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## ***Spring 2019 Focus Groups (Second Cycle)*** **Executive Summary**

Prepared for the Privy Council Office of Canada

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This public opinion research report presents the results of a series of focus groups conducted by Phoenix SPI on behalf of the Privy Council Office. The research study was conducted with Canadians aged 18 and older between May 8 and May 29, 2019. In total, 12 focus groups were conducted in six locations across the country: Etobicoke/Scarborough, Saint John, Quebec City, Ottawa, Calgary, and Prince George.

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## Executive Summary

The Communications and Consultations Secretariat of the Privy Council Office (PCO) provides advice and support to the Government of Canada, the Clerk of the Privy Council, as well as federal departments and agencies on matters relating to communications and consultations. One tool used by PCO in order to fulfil this mandate is public opinion research. Phoenix Strategic Perspectives (Phoenix SPI) was commissioned by PCO to conduct a series of focus groups to explore the views of Canadians on current events of relevance to the federal government.

### 1. Research Objectives and Purpose

The main objective of the focus groups was to explore the perceptions of Canadians on the state of current events, which included their opinions on the environment, steel, pipelines, fisheries, and vaccines. This input was needed because complex issues are often difficult to communicate to the Canadian public in a manner that is easily and clearly understood. The target population for the focus groups was adult Canadians aged 18 and older. By carrying out this research, PCO was able to ensure a better understanding of the views and concerns of the public. This understanding will be used to develop effective communications strategies and products.

### 2. Methodology

Twelve focus groups were conducted with Canadians, with two groups conducted in each of the following locations: Greater Toronto Area (GTA)<sup>1</sup>, Saint John, Quebec City, Ottawa, Calgary, and Prince George. The groups in Quebec City were conducted in French and the groups in the GTA, Saint John, Calgary, and Prince George were conducted in English. In Ottawa, one group was conducted in English and one in French. In all locations, except Ottawa, groups were segmented by gender (one group with men and one with women). All groups included a mix of participants by age, employment status, income, and education. Groups in Ottawa also included a mix by gender.

The following additional specifications applied to this research: eleven individuals were recruited by phone for each two-hour group; participants received an honorarium of \$100 in appreciation of their time. All groups were held in a facility that allowed observation of the sessions, either behind a one-way mirror, or via closed-circuit TV in a room adjacent to the meeting room where the focus groups took place.

In total, 107 Canadians took part in this research:

Location	Language	Audience	Number of Participants	Date and Local Time
GTA, ON	English	Male	9	May 8; 5:30 pm
GTA, ON	English	Female	8	May 8; 7:30 pm
Saint John, NB	English	Female	10	May 14; 5:30 pm
Saint John, NB	English	Male	10	May 14; 7:30 pm
Quebec City, QC	French	Male	9	May 15; 5:30 pm

<sup>1</sup> Participants were recruited from Scarborough and Etobicoke.

Quebec City, QC	French	Female	9	May 15; 7:30 pm
Ottawa, ON	English	Male/female	8	May 21; 5:30 pm
Ottawa, ON	French	Male/female	8	May 21; 7:30 pm
Calgary, AB	English	Female	9	May 28; 5:30 pm
Calgary, AB	English	Male	9	May 28; 7:30 pm
Prince George, BC	English	Male	9	May 29; 5:30 pm
Prince George, BC	English	Female	9	May 29; 7:30 pm

All steps of the project complied with *The Standards for the Conduct of Government of Canada Public Opinion Research*.

The investigators for this study were Philippe Azzie and Alethea Woods. Philippe moderated the groups in the GTA, Saint John, Quebec City, and Ottawa. Alethea moderated the groups in Calgary and Prince George. Both moderators contributed to the final report.

### 3. Limitations and Use of the Research Results

This research was qualitative in nature, not quantitative. 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. As such, the results provide an indication of participants' views about the issues explored, but they cannot be generalized to the full population of Canadians. Specifically, 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.

