative feeling of any significance and all provoked at least some enthusiasm. “I love that sober second thought,” exclaimed one attendee.

A small number would have Canada do without a second House. But most were satisfied with the status quo. “They actually should probably leave [the Senate as it is] because there’s always like one or two words in laws that can be changed, ...so to have this [Senate] is probably a good idea.” “I like them not behooving to anybody,” added another attendee, “that they are independent, they do not have to toe the party [line]....”

The sundry recommendations included: a demographic Senate reflecting Canada’s multicultural and gender characteristics, term limits, perhaps age limits, stronger competence requirements, and regular Senate elections.



### **4.2.3. British Columbia Forum**

Attendees of the British Columbia forum favoured stronger representation for provinces generally and for the Western provinces in particular. “If we cannot have equal weight for all the provinces,” insisted one participant, “then I don’t see a reason for having a Senate.” The idea of fairness and fair representation for the West emerged repeatedly but it was not the only theme. Other values—accountability, honesty, transparency, efficiency, some degree of non-partisanship—emerged at the B.C. forum as they did at other discussions.

As elsewhere, many embraced elections as a way of assuring accountability. Patronage appointments would contribute to a continuing de-legitimation of the Senate, in the view of many. Some participants nonetheless opposed electing Senators: “I can see problems with an elected Senate in that elected folks tend to have different personality types.”

### **4.2.4. Alberta Forum**

Participants in the Alberta gathering had their own special focus--the principle of regional representation, as illustrated in the following verbatims:

I think it is important that it [Senate] does represent the regions;

The Maritimes is over [represented], Ontario is under, Quebec would be just about where it should be, and the West is underrepresented;

I think it is very important to represent the regions and to protect minority interests [because majority are already represented by the House of Commons; and

I think it’s pathetic that as Alberta, you know, is a significant player in the Canadian economy if nothing else, we have 6 Senators, that’s pathetic.

The idea of electing senators elicited energetic support but enthusiasm for an elected system was far from universal. “Under an elected Senate,” cautioned one person, “we may lose some of the talent that’s required to sit on Committees.” “To have people who are experts in different areas,” volunteered another, “I think the appointed system is better.”



Once the dilemma of the West's under-representation were resolved, the Alberta forum attendees would embrace the *sober second thought* and other traditional roles of the Upper House. There was some sense that the Senate should have more resources. "They could do all of [their] roles more effectively."

Apart from the regional aspect, there emerged no strong dissatisfaction with the system. "The Canadian system of governing themselves," said one participant, "has not worked that badly." Once the regional dilemma is resolved, for some participants it would be important to assure adequate Aboriginal, female, and other diversity of representation.

#### **4.2.5. Saskatchewan Forum**

The seemingly more politically interested participants in the Saskatchewan forum appeared more aware of the Senate's activities than others. They also seemed more sanguine. "[Senators] take the position as appointed delegates very seriously," said one pro-Senate attendee, "and they only object when they feel it's in the national interest." According to another pro-Senate participant, "the majority of Senators do their jobs...better than the people in the Commons." Said a third pro-Senate participant, "For less than \$3 a year, I'm pleased with the checks and balances...and the quality of personnel."

Participants appreciated what they perceived as the Senate's roles to scrutinize legislation, act as watchdog, keep the Prime Minister in check, and "keep MPs on the straight and narrow." A few foresaw a new role for an energized Senate as interlocutor between federal and provincial governments.

#### **4.2.6. Manitoba Forum**

Participants in the Manitoba gathering favour stronger regional representation, notably for the West. One participant put it this way: "Making it more fair, more regional, will mean lessening the power of Ontario and Quebec and giving more Senators to newer regions like the West."

Manitoba attendees had a range of other goals as well. For one participant, it was vital to make the Senate multicultural: "We're not all white Anglo-Saxon anymore." For others, a key goal was to achieve an elected Senate in order to reflect the country more accurately. Yet, for others an elected Senate would "introduce the same problems that are fundamental to an electoral system."



#### **4.2.7. Ontario Forum**

A number of participants in the Ontario forum held in the Greater Toronto Area seemed receptive to the idea of stronger regional representation. “We’re very strongly in favour of regional representation,” insisted an attendee. But they were not always clear as to what was intended, for example if they favoured parity of representation by province or by region.

Ontarian participants tended to value all the traditional roles of the Senate. On the matter of scrutiny, they voiced an appreciation of the technical knowledge that Senators may bring. For them, a value of the Senate and a criterion for consideration in appointments is “expertise in the areas that legislation is coming forward, everything from the military to economics to medicine,” in the words of one participant. For many, the ideal Senate is non-partisan. “It’s like having an audit for your company,” declared one attendee.

As at other forums, attendees were divided about elections. “We don’t trust the people we elect to the Commons, why would we trust the people we elect to the Senate any more?” Still others viewed the Senate with equanimity—“There’s so much more that needs to take priority than Senate reform...”

#### **4.2.8. Quebec Forum**

A number of Quebecers valued the sober second thought function of the Upper House. “The Senate needs to remain our second chamber,” insisted one Quebecer. “It’s important to have a balance ... The Senate has its place.”<sup>53</sup> The Senate offers not only a second opinion but also expertise. “We need Senators,” said another participant, “...because we don’t expect MPs to provide sectoral expertise [that we count on from Senators].”<sup>54</sup> Some hoped that any term limit would not be made too small since it can take years to learn to be truly useful. “If the term were four years,” declared one participant, “that would hardly be long enough to become competent.”<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> C’est évident que le Sénat comme tel, comme deuxième chambre demeure. Je trouve ça important qu’il y ait un équilibre...le Sénat a sa place.

<sup>54</sup> On a besoin des [sénateurs,..., parce que nos députés, on ne leur demande pas d’avoir une expertise dans des secteurs en tout cas.

<sup>55</sup> Ça prend une certaine durée, je vais plus loin que quatre ans, parce qu’à quatre ans, tu deviens à peine compétent [comme] juriste.



Another participant spoke at length about the value of the Senate:

MPs don't go into all the detail and impacts of laws. That's why we have the Senate chamber. That's where they take the time to analyse the impacts. Their role is to get into the detail to foresee the long-term consequences. That can't be done in the House of Commons because they don't have the time to do it.<sup>56</sup>

Some were critical of the Senate, particularly its failure to communicate. "People don't know what Senators do," declared one attendee. There are 105 of them but they have no visibility...Something is wrong with their approach."<sup>57</sup> A number of other participants concurred that Senators are unknown. A few favoured abolition. One Quebecer pointed out that Premier J-J Bertrand had abolished Quebec's Upper House in 1968 amid prophecies of doom that never materialized. The predominant view was for incremental change in order to improve the Senate while avoiding serious constitutional debate.

#### **4.2.9. New Brunswick Forum**

Participants in the New Brunswick gathering were receptive to the idea of the Senate as a place of sober second thought but were generally unaware of its roles and activities. Reflecting a common sentiment, one person expressed the view that "it's very important to have a Senate because it's always good to have the checks and balances." Others nonetheless acknowledged not knowing much. "We don't hear too much about what goes on [in the Senate], but I think the Senate itself is a check [...] for a government that becomes too powerful." From another participant: "We don't hear much about what goes on."<sup>58</sup>

Some participants favoured elections on grounds of modernity and accountability. Meanwhile some feared that an elected Senate would merely

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<sup>56</sup> [Les députés] ne vont pas en profondeur de tous les détails puis des conséquences, etc. C'est pour ça qu'à la chambre du Sénat ; c'est là qu'ils prennent le temps d'analyser tous les impacts. [...] Leur rôle c'est de rendre dans les détails pour voir les conséquences au long terme, puis l'évolution possible. Tu ne peux pas faire ça dans la Chambre des communes parce que tu n'as pas le temps à le faire.

