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# Privy Council Office

## Continuous Qualitative Data Collection of Canadians' Views – Wave 5 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 fourth 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:

- Government of Canada Actions
- Canada-US Relations
- Poverty
- Local Challenges
- The culture sector in Canada
- The CBC
- Impaired Driving
- Public Safety
- Justice
- Cyber Security

## Overview of Methodology

This fifth wave of qualitative research was comprised of a series of sixteen focus groups with Canadians aged 20 years old and above, held between May 8th and May 30th, 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:

- May 8<sup>th</sup> – Moncton
- May 10<sup>th</sup> – St John’s
- May 15<sup>th</sup> – North Vancouver
- May 16<sup>th</sup> – Calgary
- May 23<sup>rd</sup> – North York
- May 24<sup>th</sup> – Montreal
- May 29<sup>th</sup> – Sault Ste Marie
- May 30<sup>th</sup> – Sudbury

A total of 12 participants were recruited for each session to ensure that a minimum of eight to ten participants would attend. In total, 144 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

### *Local Challenges*

In North Vancouver participants were concerned with the cost of housing and a need for improved infrastructure. In Calgary, the discussion was largely focused on the economy and its recent impacts on the job market, and the cost of housing. Those in St. John’s felt there was a decrease in the number of jobs in the community, which was brought to light in an exercise where participants highlighted ‘a shrinking middle class’ as a major concern. During the exercise in Sudbury, healthcare, lack of jobs, and the cost of living were highlighted as concerns for the community, while, those in Sault St. Marie noted a lack of quality jobs in the community and a need for local economic diversification.

### *Canada -United States Relations*

The perspective on Canada-US relations was similar in all locations. Participants felt it was important for the Canadian government to protect its trade interests; compromise in trade agreements would be acceptable, but they did not feel this was necessary at this preliminary stage, and; participants also recognized the need to be cautious when asserting the interests of Canada as the US has a large economy and is one of Canada’s largest trading partners. Discussions of softwood lumber and dairy agreements left participants feeling comfortable with the government’s current approach. It was also widely accepted that Canada and the US should work together on environmental issues, even if this would be difficult to accomplish.

### *Poverty*

Participants in Calgary, North Vancouver and St. John’s noted an increase in poverty in their communities. According to participants, primary factors contributing to this increase ranged from increased housing costs (North Vancouver), weakened provincial economic prospects (Calgary) and the lack of well-paying and steady jobs in their community (St. John’s). Opinions were mixed when asked if the government should focus on ‘reducing the number of Canadians living in poverty’ or; ‘increasing the number of low-income Canadians who join the middle class’, however when asked about the target group for a poverty reduction strategy, the ‘working poor’ was a clear top choice in all locations. Poverty was defined similarly across all groups as the inability to afford all the necessities, which included housing, food, utilities, internet access and healthcare. There were no clear preferences in terms of federal government policies that would be most effective in addressing poverty in Canada, however policies relating to a guaranteed minimum income, skills training, and building affordable housing were most often discussed.

### *Official Languages*

Protecting the French language was important to participants in both Moncton and Sudbury. However, there was a contrast in their ideas of the current state of the French language in Sudbury. Participants overall felt there was an increase in the availability of access to services and education in French in the community, and they did not perceive as much discrimination towards French speakers as in the past. However, participants still feared the sustainability of the French language in their community as there was a general sense that younger generations of Franco-Ontarians were not concerned with the vitality

of their language. During the written exercise the key issue selected by many participants was transmitting the French language and culture to younger generations.

### *Heritage*

Once provided with a description, participants in Sault St. Marie, North York, Montreal and Sudbury recognized the importance of the culture sector in Canada. When asked about the major challenges of the culture sector strong competition, especially American creators and producers as well as a perceived lack of value placed on the culture sector in Canada, were discussed. Those in Sault Ste. Marie and Sudbury were conflicted on the government’s relationship with the sector however those in North York felt it was most important for the federal government to support Canadian culture. When asked, many felt going forward the federal government should focus its efforts on partnerships and digitizing Canadian culture.

The news industry was recognized as a struggling industry however a desire to protect the industry as-is was not often expressed as many felt more effort should go into modernizing the industry, through supporting digital content.

CBC was seen as having an essential role in the culture sector for Canadians across all regions and helps to create a sense of national awareness and identity. Many noted the CBC did a good job of promoting local content, felt the amount of indigenous content could be increased, and felt more should be done to target content to younger demographics.

### *Impaired Driving*

At first, participants were not in favour of the random administration of Blood Alcohol Content (BAC) tests, and felt there needs to be substantial cause for a test such as the smell of alcohol or visibly unsafe driving. After some discussion, opinions shifted slightly and most were in favour of a reasonable number of random stops to ensure the safety of all drivers. Overall, participants felt that, approached reasonably, random tests are justified due to the number of deaths from impaired driving and the ability of the tests to reduce this number.

### *Public Safety*

National Security was described by participants in North York, Montreal, Sault Ste. Marie and Sudbury as relating to protecting Canadian citizens, protecting trade and natural resources, and preventing terrorism both at home and abroad. National security agencies known to participants included the Canadian Security Intelligence Service (CSIS), the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP), the Canada Border Services Agency (CBSA), and the Department of National Defence (DND). The sharing of information between these agencies was important to many, in particular when saving lives, national security and saving money were of concern. Favoured terms to describe the guiding principles of national security in Canada were safety and security, as they were seen as the basic functions of security policy.

### *Justice*

Those in North Vancouver, Calgary and St. John’s were aware of the existence of mandatory minimum penalties in Canada; however few could name specific details. Overall, participants believed the

existence of mandatory minimums made the criminal justice system more fair, as there were set penalties to anyone who committed a crime regardless of their social status or access to a lawyer. When presented with the idea of increasing some of these maximums and repealing some mandatory minimums, many agreed with increasing the maximums for some crimes, but keeping mandatory minimums. Last, participants were presented with the option for judges to use special exemptions to bypass mandatory minimums. Participants were wary of the influence and bias judges could have on these cases and were comfortable with this suggestion only when it was clear there would be strict criteria and guidelines for a case to be eligible for special exemption.

### *Cyber Security*

Cyber security was described by participants in Calgary and North Vancouver as supervision of online activity and the protection of personal information. In both locations, specific instances of cyber-attacks and threats were named, such as recent cyber attacks against the British Health Services, Alberta Health Services, and attacks on White House cyber security. Participants in both locations had heard the federal government was addressing the issue of cyber security, but felt that compared to other countries this was not a high priority issue for Canada. While overall there was support for protecting the electoral process from cyber-threats, there were several concerns such as a potential for an increased government presence and impact on free speech, as well as concerns on why only electoral process protection was a concern rather than all government services.

### **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.