### 4. Summary of Findings

#### *Government of Canada News*

Among things participants had seen, read, or heard about the Government of Canada recently, the most commonly identified ones were the SNC-Lavalin affair and the price on pollution, typically termed a "carbon tax". Other top-of-mind issues were identified by smaller numbers. These included pipelines, legalization of cannabis, tension between China and Canada, the Phoenix payroll issue, U.S. tariffs on Canadian steel and aluminium, negotiating a North American free trade agreement, Canada's garbage dispute with the Philippines, the court case in relation to defence procurement, migrants crossing the U.S. border into Canada irregularly, Canada changing its policies regarding refugees, the prime minister's travels to Tofino, subsidies for purchasing electronic vehicles, a national Pharmacare program, taxing of Netflix, federal advertisements about drinking and driving, an increase to the child tax benefit, granting the government of Quebec a role in nominating judges to the Supreme Court of Canada, financial contributions to the reconstruction of Notre Dame cathedral in Paris, and the transfer from a healing lodge back to a federal prison of an individual serving a life sentence for first-degree murder.

#### *Environment*

The price on pollution was most often top-of-mind when participants were asked what they recalled about the environment lately. Asked explicitly if they had heard of the Paris Agreement on

climate change, most participants said they had, routinely describing it as an international agreement to deal with climate change or an international agreement to reduce greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions. Most participants were doubtful that Canada would reach its target under the agreement of reducing its GHG emissions by 30% below 2005 levels by 2030. At the same time, most participants also said it is important for Canada to do so or at least try to do so.

Virtually all participants in Saint John, Quebec City, and Ottawa said they were aware of the environmental issue around plastics and plastic pollution. When it came to what they would most like to see government do, they were most likely to identify banning single use plastics, followed by eliminating plastic pollution and reducing plastic pollution.

For their part, most participants from Etobicoke/Scarborough, Saint John, and Calgary, said they had heard about the Government of Canada's plan to put a price on pollution. Things heard about the plan included paying a higher price at the pump for gasoline, receiving an incentive (typically termed "a rebate" or "credit"), that there will be a penalty for big emitters of greenhouse gases, that some provincial governments oppose it and have taken the Government of Canada to court, that it is aimed at businesses, that the Alberta government may eliminate its pricing on pollution system, and that there is debate/criticism/disagreement about the Government of Canada's plan.

In Calgary, participants were asked what they know about the environmental assessment process in Canada. No one claimed to know anything about this process, although several participants thought they might have heard something about changes to the rules or process. Most shared the view that the environmental assessment process has the potential to strike a good balance between the environment and the economy.

### *Steel<sup>2</sup>*

There was widespread awareness among participants in the GTA, Saint John, and Quebec City that U.S. tariffs had been imposed on Canadian steel and aluminum, but limited awareness of anything else beyond that fact. Reaction to the imposition of the tariffs was critical, with participants routinely suggesting that the measures are not justified, go against the principles of free trade, reflect the protectionist views of the current U.S. administration, and result in a 'lose-lose' situation for both countries. There was a near consensus that Canada should keep its countermeasures in place (but not increase them), but participants were divided when asked if Canada should refuse to ratify the new free trade agreement until the U.S. removes its tariffs between those who said yes and those who said they did not know.

There was support across these groups for Canada and the U.S. reaching a compromise whereby the tariffs would not be completely eliminated, but an agreement reached to lower them or change the way steel trade works between the countries to resolve some U.S. concerns. That said, support was based on the assumption that the compromise would be beneficial to both countries.

Compared to all the other issues facing Canada-U.S. relations, the steel tariff was described as important, primarily because it was seen as a microcosm of Canada-U.S. relations in general (i.e. an indication of the state of relations between the two countries). It was also seen as important

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<sup>2</sup> Issues in this section were explored with participants in all locations except Prince George, but questions asked in Ottawa and Calgary were revised following the U.S. government announcement that it would lift tariffs on Canadian steel and aluminum.

because of the economic implications and consequences it was having and could have in the future for both countries.