<sup>57</sup> On ne sait pas ce qu'ils font [les sénateurs], à quoi ils servent. Ils [nombrent] 105, [mais] ils manquent de visibilité... Il y a une méthode de travail qui manque en quelque part.

<sup>58</sup> On ne sait pas grande chose sur le rôle du Sénat.



duplicate the Commons: “[An elected Senate] is going to be too caught up in partisan consideration[s] rather than operating as a body that looks at [issues] from different perspective[s].” There was some receptivity to greater regional representation but also concern about “going too far down that road.”

#### **4.2.10. PEI Forum**

Senate reform was supported but not on a comprehensive scale. As one attendee pointed out, “there’s a lot of problems in Ottawa and Senate [reform] is kind of down on the [bottom of] the list of problems.”

As for potential changes, many attendees were receptive to the idea of better regional representation for the West. A few would elect Senators. Others favoured a kind of non-partisan appointment. Other recommendations included term and age limits, less partisanship in appointments, and Senators elected by the province.

#### **4.2.11. Nova Scotia Forum**

Nova Scotia participants were generally certain about the value of a continuing Senate. The following verbatims reflect their varied satisfaction: “It provides a balance or a check on the kind of volatility of [general] elections every four years”; “the sober second thought [idea] is something that should never disappear”; “the Senate does a lot of good work and...[Senators aren’t] getting credit for it”.

A few people wondered how well the Upper House was performing. “How do [we] measure how [Senators] are doing their job?” asked one person. “How valuable is [sober] second [thought]?” asked another. “It’s very seldom that the Senate goes against the House of Commons.”

Participants acknowledged their lack of knowledge of the institution. A Nova Scotia forum attendee asked, “If people don’t know enough about the Senate, ...then why would we want a comprehensive change?”

#### **4.2.12. Newfoundland and Labrador Forum**

Participants in the Newfoundland and Labrador forum, held in St. John’s, had mixed views about the roles and importance of the Senate. According to one participant, the Senate “does not have any legitimacy.” According to another, “Senators are very good at [carefully] looking [over] the laws.”





Participants in Newfoundland and Labrador tended to be more aware of the people occupying Senators' chairs than attendees at other forums. But Newfoundland and Labrador forum attendees seemed no more aware of the chamber's operations than did participants at other forums.

Simplicity was a theme that came up when the idea of an elected versus appointed Senate was discussed. "I don't like [the idea of] electing MPs at the same time [as] electing Senators," volunteered one attendee, "because people are going to get mixed up." In terms of fairness, some felt "it would be a good idea to elect [Senators]". With regards to the best person for the job, "we get a better pool of candidates often by not electing them. They are professionals, experts in different fields, and by being appointed, they don't have to campaign to be elected."

#### **4.2.13. Youth Forum in Ottawa**

Youth participants at the Ottawa forum saw the Senate as providing an unbiased perspective and expertise in the evaluation of bills and policies. According to one participant, "the purpose of the Senate, [for] me [is] to make the right decision for the country as a whole." The idea of the Senate as a repository of sober second thought was strong.

Some support was expressed for stronger regional representation, especially for the West. But some concern was also expressed about the potential impact on the country of an excessively regional orientation. "The [regions] should have their proper representation," offered one youth participant, "but, the purpose of the Senate, [for] me [is] to make the right decision for the country as a whole."

A few favoured elections as a way of assuring accountability but others opposed the change. "I don't think that [voters] are politically involved enough, not only to vote in a MP," declared one attendee, "but [also] to learn enough [about] how the Senate works,,,,,and make good decisions about [electing Senators]."



## **4.3. Survey Findings**

### **4.3.1. Public Opinion**

Self-reported knowledge of the Senate is low with a mean score of 3.5 on the 7 point scale. Those who report knowing almost nothing (score of 1) outnumber 2.5:1 those who report knowing a lot (score of 7). Those scoring 1-3 total 52% as compared to 32% scoring 5-7. No aspect of the democratic system elicits as low a level of self-reported knowledge. Low knowledge is especially strong among Quebecers, the young, and First Nations/Métis/Inuit, as shown in Appendix table 14.

Respondents across Canada prioritize the Senate's role in providing scrutiny, as shown in table 4.3.1a and Appendix tables 16a and b. Opinion across the country is substantively homogeneous though some small, statistically significant differences distinguish the priorities of some provinces and segments over others. In the case of the role of the Senate in protecting minority rights, Quebecers, Newfoundlanders and Labradoreans, and youth place more emphasis than average while residents of B.C. and especially Saskatchewan place less emphasis.

By overwhelming margins, Canadians favour election of Senators as opposed to their appointment, as shown in table 4.3.1b. On this specific issue, there appears to be no difference of opinion across provinces and segments, as shown in Appendix table 17b.

By a strong margin, Canadians are favourable to parity of representation by regions, as shown in table 4.3.1c and Appendix tables 18a and b. Support for parity by province is slimmer. Support for regional parity is weaker than average in Quebec and stronger than average in the territories, Saskatchewan and Manitoba, and in all Atlantic provinces but PEI.



Table 4.3.1a: Desirable Roles of the Senate, Canada-Wide Gap Analysis (Proportion Saying Lowest Priority Subtracted from Proportion Saying Highest Priority)<sup>59</sup>

	Highest Priority (%)	Lowest Priority (%)	Highest-Lowest
Making sure that new laws or spending coming from the House of Commons are reasonable	60	17	+43
Protecting the interests of Canada's regions	25	31	-6
Protecting the interests of minorities	14	48	-34

Table 4.3.1b: Public Opinion on Senator Selection and Term of Service Canada-Wide Means and Distributions (7=strongly agree, 1=strongly disagree)<sup>60</sup>

	Mean	7	6	5	4	3	2	1	DNK
Senators should be elected directly by citizens	5.7	51	18	10	6	4	4	7	1
Senators should serve for a set number of years and not until age 75	5.0	41	14	10	7	7	7	14	1
Senators should be appointed by the Prime Minister	2.6	7	4	8	9	11	16	44	1

<sup>59</sup> GenPop Q14: "It is sometimes said that the Senate should carry out three main responsibilities. Which of these if the most valuable in your opinion?"; GenPop Q15, Forum Q15: "It is sometimes said that the Senate should carry out three main responsibilities. Which of these is the least valuable in your opinion?"

<sup>60</sup> GenPop Q17, Forum Q17: "On a 7 point scale where 1 means strongly disagree and 7, strongly agree, how much do you agree with the following opinions about how and for how long Senators should be chosen?"



