



Government
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Gouvernement
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Continuous Qualitative Data Collection of Canadians' Views – August 2019

Executive Summary

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Canada 

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Introduction

The Communications and Consultation Secretariat of the Privy Council Office (PCO) commissioned The Strategic Counsel (TSC) to conduct continuous cycles of focus group research across the country with members of the public on key national issues, events, and policy initiatives related to the Government of Canada.

The broad purpose of this ongoing qualitative research program is three-fold: to explore the dimensions and drivers of public opinion on the most important issues facing the country; to assess perceptions and expectations of the federal government's actions and priorities, and; to inform the development of Government of Canada communications so that they continue to be aligned with the perspectives and information needs of Canadians, while remaining both clear and easy-to-understand.

The research is intended to be used by the Communications and Consultation Secretariat within PCO in order to fulfill its mandate of supporting the Prime Minister's Office in coordinating government communications. Specifically, the research will ensure that PCO has an ongoing understanding of Canadians' opinions on macro-level issues of interest to the government, as well as emerging trends.

The following report provides the findings of 8 in-person focus groups conducted between August 8th and August 15th, 2019, in four locations across the country in Ontario, Quebec, Nova Scotia and Nunavut. Details concerning the locations, recruitment, and composition of the groups are included in the section below.



Among the specific objectives for this cycle of focus groups, the research explored a wide range of issues, many of them in-depth, including awareness and perceptions of recent Government of Canada stories in the news, specific initiatives and recent announcements regarding climate change and the environment, such as the ban on single-use consumer plastics and the price on pollution, among others. In addition, the research explored local issues of concern, identifying specific challenges with respect to infrastructure and the economy. Specific topics such as childcare, health care, housing and Indigenous issues were explored in certain locations. Moreover, a series of exercises were completed by participants, depending on the location and the topic being discussed. These exercises aimed to draw out participants' priorities with respect to Government of Canada goals, both broadly and in specific areas such as child care and health care. Additionally, exercises were completed by participants in certain of the locations to test possible names for a government strategy to improve access to affordable prescription medications, and to assess the perceived impact of a range of Government of Canada actions related to the environment.

As a note of caution when interpreting the results from this study, findings of qualitative research are directional in nature only and cannot be attributed to the overall population under study with any degree of confidence.

Methodology

Overview of Groups

Target audience

- Canadian residents, 18 and older
- For the second cycle, groups were split primarily by gender

Detailed approach

- 8 in-person focus groups across 4 Canadian cities
- Two groups conducted per location, in Hamilton, Ontario (Aug. 8th), Trois-Rivières, Quebec (Aug. 8th), Iqaluit, Nunavut (Aug. 13th) and Kentville, Nova Scotia (Aug.15th)
- Groups in Trois-Rivières, Quebec were conducted in French, while all others were moderated in English
- A total of 10 participants were recruited for each group, assuming 8 to 10 participants would attend
- Each participant received an \$90 honorarium in respect of their time
- Across all locations, 71 participants attended, in total. Details on attendance numbers by group can be found below.

Group Locations and Composition

LOCATION	GROUP	LANGUAGE	DATE	TIME	GROUP COMPOSITION	NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS
Hamilton	1	English	Aug. 8, 2019	5:30-7:30	Women	10
	2			7:30-9:30	Men	9
Trois-Rivières	3	French	Aug. 8, 2019	5:30-7:30	Women	10
	4			7:30-9:30	Men	9
Iqaluit	5	English	Aug. 13, 2019	5:30-7:30	Women	8
	6			7:30-9:30	Men	7
Kentville	7	English	Aug. 15, 2019	5:30-7:30	Women	9
	8			7:30-9:30	Men	9
Total number of participants						71

Key Findings

The following outlines a summary of the key findings from each topic discussed during the cycle of focus groups undertaken in August, 2019.

Government of Canada Activity (Hamilton, Trois-Rivières, Iqaluit, Kentville)

In all locations, when asked about Government of Canada activities, initiatives or announcements, mentions tended to focus mainly on stories continuing to receive media attention, including those pertaining to trade and diplomatic relations, specifically in relation to the Canada-United States-Mexico Agreement (CUSMA) and Canada's ongoing dispute with China.

On the environmental front, several participants made reference to pipelines, the initiative to ban single-use plastics, and the recent return of Canadian garbage from the Phillippines. Miscellaneous references were also made in a number of groups to increases in the amount of the Canada Child Benefit (CCB), the legalization of cannabis, and the SNC-Lavalin issue, but these items were mentioned by very few participants across all groups and did not generate significant commentary.

In Iqaluit, there was some recall of an announcement regarding an injection of funding for infrastructure in Nunavut, and the Government of Canada's apology for its treatment of Inuit.

Local Challenges (Hamilton, Trois-Rivières, Iqaluit, Kentville)



Issues or challenges common to all locations included: affordable housing, jobs, drug use, crime, public services and infrastructure. Access to health care services also surfaced fairly consistently in many of the groups.

At the same time, a number of issues were identified specific to each location. In Hamilton, concerns focused primarily on pollution from the steel mills and gentrification of neighbourhoods. In Iqaluit there was a heavy focus on what was viewed as a serious infrastructure deficit (i.e., internet connectivity, water, sewage, housing, roads, health care.). In Kentville, participants were also preoccupied with similar issues in terms of housing, roads and health care. Respondents in Trois-Rivières had similar concerns regarding healthcare, roads, water pollution, composting and tourism.

