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# Privy Council Office

## Continuous Qualitative Data Collection of Canadians' Views – Wave 7 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 seventh 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
- Local Challenges/Community Specific Issues
- Canada-US Relations
- Taxes
- Seniors Policies
- Youth Policies
- Youth Volunteering
- Disabilities
- Apologies

## 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 July 10<sup>th</sup> and August 3<sup>rd</sup>, 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:

- July 10<sup>th</sup> – Sorel
- July 12<sup>th</sup> – Edmonton
- July 18<sup>th</sup> – Thunder Bay
- July 19<sup>th</sup> – Hamilton
- August 1<sup>st</sup> – Vancouver
- August 3<sup>rd</sup> – Charlottetown

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

### *Canada -United States Relations*

In all groups, discussion on Canada- United States relations quickly focused on trade relations, in particular NAFTA, as participants felt trade was essential for a strong economy in Canada. These discussions focused on three main points of concern: the perceived different perspectives between Canada and the US, both in society and in government; concerns about specific trade aspects, in particular lumber and dairy; and concerns about the unpredictability of negotiations and whether Canada can/should maintain a firm stance. These beliefs carried on during the issues exercise when discussing negotiations between the two countries where participants were most concerned with the issues of the environment and climate change, anti-terrorism security, immigrants and refugees, trade, and treatment of minority groups.

### *Local Challenges*

Participants in Sorel, Thunder Bay and Charlottetown, identified health care, local economic prospects, the ability to find affordable housing, poverty and homelessness and an aging population as issues of most concern in their community. Participants most often explained their choices based on either having been directly impacted by some of these issues or because they see them as ongoing issues affecting their community. Other issues mentioned included environmental concerns and transportation off the Island (for those in Charlottetown).

### *Vancouver Issues*

Awareness of the Port of Vancouver was mixed among groups however, for those who were aware, the Port was described as important infrastructure for the community which was currently undergoing expansion. Participants felt the Port supported the local community by providing jobs and strengthening the economy. Participants also discussed Granville Island, describing it as a tourist hub that was often crowded, and most assumed that the Island was owned and operated by the city. When provided with information that the Canadian Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC) owns the property, and were developing plans for redevelopment, participants felt costs for such a redevelopment should be assumed by the CMHC.

### *Taxes*

Participants in all sessions agreed that the tax system needs reform. Participants tended to support initiatives targeted at the wealthy and which were intended to close tax loopholes, increase taxation levels and prevent fraud. There was agreement in all locations that big corporations and the top 1% should be paying more taxes, many saying that despite having the means to do so, they don't pay their fair share as it stands. Some also felt churches and religious groups should pay more taxes. Conversely, the working poor, low income Canadians, students and veterans were most often identified as groups that should benefit from tax relief.

There was also an appetite amongst some to see small businesses pay less taxes – explanations for this point of view most often focussed on the contributions of these small businesses to local economies through job creation.

Participants struggled with defining what they would deem to be the ‘top 1%’ - definitions ranged those earning more than \$60,000 to those earning \$1 million dollars or more a year.

There was very little interest in any tax measure intended to change the tax rate for small businesses to ensure they were more aligned with those paid by larger businesses. Most simply said that small businesses often struggle to make ends meet and simply don’t have the financial wherewithal that larger businesses do.

Of the six possible measures intended to make the tax system fairer, support was highest for:

- the introduction of measures intended to ensure family members of a business owner who are receiving any type of payment from the corporation are indeed contributing to the business.
- taking steps to tax business investment portfolio income at a higher rate if it is taken out of the portfolio for reasons other than to upgrade or improve the business.

As for some of the other options presented to participants, reactions were mixed. Participants who opposed them often said that these measures seemed to target individuals who had taken on a certain level of risk to ensure the success of their business and, as such, these types of benefits seemed reasonable. These proposed measures included:

- Taxing corporations without any employees at the same rate at which personal income is taxed;
- Taxing cash in business accounts which are included as part of the sale of a business to lessen the amount of tax paid overall;
- Treating employee stock options more like regular income, and
- Lowering the tax threshold for tax exemption of the sale of a business which currently stands at \$850,000.

When asked what funds generated by Government of Canada tax reform efforts should be targeted towards, the most often-mentioned measures included debt repayment and healthcare transfers to the provinces.

### *Youth Policies*

Government actions that participants felt would have a positive impact on youth included:

- Tax cuts to the middle class and increases for the wealthy;
- funding provided for transit system upgrades;
- Increased non-repayable tuition grants for low and middle income students;
- the healthcare deal to increase funding for home care and mental health;
- the Canada Child Benefit;
- the investment of \$165 million in a Youth Employment Strategy including Canada Summer Jobs;
- the expansion of Employment Insurance (EI) benefits to parts of the country who have experienced significant job losses;

- the introduction of a plan to legalize marijuana; and
- the rejection of the Northern Gateway Pipeline.

Actions that were more likely to garner mixed reactions included the decision to allow the Kinder Morgan project to proceed as well as efforts to strengthen the Canada Pension Plan.

### *Youth Volunteering*

Most youth group participants said they either currently volunteer or have volunteered in the past, and do so for a variety of reasons. For some it is out of a desire to help others or as a way of giving back to their community. For others, it is an alternative to monetary contributions, a means of socializing with others and/or to gain experience that may be useful when applying for scholarships or future employment opportunities. There was no clear consensus as to a preferred name for a potential Government of Canada volunteer program. Reactions to the options presented were measured at best.

### *Seniors Policies*

In Charlottetown participants felt Government actions that have had the most positive impact on their community were the Caregiver Tax Credit; the healthcare deal signed with PEI to increase funding for homecare and mental health; the new deal to strengthen the Canada Pension Plan; lowering the age of Old Age Security; and increasing the Guaranteed Income Supplement for low income seniors. Infrastructure spending was also important to participants including spending on hospital infrastructure, affordable and accessible housing, affordable and accessible transit and more community centres.

### *Disabilities*

When asked to define disabilities, participants highlighted both physical and mental disabilities. Challenges described by those with disabilities included stigma, financial challenges, employment challenges, quality of life, and a lack of accessible services and support. After being provided with a list of potential Government of Canada actions participants felt that improving access to employment for people with disabilities was the most important as it increased quality of life. Participants did not see funding disability services as a tradeoff but rather as vital to strengthening communities overall. Participants had mixed opinions about fining businesses that were not accessible to those with disabilities, however they thought government infrastructure spending on public spaces should be contingent on these projects being accessible to those with disabilities.

### *Apologies*

Overall, participants agreed that apologies were very important to acknowledge and heal from the past, set standards for society, and to provide education on the issue. Criteria suggested for formal apologies included whether the incident was an overt action by the federal government, with long-term effects and was a legal/moral issue. Participants did not feel too many high-profile apologies could diminish the significance of an apology but did feel that the apology must be accompanied with action to show changes have been made.

## **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.