*Table 4.3.1c: Senate Representation – Desirability of Equality among Regions and Equality among Provinces  
Canada-Wide Means and Distributions (7=strongly agree, 1=strongly disagree)<sup>61</sup>*

	Mean	7	6	5	4	3	2	1	DNK
Having regions with an equal number of Senators ensures that everybody is treated fairly	4.9	30	17	16	11	10	7	9	1
Provinces with small populations should be protected against the larger provinces by allowing every province to have the same number of Senators	4.5	25	13	15	11	11	11	13	1

### 4.3.2. Forum Opinion

Forum Participants differ little in important ways from Canadians as a whole in their Senate-related attitudes. Forum participants are majority-supportive of elections, albeit less so, as shown in Appendix table 17b. Their modestly lower support may be an artifact of learning about some of the activities of the Senate and thus being perhaps more sanguine about its current operations. Indeed, forum participants report a jump in their knowledge of the Senate as a result of the forum experience.

Meanwhile forum participants are more supportive of term limits, perhaps as a result of having been exposed to various term limit-related ideas in the forum sessions. Forum participants are especially supportive of parity among the provinces, as shown in Appendix table 18b. This may well be an artifact of provincial residents spending much time together and building strong provincial identities as a result.

<sup>61</sup> GenPop Q18, Forum Q18: "Another issue is how the Senate should protect regional or provincial interests. How much do you agree with each of the following opinions using a 7 point scale where 1 means disagree strongly and 7, agree strongly?"



## **5.0. Political Parties**

### **5.1. Introduction**

Both the forums and the survey research explored attitudes about the desirable roles for Canadian political parties, what can be done to encourage more participation and membership, and whether there exist or could exist alternative institutions to carry out some of their roles.

### **5.2. Forums**

#### **5.2.1. Overview**

The general image emerging from the forums is one of parties losing attention and respect from their potential clientele or members. They are generally perceived as non-accountable and, in some instances, as secret. Parties were generally characterized as not immensely interested in recruiting members or hearing from ordinary citizens. They are perceived as neither good nor especially honest in communicating. Aspersions were cast on the quality, clarity, and ethical integrity of party platforms.

Many participants wanted the parties to take the lead in galvanizing and integrating youth. Yet, participants remained doubtful of the integrity of parties. In the spirit of their skeptical views of political parties, forum participants were unenthusiastic about public funding for party-affiliated foundations or think tanks that would undertake outreach programs to youth or other low participation segments in the electorate. As in the case of the other topics explored at the forums, participants saw a role for schooling and education to encourage an understanding of and participation in political parties.

#### **5.2.2. Territories (Yellowknife) Forum**

Accessibility was a recurrent theme in the Northern forum. As one person put it, "most people don't have access to the bigger parties. In the real realm of the North, you find most people on the fringes really." Expressing a more sanguine perspective, another participant felt that parties do everything in their power to get citizens involved. This individual felt that "you may never in your



life intend to run for office.” But, he added, “if you join a political party you can be involved in selecting delegates and affecting policy, and as a member of a political party have way more influence than just as an individual.”

Additional funding of political parties by institutions and foundations was not a recommendation. While few people had ever heard of such funding and believed this to be a “strange notion” for strengthening parties, some recognized that these alternative institutions and foundations are already in place. There was mention that major political parties already have research wings funded by their own members’ contributions.

Recommendations for improving the performance of parties included greater realism and clarity in party platforms and greater use of technology to help distant parts of Canada make a connection to parties.

### **5.2.3. British Columbia Forum**

There were mixed feelings at the British Columbia forum over whether political parties perform the roles they ought to. Many people felt that “political parties do not articulate their platforms well to anyone”. It was expressed by a participant that “there needs to be more transparency and more accountability on how parties select candidates and how they select policy.”

People tend to avoid parties because they feel they will not have an influence. “I guess you can sit on the sidelines, from my perspective, and complain that those things don’t represent your values,” said one person, “or [you can] become part of the solution and get involved.” Political parties are still perceived as “an old boys club,” depressing participation rates among women and minorities, thought a number of attendees.

Forum participants in British Columbia were not opposed to alternative institutions and foundations as long as they were non-partisan. Public funding of non-partisan institutions could “encourage...people to get out and vote.” Others expressed concern about more funding for party-related activities. “Who decides how many of these institutions there are going to be?” wondered one participant. “Which party gets what?”

### **5.2.4. Alberta Forum**

Alberta forum participants felt that political parties perform relatively well except in respect of accountability. Participants queried the level of consultation



in platform development. One participant expressed concern about a lack of follow-through on campaign commitments. "Campaign promises, I would like to see parties more tied to their campaign promises."

Participants felt that members of the public had some responsibility for the low level of participation in parties. "If you wanted to be more informed about what the parties are doing," admonished one attendee, "sign up to all of them, go to all their conventions and decide at the end of that what you want to support."

Participants were open to the idea of public funding for party think tanks but were concerned about having three partisan think tanks that were all publicly funded. "If there are three parties, three parties have a different think tank, who is going to pay? We are." Expressing the opposite perspective, another participant declared: "Public funding is good. Democracy is worth a bit of public funding."

One distinctive recommendation in Alberta was for party executives at the constituency level to play a stronger role in holding politicians accountable for their promises.

#### **5.2.5. Saskatchewan Forum**

Participants' lack of trust in politicians appeared to impact their trust of political parties. One respondent asked "If we can't trust the MP, how are we going to trust the party?"

There appeared to be a consensus that parties were fulfilling many of their roles but not extremely well. Insufficient clarity, authenticity, and honesty were key weaknesses. The parties also seem weak at mobilizing active support. "I think they are doing their jobs pretty well," opined one participant, "but...I don't think that they do particularly well in this day and age is get[ting] involvement from the grassroots."

Political parties did not communicate well and were unclear on how they differed from each other, many felt. A younger participant addressed the lack of youth involvement in political parties by offering the following observation, "As someone from the younger spectrum, it's really hard to get jazzed up about a party when it's the same old dudes that are 50 or 60 years old." Another respondent raised the issue of membership fees as a concern by saying "I don't want to pay a membership fee, what for [politicians] to talk to me."



Participants were cool to the idea of funding political foundations. One participant noted that “Universities – independent institutions are the best places to get ideas about public policy and that should be encouraged.” Participants felt that think tanks and alternative institutions should stay independent from specific parties.

#### **5.2.6. Manitoba Forum**

Participants in Manitoba did not have strong opinions on how well parties were performing their roles. The focus of participants appeared to be more on public participation in parties. They were concerned about the lack of involvement of young people and citizens in general in our political process. One respondent summed up their view of the conversation by saying “For me, this isn’t a very important question. I don’t care if people aren’t involved in the parties. I’m more worried about the disengagement of young people, and ethnic groups, and aboriginal and First Nations people in the political process.” One respondent believed that parties were not active enough in engaging citizens: “People don’t hear about party membership unless it’s election time.”

Funding of alternative institutions and political party foundations was met with some hesitation. “I would prefer it [foundations] not to be connected to the parties,” offered one attendee. “I think non-partisan is really more effective at getting the common goals dealt with.”

#### **5.2.7. Ontario Forum**

Participants in Ontario seized on the importance of accountability as an important value for parties to strive for. Participants felt that parties needed to act on the needs and wants of constituents and provide better quality feedback. “Parties are very good at providing feedback about their successes,” noted one participant, “but not so good on providing feedback about their failures.”

Ontario participants provided interesting explanations for why people decide to participate in political parties and why others choose not to. Many under-represented groups in political parties have other means of influence. “Women, ethnic minorities, First Nations and so on often have fairly strong advocacy groups already and many of those groups are becoming stronger and more vocal.”





