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Privy Council Office Continuous Qualitative Data Collection of Canadians' Views – First Round of Focus Groups

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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Mike Colledge
President
Ipsos Public Affairs



Executive Summary

Background and Objectives

The Privy Council Office (PCO) is the hub of non-partisan, public service support to the Prime Minister and Cabinet and its decision-making structures. Led by the Clerk of the Privy Council, PCO helps the Government implement its vision and respond effectively and quickly to issues facing the government and the country.

As an advisor to the Prime Minister, PCO brings together quality, objective policy advice and information to support the Prime Minister and Cabinet, including information on the priorities of Canadians. To this end, the Communications and Consultation Secretariat within PCO supports the Prime Minister’s Office in coordinating government communications and setting broad government communications themes and messages, in accordance with government priorities, as determined by the Prime Minister, Cabinet, Cabinet committees and the Clerk of the Privy Council. The Secretariat also works with PCO policy secretariats to advise and support Cabinet and its committees.

In fulfilling its mandate, PCO required an ongoing cycle of qualitative data collection to ensure that it has up-to-date representations of Canadians’ opinions on macro-level issues that are of interest to the government, such as their views on what should be the priorities of the government. Additionally, such research increases the Government of Canada’s understanding of emerging trends, and measures Canadians’ views on key national issues and policy initiatives.

Through the use of an ongoing cycle of focus groups, PCO is gaining a solid understanding of Canadians’ views as they relate to the most important issues facing the country; their perceptions of how the federal government can best address these issues; expectations of actions related to government priorities; and perspectives on how the government can most effectively convey its efforts in dealing with emerging issues. This research helps inform the development of communications messages, products and dissemination tactics to respond to priority issues. Additionally, the research allows the Government of Canada to develop and refine communications activities to meet the specific needs of Canadians with timely, up-to-date, easily understood information based on the current perceptions of Canadians in the requisite areas.

This first wave of ongoing qualitative research was meant to gather feedback from Canadians on select issues and policy areas that are important to the Government of Canada. The issues discussed during focus groups differed from one week to the next. Topics covered were divided as follows between week one and week two:

- Week One:
 - The Government of Canada’s plan for investing in infrastructure
 - Affordable housing for Canadians
 - Encouraging innovation in Canadian businesses
 - Encouraging healthy lifestyles for Canadians
 - The Canadian justice system

- The Canadian Armed Forces
- Week Two:
 - Government priorities and actions
 - Energy and the environment

Overview of Methodology

This first wave of qualitative research was comprised of a series of twelve focus groups with Canadians aged 20 years old and above, held between January 24th and February 1st, 2017. All group discussions lasted approximately two hours and were conducted in the evening, with the first session in each city starting at 5:30pm and the second starting at 7:30pm. These sessions were held in the following locations:

- Week One:
 - Drummondville – January 24th
 - Moncton – January 25th
 - Mississauga – January 26th
- Week Two:
 - Regina – January 30th
 - Calgary – January 31st
 - Saskatoon – February 1st

A total of 12 participants were recruited for each session to ensure that a minimum of eight to ten participants would attend. In total, 117 participants took part in the discussions. All participants received an honorarium of \$75 for attending the sessions at the focus group facilities. The screening questionnaire helped ensure that participants included a good cross-section of the general population, with good mixes of gender, ages, education and income levels, as well as household composition. Additional methodological details can be found in the appendix of this report.

This first wave of research is part of a continuous qualitative research project that will include a total of 144 focus groups to be held in multiple waves over the 2017 calendar year, with the option of renewing the cycle of research for two additional years. The contracted amount for this research project for calendar year 2017 is \$916,865.05, including HST.

Key Findings

Week One Findings

Investing in Infrastructure

Many participants in Drummondville, Moncton and Mississauga had heard of recent investments in local infrastructure, including roads, local hospitals, bridges or public transportation, but few among them

could recall if the Government of Canada was involved in any of those local infrastructure projects. Despite their relatively low awareness levels, most participants believed that substantial investments were necessary to fix infrastructures that they felt were in rough shape.

Reactions to material outlining the plan for a Canada Infrastructure Bank were somewhat positive. On the positive side of things, many participants understood that this idea would likely generate additional funds for infrastructure projects across Canada because of the involvement of private sector investors in collaboration with government. However, most remained confused as to how the private sector would benefit from their investments, leaving many participants worried that private companies may end up overcharging to make a profit or that the money may not be allocated properly.

Affordable Housing

The lack of affordable housing was viewed as a key problem in all three locations. Whether caused by higher prices or lower revenues, there was a sense that a significant portion of the population, which most felt was growing, could not afford decent accommodations. When asked what approach should be used by the Government of Canada to help provide access to affordable housing, participants were in general more favourable at the idea of providing subsidies to lower the rent of those in need rather than encouraging new constructions. While a majority of participants felt that subsidies should go directly to renters rather than owners, this position was not without its detractors. In the end, it came down to whom participants believed would use the money more effectively.

Small Business Innovation Research Program

The broad outlines of a plan to create a program that is meant to encourage innovative businesses in Canada was presented to participants. In general, they reacted very favourably to the idea. Participants were asked to comment on six possible names for this new program. One clearly distinguished itself from the others: Innovative Solutions Canada. It was deemed the clearest and most informative name on the list. Participants felt that it clearly identified the purpose of the program and plainly branded it as a Government of Canada program.

Encouraging Healthy Lifestyles

Participants were nearly unanimous in their desire for the Government of Canada to play a role in encouraging Canadians to live a healthier lifestyle. When asked what would be done more generally to encourage healthy lifestyles, educational campaigns immediately came to mind. Participants pointed to the importance of teaching kids from a very young age about the importance of healthy foods and exercise.

