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Privy Council Office Continuous Qualitative Data Collection of Canadians' Views – Wave 10 of Focus Groups

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY
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Mike Colledge
President
Ipsos Public Affairs

1. 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 tenth 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 location to the next. Topics covered included:

- Creative Canada
- Corporate tax rules
- Canada-US relations
- Healthy eating
- Labour and employment
- Gun control laws
- Deferred prosecution agreements
- Fall economic statement
- Offshore protected areas
- Immigration fees
- Bombardier
- Asylum seekers

Overview of Methodology

This wave of qualitative research was comprised of a series of 12 focus groups with Canadians aged 20 years old and above, held between October 11th and October 26th, 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:

- October 11th – Laval
- October 17th – Prince Rupert
- October 18th – Vancouver
- October 19th – North Bay
- October 23rd – Fredericton
- October 25th – Quebec City
- October 26th – Mississauga

A total of 12 participants were recruited for each session to ensure that a minimum of eight to ten participants would attend. In total, 122 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 second 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

Creative Canada

Laval, North Vancouver, North Bay, Fredericton and Quebec City participants were asked a series of questions regarding the Government of Canada’s Creative Canada initiative. Participants were unaware of the name of the initiative on an unprompted basis, but most participants said they had in fact heard about the announcement when prompted on some key features. The most widely-recognized elements of the initiative were all related to Netflix.

In both Quebec locations, participants spontaneously mentioned that they had heard about the debates regarding the taxation of Netflix services, but not of the other elements of the initiative. Many participants outside of Quebec said they were aware of the future creation of Netflix Canada and the

added funds for Canadian productions. They mostly shared positive views regarding all elements of Creative Canada, even if they did not previously know about most of them.

Corporate Tax Rules

A short discussion on the Canadian government’s possible changes to the corporate tax regime was held in Laval, Prince Rupert, North Bay and North Vancouver. Awareness of the recent Canadian consultations on tax changes was highest in Prince Rupert and North Vancouver. Only a handful of participants in Laval and North Bay were aware of the consultations, and most displayed little to no understanding of the nature of the proposed changes to the corporate tax regime. Those who were aware of the proposed changes shared mixed views as to whether these were a good idea or not. These participants’ views depended in large part on how they understood the changes and who they believed would be affected.

Canada-US Relations

Laval, Prince Rupert and North Vancouver participants were asked to share their views on current NAFTA negotiations between Canada and the United States. Almost all participants were aware of NAFTA negotiations and mostly shared a deep sense of worry and pessimism about the possibility of reaching a fair deal for Canada. Their pessimism stemmed mainly from their highly negative perceptions of the current US government. Most participants felt that the Government of Canada was talking the right approach by not engaging in public disputes with the US, while seemingly standing firm on key points.

Participants were also asked to select top priorities among a list of seven items that was presented to them, including: environmental standards, dispute resolution mechanism, ability to work cross-border, labour standards, indigenous rights, Canadian culture and gender equity. Environmental standards were chosen by most as a top priority because participants feared that Canadian standards might be lowered to match those of the United States and Mexico. Three other priorities stood out during discussions: ensuring the presence of a strong dispute resolution mechanism, the ability for Canadians to work cross-border and the protection of Canadian labour standards.

Healthy Eating

Fredericton, Quebec City and Mississauga participants took part in extensive discussions about encouraging healthier eating habits among Canadians. While most participants felt that the Government should do more to encourage healthy food choices, a vocal minority disagreed. Views were mostly split according to general opinions about the appropriate balance that should be achieved between private and public responsibility. When prompted on the possibility of applying new types of warning labels on foods to provide immediate information on the amount of fat, sugar and sodium contained in packaged food items, opinions were divided along similar lines. The majority who favoured this initiative believed that it would provide Canadian consumers with an easier way of identifying what was bad for them. Those who opposed such labeling said that the approach seemed too strong and preferred to have the information provided to them in a less direct manner.

Participants in all locations were presented with a series of possible warning labels and asked to select those they viewed as the most appropriate. Results were fairly consistent across all locations. Two versions stood out as most efficient: a label that included a triangle ensign with an exclamation mark and

a similar label including a stop sign with an exclamation mark. These two options ranked higher than others because of their overall simplicity and clarity. Images for all labels shown to participants are presented in the body of the report and in the discussion guide included in the appendix.