Another respondent took the paradoxical view that government error or failure was what normally triggers public engagement:

I think people get involved in political parties as a revolt from what's going on. I started getting involved in politics when they tried to put the third largest sewage plant three kilometres from my house. That's when I got involved at the municipal level very heavily so it's more as a revolt.

Recommendations from participants seemed to build around two ideas; one was the need for more formal education for young people on parties and political process and the other was for MPs and parties to do more to listen to and engage constituents.

### **5.2.8. Quebec Forum**

Quebec forum attendees gave expression to the mixed feelings and sentiments of mistrust heard at other forums. Parties “have no right to direct society,” emphasized on attendee. “They’re there to work for society.”<sup>62</sup> “[Parties] are professional organizations,” observed another attendee, “but they never do what they say.”<sup>63</sup>

Parties, felt most participants, are disengaged from the public. They need to re-engage and learn to communicate more effectively. They could have a lot more public consultation and hold forums to meet with the public.

### **5.2.9. New Brunswick Forum**

Like attendees at other forums, those at the event in Fredericton tended to be sceptical but not immensely knowledgeable about what parties do. Parties are generally far removed from the average citizen, forum participants tended to feel. Parties consult little. One silver lining in the cloud is that when parties are relegated to the Opposition side of the Commons, they tend to consult a lot more with the public than when in government.

The poor reputation of parties discourages participation in the parties themselves while also discouraging participation in the democratic process.

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<sup>62</sup> Ils n'ont pas le droit de décider pour toute la société, [le parti] est là pour travailler pour la société.

<sup>63</sup> Ils sont professionnels, mais ils ne font jamais ce qu'ils disent.



### **5.2.10. PEI Forum**

Participants at the PEI forum echoed some previous concerns about the lack of accountability and trust in political parties. “[Parties] promise one thing,” observed one participant, “and then they get in power, and they don’t stick to it. They don’t have...very strong, clear platforms.” Another participant put it more starkly: “Parties are dishonest with the electorate.”

Participants felt that parties were not open enough to attract new people. One individual provided his own insight into why parties may have such a hard time attracting new blood:

Political parties are loyalty organizations. They’re not cordial...they’re not fun. They can be, but that’s all on the side. And it’s contingent on your being...in the ‘in’ group. And if you don’t please the people about...you know that have the power to displace you, you’re displaced. And this is a...not a nice thing to belong to. Unless you think you’re going to gain something from it. So it takes an aggressive kind of person to be in a party.

The recommendations of PEI participants seemed to focus around the need for parties to be more effective at outreach. One respondent felt it was necessary to “force them [parties] not to be so much based on loyalty and try instead to kind of open up. And have more open debate. Maybe bring new ideas, even new people in.” Another attendee saw the issue as being a lack of information: “Political parties should advertise – get out to the schools, market it to the youth, and in modern ways.”

### **5.2.11. Nova Scotia Forum**

Participants in Nova Scotia felt that parties were able to pick leaders effectively and did a reasonably good job developing policy. But they are less effective at scrutinizing the performance of their own governments and they’re not entirely trustworthy when communicating to voters. One participant put it bluntly: “I think [parties] state their policies when they want to get elected. But, as far as carrying them through, [that] is a different question.”

Participants seemed to feel that parties are not working hard enough to engage people in their processes and to overcome their negative images. A



young participant noted that “I think many of my friends would decline to have anything to do with politics because there [has] been a loss of respect relating to the misbehavior at various levels of government.”

A number of recommendations were put forth by participants for reaching out to citizens. “Make the political environment more comfortable for women,” suggested one attendee, “in order that they will become involved as candidates and as party workers.” Other potential remedies: “establishing scholarships would be a good means [of] attract[ing] young people,” “parties should be looking at going into the school system and speaking to the various classes, encouraging them to come to [party] meetings [and] encouraging them to establish youth parties.”

#### **5.2.12. Newfoundland and Labrador Forum**

One participant provided an overview of the roles played by parties:

[...] things [which] are inherently necessary for the party [itself] to continue are: choosing a leader, potentially [forming] governments, organizing, funding, strategizing and carrying on the electoral campaigns; [parties] are very good [and] efficient at [doing].

While parties had all these roles to fulfill, they were losing their ability to attract and replenish their membership. Candidates “running for leadership,” observed one attendee, “have somehow devalued the coinage of party membership, by just buying members to sign up votes, and it seems it’s just become one big scam...[especially] around ethnic groups.” Without greater sincerity, parties would have an ever increasing difficulty attracting people.

Participants in Newfoundland and Labrador were open to the idea of having alternative institutions receive funding to provide input on public policy. It was not seen as having to be conducted by a party foundation however. Advocacy groups could increasingly step in to play some the policy roles that parties have carried out in the past, suggested one participant.

#### **5.2.13. Youth Forum in Ottawa**

Participants in the youth forum in Ottawa gave voice to many of the frustrations, misgivings, and concerns heard at other forums. But their observations were not uniformly negative. Party leadership campaigns seem to



arouse favour. “The way parties chose party leaders, it’s a pretty good democratic process.”<sup>64</sup> Leadership contests are not only an example of democracy but they are also a window on a party’s character and values, felt a number of attendees.

Like some attendees at other forums, some participants in the youth forum lamented the apparent absence of genuine differences among the parties and the authoritarian ways in which parties made policy. “Party platforms are basically [developed] from top to bottom, not using a grassroots approach.”

## **5.3. Survey Findings**

### **5.3.1. Public Opinion**

On balance, Canadians feel that they understand parties at least as well as other aspects of the democratic process, as shown in Appendix table 26. They have clear ideas about what they want parties to emphasize—reaching out to Canadians and developing fresh policy ideas, not explaining how they differ from each other or organizing for elections, as shown in table 5.3.1. and Appendix tables 21A and B. Few differences of much magnitude distinguish the views of provinces or segments.

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<sup>64</sup>La façon dont les parties choisissent leurs chefs de parti, ce n’est pas mal démocratique quand même.



Table 5.3.1: Desirables Roles for Political Parties, Canada-Wide Gap Analysis (Proportion Saying Lowest Priority Subtracted from Proportion Saying Highest Priority)<sup>65</sup>

	Highest Priority (%)	Lowest Priority (%)	Highest – Lowest
Reaching out to all Canadians so that their views can be represented	34	5	+29
Coming up with fresh policy ideas and solutions	26	6	+20
Alerting the public to new challenges facing Canada	15	7	+8
Encouraging people to vote on election day	17	14	+3
Explaining how the parties are different from each other	6	30	-24
Organizing for elections	2	37	-35

### 5.3.2. Forum Opinion

Forum participants resemble Canadians as a whole in their views.

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<sup>65</sup> GenPop Q20, Forum Q20: "Canada's parties carry out a number of responsibilities. Which of the following six should be their highest priority?"; GenPop Q21, Forum Q21: Canada's parties carry out a number of responsibilities. Which of the following six should be their lowest priority?"



