



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 – there was no call for a significant change in our trading relationship with the US. They value the advantages of our geographic proximity to the US market while being aware of the challenges this sometimes poses.

They are much more confident of our ability to compete in North America and globally. They want government to aggressively pursue outward looking trade policy that maximizes our access to North American and global markets. This appreciation of our economic relationship with the US parallels Canadians' acceptance of a larger role for market forces within our society and a somewhat smaller role for governments in the economic sphere. Governments are seen as catalysts for economic development in partnership with business, communities and educational institutions. They were also clear about the limitations of the market and thus assigned governments a larger role in protecting the environment, public health and safety.

That said, it would be a mistake to conclude that Canadians are unconcerned about the implications of closer economic integration with such a powerful and dominant partner. To the contrary – they voiced concerns about the need to maintain a distinct Canadian society that reflects a commitment to social equity and global involvement. This is where their pragmatic acceptance of economic realities and their embrace of the market are tempered by an insistence that political leaders protect and strengthen Canada's capacity

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

In the Canada's Future dialogue citizens articulated a set of "core Canadian values", which are summarized below:

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

One could reasonably argue that there is nothing unique about this list and that American values are generally very similar. However, what is different, as argued by Daniel Yankelovich², noted American authority on public opinion and social trends, who collaborated with CPRN on the Canada's Future dialogue, is how Canadians wish to practice those values. He noted four big differences:

- ❑ **Government and the market.** Canadians want government as a partner, facilitator and guarantor of protections, while Americans want government as the cop and watchdog.
- ❑ **Individual and community.** Canadians share a sense of community and they reject gross inequalities between people. Americans pursue a more assertive individualism, which tolerates more inequality.
- ❑ **Social morality.** In Canada social morality is based on a common set of shared norms. American social morality is linked to legalism and religion.
- ❑ **Attitudes to other countries.** Canadians have a deeper sense of obligation to other countries – they see their interdependence. In contrast, Americans use their power to be independent of world opinion.

In his recent book, *Fire and Ice*, Michael Adams expands upon some of these differences, elaborating on how Canadian values have increasingly diverged from American values at the same time as our economies have become more enmeshed.

The overarching issue for citizens in thinking about closer economic integration with the United States would be to ensure that the pursuit of market access and maximization of economic benefits does not sacrifice our capacity to make our own policy choices about the kind of Canada we want. And those policy choices, based on the values citizens

² Daniel Yankelovich is Chairman of Viewpoint Learning Inc., which developed ChoiceWork Dialogue methodology. CPRN has applied and then subsequently adapted ChoiceWork methodology in its citizens' dialogues. The methodology is designed to give decision makers a deeper understanding of citizens' value-based policy choices.

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 American and global circumstances. And they must do so in the context of competition for limited resources (they can't have it all). This requires a deeper level of policy engagement.

There are significant policy issues, constraints, challenges and opportunities related to closer economic integration that would benefit from substantive citizen policy discourse to give decision makers greater clarity with respect to the policy parameters within which they should be working. Decision makers need to appreciate which choices people are prepared to leave on the table for discussion and which are non-starters. And Canadians need to better understand, through individual reflection and learning and in discussion with fellow Canadians, the complexity and interaction of issues, the need to make tough choices and the fortitude to live with the consequences.

Canadians understand that our economic, social, environmental, cultural, and foreign policies vis-à-vis the US are inextricably enmeshed and that it is not possible to talk about economic integration in isolation. Some important policy issues and choices that call for greater public reflection include:

Foreign, Defense and Security Policies

How do we balance our internationalist orientation with our geographic location in North America, living beside the world's only superpower and what tradeoffs are we prepared to make to pursue an independent course? If we are to embrace a more robust peacekeeping role, what choices are we prepared to make in terms of reduction in traditional defense capacity? What tradeoffs are Canadians prepared to make on forging and implementing a common border security policy with the US? Are we prepared to tradeoff some loss of domestic policy control for smoother flow of goods, services and people across the borders? If we find certain aspects of US security policies to be unacceptable, are we prepared to live with the economic consequences of different security requirements? Are we prepared to be offside on the North American missile shield initiative and forgo the potential economic benefits of securing US defense contracts and the potential political consequences that might ensue?