The idea of a ban on advertising for unhealthy foods that directly targeted children was also viewed positively by the vast majority of participants. While a strong majority of participants supported the idea of a tax on sugary drinks, this measure generated a lot of discussion, with some participants opposed to it on the grounds that they did not like taxation as a general rule. However, most opponents said they would be more favourable if the tax was very small and all proceeds from it would go to programs aimed at fighting obesity in youth.



Justice System

An interesting paradox appeared during discussions on the Canadian justice system. On the one hand, when asked to select a priority between prevention, punish and rehabilitation, many said that more emphasis should be put on prevention as the main goal of the justice system. A few others chose rehabilitation, while punishment was not a favourite choice for most participants. On the other hand, most of the discussion on the overall goals of the justice system focused on the need to properly punish criminals and hold them more accountable for their actions.

This situation could be explained by two factors. First, most participants felt that the system was too soft on criminals, especially with those who committed crimes against vulnerable people. They therefore wanted harsher punishment for these crimes. Second, a group exercise highlighted a generalized lack of awareness regarding what is being done to fulfill the various roles of the justice system. Participants had heard a lot about punishment (or perceived lack thereof) in the media, but very few could recall examples of successful restorative justice, rehabilitation or support for victims.

The Canadian Armed Forces

Participants in Drummondville, Moncton and Mississauga were provided with a list of attributes that may be used to describe the CAF and were asked to choose the one attribute that best represented how they viewed the CAF. Two words were selected most often across all three locations: engaged and professional. Participants in Drummondville were more negative in their overall perceptions, while participants in Moncton were more positive but expressed some reservations about the treatment of veterans and Mississauga participants were in general the most positive in their assessments.

Week Two Findings

Priorities for their Community

Aside from healthcare services, which stood out as the number one priority raised by participants, two economic concerns were also identified as crucial by participants in Regina, Calgary and Saskatoon. One was the need to help local businesses and industries to succeed and the other was local job creation. Throughout this discussion on local businesses and jobs, participants expressed worries about the current state of their local economies. The difficult situation of the oil industry was raised as a key source of concern, with participants feeling that their communities suffered because of it.

Actions Taken by the Government of Canada

Participants were asked on a top-of-mind basis what they felt the government had done right and/or wrong over the past year. Two issues dominated these discussions across the three locations: the welcoming of Syrian refugees and carbon pricing. The former was viewed as the Government of Canada’s most positive achievement, while the latter was perceived to be the most negative.

Participants were also provided with a list of more than 20 actions taken by the Government of Canada over the past year and asked to choose the two that they felt would have the strongest positive impact



on their community. Results of this exercise varied according to locations, with participants being more likely to focus on actions that directly affected their province or their city.

Many Saskatchewan participants thus viewed the recent signature of a healthcare funding accord between the federal and Saskatchewan governments to increase funding for home care and mental health as the most important impactful action taken over the past year. The signature of a deal to provide 237 million dollars in federal, provincial and municipal funding for Saskatchewan infrastructure projects, as well as the funding of 10 water and wastewater projects in Regina and Saskatoon were also selected as the most impactful by multiple participants in Saskatchewan groups.

Calgary participants were in turn more likely to select the approval of the Trans-Mountain and Line 3 Pipelines as the most impactful actions taken by the Government of Canada. A few Calgary participants also identified the signing of a 1-billion-dollar deal for federal, provincial and municipal infrastructure spending in Alberta as a highly impactful action for their community.

Energy and the Environment

Participants in Regina, Calgary and Saskatoon were near unanimous in their support for the recent government approval of Kinder Morgan’s Trans Mountain and Enbridge’s Line 3 pipelines. Most participants felt that these approvals would be beneficial to their province because the pipelines would open up new markets for Canadian oil.

While only a few participants had heard of the Pan-Canadian Framework on Clean Growth and Climate Change by name, most had heard something about recent efforts by the Canadian government to work with the provinces to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. Initial reactions to this were generally not very positive and many participants spontaneously reduced this framework to a single idea: the carbon tax. As a general rule, participants in all three locations disliked the idea of carbon pricing. Their spontaneous focus was on the immediate cost to them and their local economy, and they tended to leave aside the positive effects that carbon pricing could have on the environment.

While views on this framework were mostly negative across all three cities, they were expressed in different manners, mainly due to the differing approaches taken by respective provincial governments. Indeed, Calgary participants directly associated this Pan-Canadian Framework with the carbon tax already in place in Alberta, while Saskatchewan participants were either aware, or guessing, that their provincial government was holding out on this agreement.

When asked to rank a series of arguments that could be made in favour of carbon pricing, two arguments stood out as the most convincing for participants across all three locations: preserving the environment for future generations and encouraging companies to become more energy efficient and find innovative solutions to pollute less. It was clear from discussions that participants in all three cities gave more credence to positive arguments that did not refer to punitive measures or to the negative consequences of climate change.



Note on Interpretation of Findings

Qualitative research is designed to reveal a rich range of opinions and interpretations rather than to measure what percentage of the target population holds a given opinion. These results must not be used to estimate the numeric proportion or number of individuals in the population who hold a particular opinion because they are not statistically projectable.

Focus group research on government priorities seeks to provide a deeper understanding of participants’ views, often complementing quantitative findings gathered through survey research. Discussions allow for deep probing on key issues that is not possible with quantitative research. This type of information is essential for the Privy Council Office in its role advising and supporting the Cabinet and its committees.