## **6.0. The Electoral System**

### **6.1. Introduction**

The discussion of the Canadian electoral system focused on the values or criteria that should guide the rules that govern how ballots are cast and counted to choose MPs rather than other electoral process issues such as election finance and campaign blackouts. Countless potential reforms are conceivable. For reasons of parsimony, participants were urged to consider three main options:

- ❑ Today's plurality or first-past-the-post system, whereby all candidates run in a constituency or riding and the one with the most votes wins;
- ❑ A possible mixed system (part plurality, part proportional representation), whereby some MPs are elected individually in ridings with others elected from party lists across a province or region; and
- ❑ A possible preferential or single-transferable-vote ballot in multi-member ridings (in one of many examples or variants, Canada could have about 75 ridings instead of about 300, each electing 4 MPs). Each ballot would allow a voter to rank the candidates on the ballot, a voter's successive preferences could be considered in determining which candidates are elected.

### **6.2. Forums**

#### **6.2.1. Overview**

Given the broad scope of the consultations, participants were not asked to choose one electoral system. They were asked to focus on the broad principles



that should underpin the federal electoral system and if there is a need for change. In practice, it was not always easy for participants to prioritize their values. Some participants valued fairness above all, others accountability, and still others effective or stable government, simplicity, or direct links between a Member and a local constituency or community. Some participants placed an equal importance on all of these values as well as on other potential values. Furthermore, participants did not always agree about what each value signified. For some participants, accountability meant the accountability of governments; for others, it meant the accountability of individual MPs.

In practice, the key sentiment that emerged in the forums was a sense that the Canadian electoral system, defined narrowly as how votes are counted and transformed into seats, is not sufficiently problematic to require fundamental change. The general disinclination to change among forum participants is paralleled by evidence of strong satisfaction with the current system from the survey research, as reported in section 6.3.

Observers attending the forums would likely note tentativeness and mystification in the remarks of participants when discussing electoral systems. Forum participants' thoughts on electoral systems and their principles seemed more inchoate or preliminary than on other topics. One might conclude either that the public has not yet formed opinions on the electoral reforms it would welcome or has concluded that our system is working well enough as it is.

The strongest case that the public is open to reform rests on comments made at the forums. Many participants said that they were open to change even if they were not currently calling for it. The strongest case that the public opposes change rests on the survey data. Survey respondents reported high levels of satisfaction with the electoral system. Furthermore, they tended to embrace values and principles that favour our current plurality electoral system rather than potential alternatives to it, as discussed in section 6.3.1.

### **6.2.2. Territories (Yellowknife) Forum**

As at many other forums, the participants in the Yellowknife gathering expressed more concern about individual representational failures than about the system whereby ballots are transformed into seats. The following illustrate some of the more frequently expressed concerns about representational failure:



- ❑ Inadequate female representation—“there are so many barriers for women’s participation that they see in terms of getting nominated...and getting into a good riding where you have a good chance of getting a seat and so on and so on”; and
- ❑ Concern expressed about the importance of locally based representation and the undesirability of parachuted candidates—“you get to vote for the people you know in your own constituency. I wouldn’t want to be voting for someone who was in Quebec, not knowing who they are, what they have done previously or anything.”

Attendees did nonetheless have concerns about system characteristics but they were rarely of one mind. For example, some people expressed concern about outcomes that did not reflect the distribution of the national vote—“the one with the least percentage of votes seems to form the government at times.” Defenders of the current plurality system pointed out that the number of raw votes does matter in our system because it forms the basis of subsidies. “Each party gets a certain amount of money from the feds depending on their popular vote,” one participant point out. “We haven’t gone so far as to give them Members of Parliament but we do give each party a certain amount of money dependant on how much of the popular vote they captured.”

Some expressed concern about the dilemma of voting for a local candidate but electing a Prime Minister—“the disconnect between your local candidate and the party leader I guess is the problem.” Feeling at a distance from Ottawa geographically and psychologically, attendees seemed receptive to a mixed system but not quite ready to embrace change.

### **6.2.3. British Columbia Forum**

B.C. forum attendees were open to reform of the electoral system but were not clamouring for it because of a feeling that it fulfills many Canadian values. “The current system satisfies quite a number of these [criteria],” insisted one participant. “I mean it will give us stability. There is accountability. It’s simple. There is a geographic link. It does tend to produce single party governments. I





mean that's a lot of criteria satisfied in the current system. What it doesn't give you I guess is fairness."

While being open to change, especially for reasons of fairness, many attendees saw merit in the present system, as reflected in the following comments: "I believe with stability you do get accountability"; "I think geographic [representation] is very important"; "The geographic link between constituents, that's an important issue"; and "Stability of government [is very important]."

A number of the concerns given voice by attendees were not related to system differences. "My concern," insisted one participant, "is not necessarily with the type of system, but with the accessibility of the system, how easy it is to vote." "Under the current system," opined another British Columbian, "when they go to Ottawa I don't believe that they represent me and the place that I live as much as they represent the party they're a part of."

Fairness was a recurrent driver of open-ness to change. So too was a concern about adequate regional representation. The values of simplicity and ease of understanding were factors in hesitancy to change. "I really like the current system in the sense that it's simple. I know that there's an MP representing my little corner of the country." "[Other rules] would start to get too complicated." "I prefer the stability associated with our system." "It would be a nightmare to educate the public [about a new system]."

Just as some of the electoral concerns were unrelated to electoral systems, so too were some of the remedies. One recommendation was to require a local principal residence for all candidates. Another was a referendum-like ballot on "values" to accompany every general election.

#### **6.2.4. Alberta Forum**

Alberta forum participants saw many useful values embodied in our system—"the idea of maintaining that geographic link with your elected member," "[belief] in a stable government," "accountability...in the electoral system."

Reporting to the assembled participants from a breakout group, a subgroup spokesman testified that in his group "there was an openness to the idea of considering change and yet recognizing some value in what we have now, with stable governments and pretty good accountability as well, the sense that you know who's responsible for decisions and you can vote them out or not."



More than a few attendees appreciated the proportionality of results from a mixed system. As one person put it, "I like the mixed member proportional [system] because the popular vote matters." Some attendees were discomfited by some aspects of non-plurality electoral systems. "I don't know about coalitions... There's just no clear direction, I think, with a coalition government." "I think," feared another attendee, "[that the] single transferable vote could generate more fringe parties."

### **6.2.5. Saskatchewan Forum**

In the spirit of other forums, participants in the Saskatchewan forum valued highly regional representation, fairness, and simplicity as criteria for assessing an electoral system. Some participants highlighted the importance of assuring greater representativeness for First Nations, Métis, and Inuit. "Native people," volunteered one attendee, "feel left out."

Participants were not displeased with the current system. They perceived it as stable and effective. "Our electoral system works, insisted one participant. "I mean it's a very good way to vote, the ballots aren't being stuck, it's fair, and it's accountable, we know that when we cast our vote it's private; we know that it's going to be accounted." Local links were valued too. "I think our system's great because we vote for our candidate," offered one attendee. "If we move from first-past-the-post to some sort of proportional representation, we'll lose regional representation."

Like attendees at other forums, participants in the Regina event noted the limitations of our current system—imperfect representativeness with occasionally surprising outcomes, problems associated with the redrawing of constituency boundaries, weak geographic representation from the West, and institutional issues such as too much power concentrated in the office of the Prime Minister. Not all of the concerns expressed in Regina or at other forums could be tied directly to the electoral system when narrowly defined as rules for counting votes and transforming them into seats.