Environmental and Natural Resources Policy

Canada's abundant water and energy resources are very attractive to our southern trade partners. Are Canadians prepared to provide the American market with greater access to our water and energy resources and if so, under what conditions and terms? What are non-negotiable issues? What tradeoffs that citizens would be prepared to make (some

access to resources in exchange for settling long standing agricultural and forestry disputes)? As a signatory to the Kyoto Protocol what obligations does Canada have to live up to and should these limit trade policy with the US? Are Canadians prepared to support environmental choices that could mean losing out on US investment and export revenues?

Social Policies

Our Canadian health care system and social safety net programs (employment insurance, old age security, and children's benefit system) have been credited with achieving less inequality than exists in the US. In any discussion of closer economic integration with the United States, including trade agreements, we know that Canadians expect government to ensure that greater integration wouldn't jeopardize our ability to shape our own social policies. Are there any tradeoffs in this area that Canadians would be prepared to consider (allowing more US based health care services to establish in Canada), and if so, subject to what conditions and terms?

Cultural Policy

Ensuring the quality and quantity of Canadian content in the audio-visual (AV) system has been an important element of our cultural policy focused on maintaining national identity and informing Canadians about each other. There are mounting industry pressures here and in the US to open up the Canadian system to more foreign (US) control and investment. Are Canadians prepared to continue supporting regulatory and funding provisions to maintain Canadian content within our AV system? Are Canadians prepared to live with the potential loss of foreign and domestic investment and political heat that might accompany such a policy stance?

Regional Differences and Intergovernmental Gridlock: could greater public discourse help?

- If significant public differences emerged along regional lines, would opportunities for national dialogue help to reconcile them? What mechanisms do we have to do so?
- Where issues are mired in the bog of intergovernmental conflict, would involving citizens in these difficult issues help governments to move beyond dysfunction into creative cooperative citizen-centred federalism?

Recommendations

Bringing the Public into Public Discourse

This conference is part of a larger project aimed at encouraging informed public debate about the future of Canada's relations with the US over the next decade and a half. While debate is healthy and essential in democracies, this note argues that encouraging public debate actually requires helping Canadians to have more dialogue and less politicized debate, to make it easier for them to talk to one another about what most matters to them and to make informed choices about where we should be going. Deliberative dialogue gives people the opportunities to individually and collectively consider policy choices from a variety of value-based perspectives, to weigh the advantages, drawbacks, and tradeoffs of alternative policy choices and to make collective choices. The result of good deliberation is reflective public judgment. We need more deliberative dialogue in a variety of forms if we are to achieve more inclusive and legitimate public policies and a

more robust democracy. The recent federal election and its lack of substantial policy discussion also points to the need for our political parties to take up the challenge by engaging their own party membership in policy dialogue and elevating the quality of political discourse.

Bringing the public into public discourse is not intended to displace but rather to add to the experts' voices, nor is it designed to bypass the role of the elected representatives. In CPRN's experience, the public is not seeking direct democracy. People still expect decision makers to take the final decision but they do insist on venues for meaningful involvement - they want to be heard and to understand the rationale beneath the policy decisions made. On the big societal dilemmas, it is rarely the technical answers that politicians are missing but rather the value-based direction that they need from the public and it is only the public that can provide this direction. However, just as policy experts need tools and resources to perform their roles, so too does the public need to have tools and resources to effectively play its role. This conference offers a potential resource to help Canadians engage in a timely and critical issue.

While Canadians want to play a larger governance role than in the past, at the same time they are less trusting of public leaders and institutions and public cynicism is growing (Gregg 2004). Policy makers and politicians have to rebuild trust by designing creative and thoughtful processes that treat the public with respect. This will require intellectual clarity, new learning and skills, resources, and transparency in reporting back to the public on the impact of their engagement. There is no quick fix solution to this dilemma. Building trust is about developing relationships and that doesn't happen overnight. However, the people who participated in our citizens' dialogues are a good indication of Canadians' ability and interest to thoughtfully engage in public discourse. There is every reason to embark on this journey with optimism.

A Final Note: Defining the Issues for Public Discourse on Economic Integration

As the conference unfolds and issues are diced and sliced in myriad combinations, we would do well to think in terms of how to define policy choices in terms that engage and speak to the public. This is not an easy task for experts who are intimately familiar with and adept at dissecting the finer points of policy. What may be incredibly compelling to policy folk may fail to illuminate public thinking. We should be thinking in terms of the concrete consequences and impacts on peoples' everyday lives flowing from different policy options. We should also be explicit about the underlying values that permeate different policy choices (too often policy is presented as neutral or value free when in reality this is rarely the case).

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