Aside from the idea of introducing warning labels on food packages, participants were asked about the appropriateness of a series of additional measures, including mandatory calorie counts on restaurant menu items, a new tax on sugary items (with revenues generated being used to promote healthier lifestyles) and a ban on advertising for unhealthy foods targeted at children. The most popular measure was the introduction of a tax on sugary items, although many among those who supported the idea stated that their support was contingent on the money being used for the stated purpose only. The two other measures generated mixed reactions.

Labour and Employment

An in-depth discussion on potential changes to labour standards in federally regulated industries was held in Prince-Rupert and North Vancouver. Participants were asked to complete three written exercises. One exercise presented a series of potential areas of focus for the Government of Canada and required respondents to select which among them should form the core of the government’s strategy as it is revisiting these standards. Wording that included “good quality jobs”, “quality jobs” and “fair jobs” worked best. On the other hand, mentions of “decent work” and “decent jobs” did not fare well.

The second exercise presented participants with the government’s statement of intentions regarding the revamped standards, as follows: *The Government of Canada must promote good quality jobs by addressing the changing way that people work, and work to increase the workforce participation of women and underrepresented groups. To do this, it will be necessary to update the Canada Labour Code to address emerging issues such as unpaid internships, and to ensure that Canadians continue to have a robust and modern set of federal employment standards.*”

The paragraph was generally viewed positively, but it was also difficult to absorb as a whole for some participants. Many appreciated the inclusion of a sentence about “changing the way in which people work” because they felt this was an important new reality to deal with. The mention of working to “increase the workforce participation of women and underrepresented minorities” generated the most discussion. Some, mostly women, felt it was essential to promote equality in the workplace for women and for other groups that may not be treated on equal footing. However, others mentioned that this did not sound right because it seemed to single out only two groups at the expense of others who might also face discrimination or other challenges. The part of the paragraph that read “continue to have a robust and modern set of federal employment standards” generated mostly negative reactions as participants felt it did match the overall objective of improvement and change, but rather suggested continuity.

Finally, participants were invited to identify among a list of twelve possible labour standards that the Government of Canada could implement in federally regulated industries, which were most important. While all measures were seen as positive and important by most participants, the most important measure chosen was ensuring equal hourly wage for people working part-time and for temporary workers compared to those who completed the same tasks as a full-time worker. The equation was simple for most participants: you should get paid according to the tasks you perform, not your status.

They summarized it as “equal pay for equal work”. A higher minimum wage was also popular for most participants. Some questioned the impact it may have on small companies who could not afford it, but most agreed that this should not be an excuse to delay increasing the minimum wage.

Gun Control Laws

Discussions on gun control laws were held with participants in Prince Rupert, North Vancouver and North Bay. Participants in all three locations generally felt that Canada was not affected by the kind of gun violence and mass shootings that plagued the United States. A few stated that gun violence was a problem, mostly related to street gangs in larger urban areas like Vancouver and Toronto, but that it generally did not affect every day Canadians. This generalized sense of comfort with the current gun situation in Canada created a sense for Prince Rupert and North Vancouver participants that gun control laws were likely just fine as they were, with a few wanting stricter controls.

Discussions in North Bay were somewhat different than in other locations. In this city, many participants believed that current gun control laws were strong enough and should not be changed, but a few strongly advocated for loosening current controls. The latter believed that current laws should be changed so that Canadians who wanted to carry guns for self-defence could do so.

Deferred Prosecution Agreements

Discussions on deferred prosecution agreements (DPAs) were conducted in Laval, Prince Rupert, North Vancouver and North Bay. Only a handful of participants had heard about deferred prosecution agreements on an unprompted basis. On a prompted basis, some said they had heard about them, but most equated this with a “standard plea agreement” for criminals in exchange for collaboration rather than something that applied specifically to corporate crimes.

The instinctive reactions of most participants across all locations were negative, driven by a generalized impression that corporate crimes and their perpetrators were given preferential treatment. Most believed ordinary Canadians would not have access to this type of plea bargain and therefore, corporate wrongdoers should not have this option. It left many participants feeling like corporate criminals could buy their way out of prosecution. Only a handful of participants spontaneously mentioned that DPAs were good because they would encourage collaboration from whistleblowers or lower ranking individuals who may not speak out unless they were given more lenient sentences or have charges removed. Even when presented with a formal argument in favour of DPAs, most remained unconvinced.