While our system has disadvantages, the alternative systems were also perceived as having disadvantages. For many, coalition governments are undesirable—"longer decision-making processes, scattered ideas and probably re-occurring elections."



Some sentiment was expressed in favour of strong independent commissions to draw ridings boundaries. Some attendees favoured a kind of slightly mixed system. Thus, we would retain our plurality system but introduce a slight modification to make sure that small parties with, for example, 5% of the vote would ultimately have a seat in the Commons.

#### **6.2.6. Manitoba Forum**

As at other forums, much enthusiasm was expressed for many principles—accountability, simplicity, stability, fairness, representativeness—with a strong link being drawn between principles and specific electoral system reforms. For some participants, a proper balance of regional influence trumps all other system issues. As one attendee put it, “it seems to me that the first problem is the population distribution in this country. I mean we have two huge provinces, you know, which get by far the lion’s share of seats, automatically...to the detriment of the Maritimes and the West.”

Many participants were alert to the likelihood of coalition governments in the event of system changes. “But, you know that coalitions have one advantage,” offered one participant. “They force minority governments, and minority governments are always more accountable. The majorities do what they want, they don’t care. So ultimately, then, you could argue that coalitions are better.”

#### **6.2.7. Ontario Forum**

Ontario forum participants felt that the current system offered clarity, stability, familiarity, and other virtues. “I’m generally happy with it,” offered one attendee. “I think the others just sound too complicated to me.” According to another, “I think first-past-the -post is the most efficient. I think you get into STV systems and you get the coalition governments which are ineffective governments.” According to a third, “I think the more complicated the system becomes, the more dissatisfaction you’re going to have so I would be 100% in leaving [it] the way it is.”

Participants nonetheless readily acknowledged a range of problems in our current system—poor representation and involvement of youth, unfair outcomes, and voters in small constituencies have more influence than voters in large ones. Electronic voting, some participants felt, might address some of their concerns.



### **6.2.8. Quebec Forum**

As at the other forums, the Quebec forum witnessed a mixture of sentiment about our electoral system. On the one hand, Quebec attendees valued highly the stability and simplicity of the current plurality voting system. “People like the present system,” said one Quebecer, “for its stability, security, and simplicity.”<sup>66</sup> On the negative side, concerns were expressed that small, minority opinion is sometimes silenced in our system and that the system requires a very rigid discipline inside the parties.<sup>67</sup> As a consequence, there is “too much concentration of power in the hands of the Prime Minister.”<sup>68</sup>

Thinking of other electoral system models, some expressed concern that Canada would end up having too few local ridings for the size and complexity of the country. As for having persistent minority governments, this was troubling to some but not to others. Furthermore, according to some attendees, either a mixed or STV system would favour the development of new political parties, a desirable end result. Some attendees called for term limits for the Prime Minister

### **6.2.9. New Brunswick Forum**

From the perspective of broad principles, New Brunswickers embraced many of the same values and criteria as other Canadians—accountability, protecting minorities from the tyranny of the majority, stability, responsibility, and that the distribution of votes be reflected in the distribution of seats. Accountability was of particular concern, especially in a majority government situation. “[With] majority [governments] you don’t have accountability until after the next [election],” noted one participant.

As at some other forums, the real concerns of participants were sometimes practical local matters with no immediately apparent link to electoral system rules. For example, French-speaking attendees wanted adequate quality representation in their language. “I live in a region where our MP is an

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<sup>66</sup> On aime le système actuel, pour la stabilité, la sécurité et la simplicité.

<sup>67</sup> Le système actuel [...] oblige une certaine discipline très rigoureuse à l'intérieur des partis

<sup>68</sup> Le système actuel favorise une trop grande concentration du pouvoir aux mains du premier ministre.



anglophone and absolutely not bilingual,” noted one participant. “But two miles from us is a francophone MP...The electoral system should take account of the language spoken by citizens in the regions.”<sup>69</sup>

Potential alternative electoral systems, especially STV, might offer voters more opportunity to express nuanced opinions, for example helping to elect a desirable local candidate even if he or she is a standard-bearer for an undesirable party or a party with little chance of forming a government.

Echoing a refrain at a number of forums in their discussions of the role of the citizen, some participants emphasized their feeling of being shut out. “We’re a democratic country,” said one attendee, “but the way the system is structured isn’t democratic. We’ve no way of expressing ourselves [except]...at an election.”<sup>70</sup> Echoing a feeling of being excluded, an Anglophone from New Brunswick added “the further you get from Ontario, the less, and less your vote counts.”

While most of attendees’ concerns were not narrowly related to electoral system attributes, some of their concerns could be linked to type of electoral system. Consider the following verbatims:

The winner-takes-all [aspect of first-past-the-post...] can be a perversion of democracy...;

If you’ve got a government elected in a mixed system, the risks of bad decisions being made are lower because in the end you will have competitiveness within the House of Commons;<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> Je suis dans une région où notre député fédéral est anglophone, et absolument pas bilingue. Mais à deux miles de chez nous, [à la prochaine circonscription], leur député est francophone. [...] le système électoral devrait tenir compte de la langue parlée par les citoyens des régions.

<sup>70</sup> On est un pays démocratique, mais...on n’a pas de manière de s’exprimer...[sauf lors d’] une élection.

<sup>71</sup> Si tu as un gouvernement [élu selon le système] mixte, le risque que [des] mauvais décisions soient prises, il est moins grand en fin de compte, parce qu’il y aurait déjà eu une contestation [au niveau de la Chambre des communes].



In another system, if a party has something interesting to say it would have a chance of having at least one seat in government [the House of Commons];<sup>72</sup>

Larger ridings (in mixed or STV system) could be dangerous.<sup>73</sup>

#### **6.2.10. PEI Forum**

Accountability may well have topped a list of values that included regional and local links, simplicity, stability, and fairness. PEI participants were not convinced that our system actually delivers on accountability. “Does our present system make them accountable?,” wondered one participant. “Not really. They’re in for four years, whether we like it or not.” One of the roots of diminished accountability appears to be related to the power of parties and their ability to enforce a party line. A related issue is the excessive power of the chief executive. “Any Prime Minister of Canada,” affirmed one participant, “has got too much power.”

Participants in the Charlottetown gathering reached no particular consensus on the hierarchy of principles that should govern choice of electoral system nor on the electoral system options themselves. Consider the following mix of verbatims:

The first transferable vote seems to be much too complicated to do well;

I really am against the majority system. I really think in the long run, you have more choice; you have a real choice when you force the parties apart, then make them stick to their guns;

One good thing... about majority [government] is that they can make tough decisions;

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<sup>72</sup> Avec un autre genre de système, si [un parti] a quelque chose d'intéressant à dire, puis à apporter, il aura la chance d'avoir au moins un député [et de la] représentation au gouvernement.

<sup>73</sup> De plus gros circonscriptions peut être dangereux.



If you have a problem with voter turnout now, changing it to a mixed system would be very confusing. And elsewhere in the world, where there are coalition governments all the time, it's...absolute chaos;

Simplicity – keep it [the system] simple.