Following the U.S. announcement that they were lifting tariffs on Canadian steel and aluminum, at least a few participants in each group in Ottawa and Calgary indicated being aware of this. Participants' impressions as to why the U.S. agreed to lift the tariffs included the following: the U.S. administration wanting to deliver a new free trade agreement ahead of the next presidential election, growing opposition to the tariffs in a number of U.S. states, opposition and pressure from industry, a need for Canadian steel and aluminium, and, possibly, a goodwill gesture from the U.S. administration in response to Canada's arrest of a Huawei executive at the U.S.' request.

There was a virtual consensus that the lifting of these tariffs was good news for Canada, but also a widespread assumption that other issues will emerge on the Canada-U.S. relations front. Reasons given to explain this assessment included the perceived unpredictability of the U.S. administration and potential developments in the Huawei affair.

### *Fisheries*

In the minds of participants, the expression 'Indigenous priority access to the fishery' was most often associated with advantageous access to the fishery. Examples of this included the right to fish first or before other fishers, the right to fish longer than other fishers (e.g. yearlong or outside prescribed fishing seasons), the right to fish without restraints on catches, not being subject to standard licensing requirements (e.g. ability to fish without a permit), and the right to sell fish commercially.

Most participants suggested that 'Indigenous priority access to the fishery' was reasonable, or a good thing, given that Indigenous peoples were first occupants of the territory. Perceived benefits included potentially contributing to reconciliation, improving management of the fisheries, assisting Indigenous communities economically, and rejuvenating Indigenous culture. Concerns about Indigenous priority access to the fishery related primarily to monitoring/managing priority access in order to prevent abuses, particularly overfishing for commercial purposes.

There was positive reaction to the idea of Indigenous communities sharing in the decision-making and management of fisheries in their traditional territories. Perceived benefits associated with 'co-management of fisheries' included better management of natural resources resulting from cooperation, benefiting from the knowledge of Indigenous peoples when it comes to fisheries, promotion of reconciliation, a model for managing relations with Indigenous peoples more generally (i.e. in other areas), and enhancing Canada's international reputation/image in terms of its relationship with its Indigenous peoples.

Concerns about this approach included ensuring a balanced approach that takes into account the perspective of non-Indigenous fishers as well, maintaining transparency about the process of co-management, apprehensions that co-management will be understood as implying equality between partners (based on a sense that Canada should be the senior partner in the relationship), and apprehensions about people potentially claiming indigenous status in order to claim benefits associated with co-management.

### *Vaccine messages*

Participants were given a handout with different pieces of information about vaccines and asked to identify anything that reassured them, anything that did not, and anything they found confusing or unclear. Overall reaction to the document ranged from positive to neutral, with participants routinely observing that it is clear and easy to understand. In terms of its impact, the most widespread effect it had on participants was to solidify or confirm their existing opinions about vaccines (which were overwhelmingly positive). Specifically, the information did not tend to create new doubts or alleviate existing ones, nor did it tend to provide new information or influence decisions to vaccinate either positively or negatively.

When it came to sources they would go to for information about vaccines, participants most often identified a family physician or healthcare provider (with participants unanimous in the feeling that they can ask questions to their healthcare provider about vaccines).

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The contract value was \$249,535.19 (including HST).

### *Political Neutrality Certification*

I hereby certify, as a Senior Officer of Phoenix Strategic Perspectives, that the deliverables fully comply with the Government of Canada political neutrality requirements outlined in the Policy on Communications and Federal Identity of the Government of Canada and Procedures for Planning and Contracting Public Opinion Research. Specifically, the deliverables do not contain any reference to electoral voting intentions, political party preferences, standings with the electorate, or ratings of the performance of a political party or its leader.

Signed:



Alethea Woods, President  
Phoenix Strategic Perspectives