Fall Economic Statement

Participants in Mississauga and Quebec City were asked a series of questions about the Government of Canada’s fall economic statement. On a top-of-mind basis, few participants had heard about the statement, even though Quebec City participants displayed slightly higher levels of familiarity with some of its specific elements. Items recalled included stronger than expected economic growth, lower deficit as a result of that growth, faster than expected indexation of the Canada Child Benefit and lower taxation rates for small businesses.

Participants were then presented with two key measures targeting small corporations’ taxes as part of the fall economic statement: restrictions regarding the practice of income sprinkling among adult family

members and the introduction of new limits to the use of a business’ passive income for personal purposes. Most participants had never heard of those two concepts. When presented with a definition of both practices, many agreed that it was right for the Government of Canada to restrict their usage.

Among a series of core measures announced in the economic statement, cutting the small business tax rate was viewed as positive for the economy and a way to encourage small businesses to flourish in Canada. Enhancing the working income tax credit was also viewed positively because participants felt that it rewarded Canadians who worked for their income. Finally, most also believed that it was a good idea to start indexing the CCB to the cost of living earlier than expected.

Immigration Fees

A discussion on the fees charged by the Government of Canada for new immigrants took place in North Vancouver, Mississauga and Fredericton. Upon being informed that there were three broad classes of immigrants (economic, family and refugees), most participants said they had heard about them previously. Participants in Vancouver were most likely to display some familiarity with the class system, followed by those in Mississauga, with participants from Fredericton being the least familiar.

Most participants across locations could not hazard a guess as to the current fee structure for those applying for permanent residency. Those who did provide a number generally overstated the amounts charged by many hundreds, sometimes thousands, of dollars. Once informed of the current fee structure, many felt the amount was reasonable, with some saying it was too low. Nearly all agreed that that refugees should not be charged an application fee. Most also agreed that the entrepreneur category should be charged higher amounts because they could probably afford it.

Offshore Protected Areas

A short discussion on offshore protected areas was held with participants in Prince Rupert, North Vancouver and Fredericton. In each location, participants were provided with a list of possible names that could be used to designate such areas, including: Marine Habitat Conservation Area, Marine Habitat Protection Area, Fish Habitat Conservation Zone, Fish Habitat Refuge, and Designated Area for Fish Habitat Protection.

The versions that contained the term ‘fish’ were considered by most to be too restrictive, while the term “marine” was seen to cover the whole habitat, including crustaceans, marine mammals and birds. Participants mostly felt that ‘conservation’ was about taking proactive steps to ensure sustainability and was perceived as a softer term than ‘protection’. The latter was viewed as stronger, more direct. Participants felt that if the goal was to act urgently on a crucial problem, then protection was the best choice. However, if the main objective was to encourage conservation and raise awareness, then participants preferred conservation. In general, participants did not relate to, nor understand, the word ‘refuge’.

Bombardier

The recently sealed agreement between Bombardier and Airbus to expand market opportunities for C-Series’ planes was discussed in Quebec City, Mississauga and Fredericton. Quebec City participants

clearly stood out from their Mississauga and Fredericton counterparts for being much more aware and familiar with the topic, while also sharing more positive views on the agreement.

It was difficult for participants in Fredericton and Mississauga to see how this agreement would benefit anyone outside of Airbus and, to the extent that jobs could be created in Alabama, the United States. It was hard to understand how Canadian jobs would be preserved, let alone created, in Canada as a result of this deal. Quebec City participants expressed more positive views of the deal in general. They mostly agreed that Bombardier had little choice but to strike a deal with Airbus in order to expand its marketing and sales forces worldwide and counter the effects of the American tariff.

Asylum seekers

Laval and Prince Rupert participants took part in a short discussion on asylum seekers who have crossed the Canada-U.S. border. Participants in both locations displayed high levels of awareness on this issue, having heard about it through traditional media outlets, as well as through social media and internet coverage. All agreed that most of the information circulating on social media about asylum seekers was negative. Most participants in both cities believed asylum seekers were coming to Canada because of a general change of immigration stance by the Trump administration in the United States, although not all could pinpoint the specific policy or event that triggered the influx of asylum seekers into Canada.

Despite the similar awareness levels across both locations, the nature and tone of discussions were different in each, with Prince Rupert participants expressing more positive views than those from Laval. Participants in Prince Rupert were indeed more likely to believe the Canadian government had improved in its handling of the issue compared to when the influx started a few months ago. Most Laval participants did not share this impression and felt that the Canadian government needed to inform them better regarding the process that had been put in place to vet these asylum seekers and ensure that the border was secure.

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.