#### **6.2.11. Nova Scotia Forum**

As in neighbouring PEI, the Nova Scotia forum reached no consensus on the hierarchy of values or the value of alternative electoral systems. Capturing some of the mood of the meeting, one person noted that “there’s no perfect [electoral] system that captures all values equally.” Adding still greater complexity to the analysis, several participants pointed out the difficulty of ensuring fairness. For one participant, “fairness is an opinion.” “Whatever the system ..., somebody’s going to feel that it’s not fair to them.” For still another, fairness is having your voice heard, not achieving a particular way of counting votes and assigning seats. To other participants, fairness is not a big subject for debate. Fair representation and fair transformation of votes into seats are crucial features of a good electoral system.

To the extent that there was some agreement, the sense was that the current system could be improved but ought not to be transformed in a fundamental way. “If it’s not broke, don’t fix it.”

#### **6.2.12. Newfoundland and Labrador Forum**

As in some of the other forums, especially in Atlantic Canada, the participants in the Newfoundland and Labrador gathering were not enthusiastic about embracing fundamental chance. They wanted simplicity and stability above all, and felt the current system provides some of both. They expressed some discomfort with the log-rolling and deal-making associated with minority governments. Concern about minority government led some other participants to oppose electoral reform out of a concern that minority governments might become more common.

Yet others wanted system reform for the same key reason that motivated other proponents of change—a fair reflection in the Commons of the actual distribution of the popular vote.



### **6.2.13. Youth Forum in Ottawa**

Reflecting a pattern evident in discussion of other topics, the Youth forum produced intense, detailed commentary. Fairness, stability, simplicity, and local links emerged as important, as they did elsewhere. As in the other forums, not all of the concerns to emerge had unequivocal links to the type of electoral rules used in a given democracy.

Consider the following disparate concerns in their own words:

- Imperfect that it is, our system works...it would probably be too complicated to change it;<sup>74</sup>
- Do we elect a candidate or party? [That's the source of confusion]<sup>75</sup>;
- [Our current system] gives too much power [and] too many seats to regional parties. I think that some smaller parties are [very much] under-represented, even though they get a vast [number of votes nationally];
- If [the current system] is not reflecting the accurate vote count of the country, then it needs to be changed;
- The first-past-the-post system is lauded for its stability. But I think that the reason that the preferential [ballot system] or [the] single-transferable-vote [system] is not [seen] as being necessarily stable is because we're not used to coalition governments in Canada;
- It's exactly what's wrong with the mixed system—the party lists; in the end the parties are entrusted with choosing candidates. I've a problem with that;<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> Ce n'est pas le meilleur [système], mais ça fonctionne. Étant qu'il n'y a pas un [système] parfait, ça serait probablement trop compliqué [à changer...].

<sup>75</sup> Est-ce qu'on élit un candidat ou, est-ce qu'on élit un parti? [Voilà pourquoi les gens sont confus].

<sup>76</sup> C'est justement ce que je n'aime pas du système mixte ; justement qu'il y a une liste de partis, puis que finalement, on laisse aux partis [de] choisir ses [propres] candidats. J'ai un peu de problème avec ça.





- I like better the STV system where there are several candidates. If you like a candidate from a party you don't like, you can still vote for him, and then vote for another candidate from the other party.;<sup>77</sup>
- The Prime Minister probably has too much power. Having the proportional representation system would be good because it spreads out [that] power a little bit;
- The problem I have with [a mixed system] is that there is no geographic link between the [listed candidates] and the people who vote for them [outside] of [their constituency]. I worry that it may take away too much power from the riding associations and give too much power to the party leaders, by giving [the party leaders] the ability to put people on the lists as opposed to the ridings electing their own local candidates;
- The problem [of public disengagement] doesn't stem from the electoral system, but rather from the Parliamentary system;<sup>78</sup>
- I'm [in favour] of switching to [...] any system other than first-past-the-post. I think almost every single alternative is better; particularly something like a preferential [ballot] or the single-transferable-vote, because it maintains that geographical link, and it also [...] gives better proportionality. [Also], it keeps fringe parties out; and
- Before any [changes] happen, [I would] like to see a lot of [education, [...]] so that people are making educated decisions.

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<sup>77</sup> J'aime mieux le principe du vote unitaire transférable où il y a plusieurs candidats. Puis, par exemple, si on aime un candidat d'un parti qu'on n'aime pas, on peut quand même voter pour lui, et puis voter pour l'autre candidat d'un autre parti.

<sup>78</sup> Le problème ne vient pas du système électoral, mais il vient du système parlementaire.



## **6.3. Survey Findings**

### **6.3.1. Public Opinion**

While Canadians have reservations about politicians and parties, they are neither perplexed nor disenchanted with our system of electoral rules for transforming ballots into seats. They see flaws, especially with respect to fairness, and they are open to change, but they are not calling for it.

Evidence that they are at least somewhat aware of how the electoral system works appears in Appendix table 26. Self-reported knowledge of the electoral system is moderately high. With a mean score of 4.5 on a 7 point knowledge scale, familiarity with our electoral system is substantially higher than familiarity with the Senate (mean of 3.5) or with how governments consult Canadians (mean of 3.8). Fifty-eight percent report their knowledge as high (5-7 on the 7 point scale) as compared to 30% reporting their knowledge as low (1-3 on the 7 point scale), as shown in Appendix table 22. Reported self-knowledge is virtually homogeneous across the country except for lower ratings among PEI residents and First Nations/Métis/Inuit respondents. The lower self-reported knowledge in the latter group is attributable to lower levels of formal education.<sup>79</sup>

While knowledge is moderately high, satisfaction with the electoral system is higher. The mean satisfaction score is 5.0, as shown in Appendix table 23. Among Canadians as a whole, those who are satisfied outnumber 4:1 those who are dissatisfied—68% score their satisfaction 5 or higher on the 7 point satisfaction scale while 17% score their satisfaction as 3 or lower. Among Canadians with extreme scores (7 or 1), those who are very satisfied outnumber more than 5:1 those who are very dissatisfied—22% vs. 4%. Satisfaction is even among the provincial, territorial, and segment groups listed in the tables of the Appendix except for a slightly higher level of such satisfaction in New Brunswick.

Canadians' satisfaction with our electoral system is reflected in their values. The public's ideal electoral system produces clear winners so that voters can

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<sup>79</sup> As revealed by regression analysis, education is the key driver of self-reported knowledge. Once education is taken into consideration, First Nations/Métis/Inuit respondents no longer differ from Canadians as a whole.



make politicians understand how they feel about the performance of the government, as shown in table 6.3.1 and Appendix tables 24a and b. In a similar spirit, Canadians tend to agree that a system with local constituencies represented by a single MP is a good idea because it makes it easier for people to know their MP and get their MP's help in solving problems. Canadians are less supportive of the idea of a system with multi-Member ridings than they are of other electoral system outcomes (see tables 24a and b).

