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Privy Council Office Continuous Qualitative Data Collection of Canadians' Views – Third 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 third 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:

- Awareness of recent Government of Canada actions
- The federal government Budget 2017
- Health care funding
- Canada-US relations
- Opioids
- Telecommunications industry
- Housing (Mississauga only)

- Bombardier (Montreal only)
- Net Neutrality (Montreal only)

Overview of Methodology

This third wave of qualitative research was comprised of a series of eight focus groups with Canadians aged 20 years old and above, held between March 21st and March 28th, 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:

- Mississauga – March 21st
- Montreal – February 23rd
- Halifax – February 27th
- Burnaby – February 28th

A total of 12 participants were recruited for each session to ensure that a minimum of eight to ten participants would attend. In total, 79 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 third 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

Budget 2017

Discussions on the federal budget took place in all four locations. However, groups in Mississauga were held before the budget was presented, meaning that the conversation focused on expectations and not actual measures in this city. Sessions in Montreal, Burnaby and Halifax being held after the release of the federal budget for fiscal 2017, participants in these locations were asked to share their general views on what they had heard, read or seen.

Overall, the budget did not leave a lasting impression on most participants. Many said it was a relatively prudent document that did not present major new spending or programs, while also not making major cuts anywhere. A few participants mentioned that they had heard this was a careful budget because of the uncertainty posed by the change of government in the United States. Measures to help caregivers and extend maternal leave were noticed in a positive way, while removal of the tax credit for transit

generated negative comments. When presented with a list of key measures included in the budget, participants reacted positively.

Canada-US Relations

The relationship between Canada and the United States generated spontaneous discussions in all cities. Unprompted mentions of the relationship included concerns over the willingness of the United States to revisit certain provisions of NAFTA, as well as worries over the handling of asylum seekers crossing the border between the United States and Canada and general comments regarding the challenges posed by the new American administration more broadly.

Participants in Mississauga, Montreal and Halifax were asked to comment more specifically on the issue of refugees crossing the border into Canada. Most participants were confused on this issue even though almost all of them had heard about this problem. The main source of confusion was related to the identity and origin of the individuals crossing the border. Most participants did not know if they were refugees, illegal immigrants running away from the US due to changes in American policies, or other types of migrants. Because of this confusion, it proved difficult to get a clear sense of how participants wanted the Canadian government to react to the situation.

Health Care Funding

Participants in Montreal and Mississauga took part in a short discussion on the recent health care accord between their respective provincial governments and the federal government. On a top-of-mind basis, very few participants had heard about the funding agreement and the money targeted to home care and mental health. When presented with the details of the funding agreement for each province, participants generally felt it sounded a good deal, but nevertheless raised a lot of questions regarding the size of the amount provided relative to the actual needs, as well as the reasons those two priorities were chosen. While almost all agreed that mental health and home care were essential needs, some would have liked to know how the decision to focus on these two was taken.

Opioids

The challenges posed by opioids were discussed in all four locations. In each city, participants were asked to share their top-of-mind thoughts on the opioids crisis, before being asked to complete two separate exercises on its causes and solutions. Awareness of the issue varied considerably from one location to the next. Burnaby participants stood out for being most aware of the crisis.

The discussions in Burnaby showed that most participants understood the seriousness of the issue for their community and had heard of fentanyl. They felt that the current situation could be considered an epidemic, with hundreds of people having died from overdoses. Top-of-mind views of the situation in other cities were more scattered due to much lower levels of information.

Participants in all locations were provided with a list of six possible reasons behind the current situation and asked to select what they felt were the top three reasons behind the opioid crisis currently unfolding in Canada. The most important reason provided across locations was people making poor decisions. The second-most important reason provided for the crisis was the presence of criminal gangs, followed by doctors not prescribing properly and drug companies making unsafe products. Poor border control and

lack of policing did not resonate with most respondents and only a handful of participants selected them as one of their top three reasons.

Out of nine possible paths to improving the situation, two solutions dominated rankings across all locations by a wide margin: better regulation of harmful substances and education campaigns to inform the public about the risks. Investing more money into policing stood out as the least favoured option.

Telecommunications Industry

Views of the Canadian telecommunications industry were mostly negative across all locations. When asked to complete a written exercise requesting that participants select up to two words that most appropriately described their impressions of the industry from a list of 16 descriptors, negative words dominated the rankings. The two descriptors selected most often were greedy and uncompetitive, followed by unaffordable, dishonest, unfair and stagnant. Explanations for these selections were mostly linked to negative personal experiences with mobile phone carriers, with a few also complaining about the cost of Internet and cable television. A handful of participants across locations shared more positive views of the industry, viewing it as critical to their lives and innovative.

When asked to select from a list of possible actions that could be taken by the Government of Canada with regards to the telecommunications industry, participants overwhelmingly chose one of two interrelated items: making telecommunication bills more affordable for all Canadians and creating a more competitive Canadian telecommunications industry. These two actions were directly related to one another in that participants felt that reducing the size of bills was the ultimate goal for any action taken, while creating a more competitive environment was the means through which this goal could be achieved.

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.