



Bringing the Public into Public Discourse

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Background / Introduction

The development and implementation of effective public policy is both art and science. It requires the thoughtful contributions of a variety of actors: experts, politicians, public servants, stakeholders and this note argues, the public. Public policy is ultimately about making choices and in a democracy it is only the public who can legitimately make choices. This note shares some of what we at Canadian Policy Research Networks (CPRN) have learned about citizen choices in relation to greater economic integration with the United States and identifies related policy issues that require further public engagement.

Our Citizens’ Dialogue research (on quality of life, the future of healthcare, Canada’s future, budgetary policy, and the long term management of used nuclear fuel)¹ has revealed insights into the values that Canadians want their public policies to reflect. Collectively the dialogues reveal much about what matters to Canadians. However, for this conference’s topic, CPRN’s research project, *Citizens’ Dialogue on Canada’s Future: A 21 Century Social Contract* (Canada’s Future, 2003) which engaged Canadians in reflective conversation on the kind of Canada they want for themselves and their children, and what roles and responsibilities they see for themselves, governments, business and communities, is most relevant. It, along with polling evidence analyzed by Matthew Mendelsohn (2002), Michael Adams (2003) and Frank Graves (2003), sheds light on the perspectives that citizens bring to the issue of closer economic integration with the United States.

To set the stage for this discussion, a brief summary of Canada’s Future dialogue results is needed. In building their vision for Canada, dialogue participants revised the roles and responsibilities of governments, citizens, business and communities to suit the

¹ CPRN dialogues involve random selection of citizens by a professional polling firm (representative sample), carefully prepared workbooks that set out several values-based scenarios with objective background information, professional facilitators, day-long deliberative sessions with 40 participants in locations across the country, pre and post questionnaires, video and audio tapes and in depth analysis of findings. CPRN dialogue reports and workbooks, including *Citizens’ Dialogue on Canada’s Future: A 21st Century Social Contract*, upon which this note draws, are available on CPRN’s Web site www.cprn.org

circumstances of the new century. These updated roles and responsibilities form a new unwritten social contract to shape Canada's future. What is new about the contract that citizens outlined can be summarized in four key points:

1. Markets are not separate from civil society but are seen as integral to working society, serving public as well as private interests, with market values being integrated into Canadians' notions of civil society and social equity.
2. Citizens see themselves as more active participants in governance: they have a keen desire for more involvement in public affairs.
3. Canadians' support for diversity is repositioned in light of the experience of the past two decades. Their respect for diversity is affirmed but is now seen as an important part of (and limited by) a broader set of core Canadian values.
4. Canadians share a consistent set of values: this distinctive set of values provides an essential foundation on which Canadians and their governments can build a different community north of the 49th parallel, notwithstanding the growing economic integration of North America.

Using evidence from this and other recent dialogues, this note applies a citizens' lens to the issue of greater US-Canada economic integration and identifies some policy questions and considerations that would merit public further dialogue. It concludes with some thoughts on why and how to bring the public into a deeper discussion on this and other critical policy issues that will define the kind of Canada we share.

Key Issues

Pragmatism and Principles: Citizens Want a Balanced Approach

We are a long way from where we were in the 1989 US-Canada Free Trade debate. Canadians are now much more comfortable with and dependent on the economic benefits flowing from closer commercial integration with the US. In the Canada's Future dialogue, Canadians showed little appetite for a dramatically different economic course – ~~Canadians~~ no call for a significant change in

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for policy independence in social, economic, environmental and foreign spheres. Underlying this insistence is a shared values base that they want to see reflected in public policy.

Canadian and American Values: Congruence and Divergence

articulated in our dialogues and elsewhere, would continue to look different than those made by Americans.

US-Canada Economic Integration: Choices for Canadians

We know a lot about the values that Canadians want their public policy to reflect and we know that they want the Canadian government to protect its policy independence. And while we know that maintaining our social programs is critical to Canadians, we know less about what kinds of choices Canadians want their governments to be making on a range of complex policy issues that come into play in the pursuit of closer economic integration. Understanding citizens' values does help to frame the discussion, but more is needed. Citizens must continue to examine the values underlying policy choices and be prepared to weigh difficult new policy choices in the context of changing North

Judith Maxwell, *Coming of Age in Canada*, 2003, Speaking Notes for the Couchiching Summer Conference

Matthew Mendelsohn, *Canada's Social Contract: Evidence from Public Opinion*, 2002, CPRN