*Table 6.3.1.: Ideal Election Outcomes and Systems  
Canada-Wide Means: (7=strongly agree, 1=strongly disagree)<sup>80</sup>*

	Mean
It is a good idea for elections to produce clear winners so that voters can make politicians understand how they feel about the performance of the government	5.4
A system with local constituencies represented by a single MP is a good idea because it makes it easier for people to know their MP and get their MP's help in solving problems	5.3
Majority governments are a good idea because majority governments can more easily do what they were elected to do and it is easier for Canadians to know whom to hold accountable	4.8
It is a good idea for every party's percentage of seats to be precisely the same as its percentage of the popular vote	4.7
Governments run by a coalition or alliance of several political parties is a good idea because parties learn to cooperate and serve diverse interests	4.5
A system that makes it easier for small parties to get elected is a good idea because it allows a greater diversity of opinion in the House of Commons	4.4
A system where voters elect several MPs who represent a larger constituency is a good idea because having multiple MPs for a constituency would better represent the diversity of people and ideas in an area	4.1
A system that makes it easier for small parties to get elected is a bad idea because this gives small parties too much power when larger parties need their support to form a coalition government	3.7

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<sup>80</sup> GenPop Q25, Forum Q25: As you may know, different election systems can produce different results in Parliament after an election is held and all ballots are counted. How much do you agree with each of the following opinions about the ideal results of an election? Please use a 7 point scale where 1 means strongly disagree and 7, strongly agree.



We undertook multivariate statistical analysis (stepwise regression) to identify the demographic drivers of why Canadians value highly an electoral system that produces clear winners. Producing clear winners is Canadians' most strongly held, electoral system value, as shown in table 6.3.1. Causal modeling showed that support for this outcome rises with age and falls slightly with education. It is as if age and experience leads people to favour clear messages to politicians about the public's pleasures and displeasures. Meanwhile, education leads people to be open to new electoral values and principles.

We also undertook multivariate statistical analysis (factor analysis) to reveal the structure of Canadians' thinking on these electoral system outcome issues. The factor analysis of their evaluation scores yields a sensible two-factor solution

- ❑ a pro-reform factor representing a desire to make it easier for small parties to get elected, favourable feelings towards coalition governments, and other pro-reform ideas vs.
- ❑ a pro-*status quo* factor representing the idea that majority governments, producing clear winners, and other *status quo* ideas are desirable.

The clear two-factor structure emerging from the factor analysis lends support to the idea that Canadians have a good understanding of the arguments pro and con even if they lack the detailed knowledge available to experts.

Canadian opinion tends to be homogeneous across the provinces and segments but some differences emerge:

- ❑ The special affinity of Northerners for local constituency links to Parliament and for majority governments;
- ❑ In a pattern analogous to that of Northerners, Saskatchewan residents display a lower affinity for all system outcomes other than local constituencies and majority government;
- ❑ Quebecers' greater proclivity for coalition government and ensuring that the distribution of ballots is paralleled by a similar distribution of seats;



- N.B. residents' greater support for majority government and ensuring that the distribution of ballots is paralleled by a similar distribution of seats;
- PEI residents' desire to ensure that the distribution of ballots is paralleled by a similar distribution of seats;
- Lesser support among youth for clear winners and more support for opportunities for small parties;
- More support for opportunities for small parties among First Nations/Métis/Inuit populations.

Given high satisfaction with the current system among Canadians as a whole, one might expect some resistance to having party lists of candidates, which are necessary in mixed and Proportional Representation electoral systems. Indeed, Canadians are resistant to the idea, as shown in Appendix tables 25A and B. British Columbians and Albertans are especially resistant to the idea of party lists while Quebecers and, to a lesser extent youth, are less opposed than Canadians as a whole, as shown in Appendix table 23B.

### **6.3.2. Forum Opinion**

In their self-reported knowledge, attitudes, and preferences, forum participants resembled Canadians as a whole. As reported in chapter 2, forum participants revealed a substantial jump in knowledge as a result of their experience. In their attitudes and preferences, they differed from Canadians as a whole in being

- Less concerned that the distribution of ballots be reflected perfectly in the distribution of seats; and
- Even more opposed to party lists of candidates.



## **7.0. Conclusion**

Research studies often produce a combination of clear conclusions and uncertain ramifications. From this study, the clearest substantive conclusions are that Canadians

- know far less about how our democratic system functions than they would like, and call for greater efforts by provincial governments through Ministries of Education and the federal government through Parliamentary and departmental communications and program efforts to inform Canadians, especially young Canadians, how the system works;
- want to know a lot more about the roles of MPs in consulting the public and in their Committee roles, which the public values highly, than they do about MPs' roles in Question Period, which Canadians value less and perceive as undermining respect for the House of Commons;
- desire a quantum leap in the quantity and quality of governmental efforts at consulting the public on prospective policies and bills with far greater effort at clear communication and genuine consultation;
- embrace elections to the Senate and are receptive to parity of representation by region while wishing to avoid Constitutional changes that would require provincial consent;
- express strong satisfaction with our first-past-the-post or plurality electoral system and the values it embodies while being open to considering options for change; and
- are mistrustful of federal politicians and political parties, whose promises they cannot often trust and whose



communications they cannot often understand or identify with.

With respect to the research process, a vital conclusion is that forum participants felt positively about the experience. Reviewing an earlier draft of this report, a member of the Methodology Committee called on us to make mention of this. Professor Evert Lindquist writes that “participants were pleased, even gratified and proud, to participate!” He adds:

Participants at the forums I observed indicated that they learned a lot, would like to learn more, would come to another forum, would have liked some more background materials, and might even be willing to spend more time delving into issues. Indeed, I got the sense that they would have recommended more such forums on an annual basis as part of “normal” engagement of governments, MPs, and citizens.

Participants in the forums arrived at the gatherings with a certain mistrust of politicians. Public mistrust and disrespect in the case of politicians represents an important challenge. In the view of forum participants, public misapprehensions about politicians are a factor driving the long-term decline in voter turnout, participation in parties, and public attentiveness to national issues.

Public misapprehensions about politicians are a major challenge because of the paucity of tools for turning around public sentiment. One tool, recommended by survey respondents and forum participants, is for the leadership in the Commons to exercise more discretion in the tone and demeanour of Question Period. It is unclear what other tools might become available.

The public wants more honest talk from politicians and fewer promises that are not kept. But politics is never just about policies and programs; it is also about symbolic communication. Some would say that politics is mainly about symbolic communication.<sup>81</sup> Thus, every time a politician speaks, he or she is on a precipice, weighing the symbolic electoral benefits of honesty vs. empathy.

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<sup>81</sup> For a classic statement on this, see Murray Edelman, *Politics as Symbolic Action* (Academic Press, 1971).



On the one hand, honest talk may require a politician to explain the impediments to resolving a matter of earnest importance to the audience, at the immediate risk of seeming callous. On the other hand, empathetic talk may require such earnest reassurance of the merits of the audience's concerns that the politician is effectively promising something that cannot be delivered with the time of reckoning in the future.

Politicians can change their conduct to help enhance the public regard in which they are held. But changing the public image of politicians may require the efforts of more than politicians alone. As both the forum participants and the survey data showed, federal and provincial efforts at educating and informing citizens about the democratic process would help produce a more informed public. The media may also have a role to play, strengthening their reporting on the elements of the Parliamentary process that the public values and respects highly (e.g. Committees and public consultations) and downplaying elements that are valued less (Question Period).

Canadians value their democratic institutions but want improvements. Too often, there is a sense that politicians are not to be trusted. The degree of public misapprehension is remarkable given that politicians are meant to represent the public interest and paradoxical given that politicians are often ordinary, non-elected citizens for years before embarking on Parliamentary service.

Looking to the future, the ability of Canadians to draw comfort, satisfaction, and pride from our democratic institutions will depend in no small measure on the country's ability to strengthen bonds of trust between citizens and the people elected to serve them.