Few were aware of federal government activity providing support for their communities. And, for the most part, any Government of Canada activity was perceived as having a 'neutral' impact, neither strongly positive nor strongly negative. Iqaluit was one exception, where participants were predominantly of the view that Nunavut is vastly underserved with respect to federal government funding, and that decisions made by the federal government often do not align with local preferences and needs. In Kentville some participants noted, in a positive vein, federal government funding of local medical facilities and increases in GST credits or rebates.

Government of Canada Priorities (Hamilton, Trois-Rivières, Iqaluit, Kentville)

Participants in all locations were each given a work sheet with a list of over-arching goals for the Government of Canada and asked to select the top two or three on which the federal government, in their view, should focus. Across all groups a consensus emerged around the importance of two key goals: "Making life more affordable" and "Improving Canadians' quality of life".

The focus on affordability reflected broader concerns about the rising cost of living, especially for housing and other basic needs, and about wages and salaries not keeping pace. Participants also prioritized affordability believing it to be a goal around which the federal government could establish a clear set of policy prescriptions aimed at, variously, addressing housing shortages/costs, cutting taxes, improving the outlook for jobs and increasing wages.

For most participants, improving Canadians' quality of life suggested a wider lens, beyond just economic and financial issues, that would also include Canadians' overall health and personal well-being. Other goals relating to ensuring Canadians are content, thriving or prosperous were thought to be overly subjective, or personal in nature, thereby making it difficult to develop a specific agenda around them, or to measure progress.

Growing and strengthening the middle class, as an over-arching goal, sparked some debate and was viewed differently across locations. In some cases, the consensus view was that the strength of the middle class is vitally important as a barometer for societal success and prosperity. In these groups, many felt strongly that bolstering the middle class should be a primary focus of government. In other groups, the dominant perspective was that those in lower income groups are most in need of government support.

Childcare (Hamilton, Trois-Rivières, Kentville)



Participants' concerns about childcare centered on affordability, primarily, in both Hamilton and Kentville. Quality was particularly important in Kentville, while being so to varying degrees in Hamilton and Trois-Rivières. Reducing wait lists for childcare spots was singled out as important by several participants, but was the principle concern of respondents in Trois-Rivières. Men in that city also wanted the creation of more spots to be a priority. That said, the primary focus on affordability in two of the three locations reflected participants' views that daycare costs in these provinces (Ontario and Nova Scotia) can be significant, especially for those with more than one child in care and with fairly modest household incomes. For some, the decision to remain in the workforce was made more difficult due to what are perceived to be very high costs for childcare.

When asked whether the government should focus more on improving the availability and quality of before and after school childcare OR that of childcare for younger children who are not yet in school, participants held mixed views overall. Some felt it is more important to provide children with structured activities before and after school to ensure they are not left to their own devices and to better align with parents' working hours, especially those working shifts. Others were of the view that providing childcare for those not yet in school is most important in terms of providing a good educational foundation and a more organized environment for children at a vulnerable age and formative stage of development.

Health Care (Kentville)

Concerns about health care were very prominent in this location. The issues focussed primarily on doctor and nurse shortages, associated long wait times and limited access to primary care, as well as the need for a hospital and long term care facilities. Lack of services and support for mental health and addictions were also top-of-mind. Awareness of federal government announcements to address these challenges, or improve health care in general, was quite low.

When provided with a list of possible priorities for the Government of Canada on health care, consistent with the concerns identified above, a majority of participants selected doctor and nurse shortages and reducing the wait times for mental health care as the highest priorities, with the latter more cited by women. Improving access to prescription drugs was also widely cited as a top priority, more prominently and unaidedly by men. Most participants believed it should not be a priority of the Government of Canada to provide access to affordable contraception, as many believed it is already widely available and affordable for Canadians.

Following up on the discussion of pharmacare, few were aware of news related to the Government of Canada doing something to ensure access to affordable prescription medications, but most thought it was a good idea, and almost all said they would be positively and personally affected if such a program were to be implemented.

When asked to identify a potential name for this program from a list provided, "Universal Drug Care", "National Pharmacare Plan" and "Prescription Access Plan" all ranked within the top three selections; however, there was no consensus within either group that any one of these options was the "best". Moreover, there was little agreement among participants about their reasons for choosing these names over others.



The Environment (Hamilton, Trois-Rivières, Iqaluit, Kentville)

Across all groups and locations, there were clear concerns about the environment, from both a local and national perspective. Nationally, the environmental issues of greatest concern included climate change, emissions, pollution, and events like forest fires and flooding. Many voiced concern about the effects that pollution is having on Canada's waters – lakes, ocean and marine life – in particular. In addition, many cited growing concern with waste and waste management, including the exporting of waste offshore to developing countries, like the Philippines.

Local environmental issues varied between locations. While sewage systems were top-of-mind in Iqaluit and Kentville, environmental concerns in Hamilton focussed prominently on industrial pollution from the locally-based steel industry. In Trois-Rivières, the source is from pulp and paper, aluminum and other industries. Residents of Iqaluit also cited transportation infrastructure and seaports, in particular, as negatively affecting the environment in their community. Asked what the federal government might do to help address local environmental issues, participants were short on specifics but felt that the Government of Canada does have a role to play, alongside municipal and provincial/territorial governments.

There was some recall of recent news or announcements from the federal government concerning the environment, but most of it was vague and short on details. Most commonly, participants identified the single-use plastics ban and the garbage shipment to the Philippines, in addition to some more limited mentions around the TMX pipeline.

Overall, there was moderate unaided awareness of the ban on single-use plastics across the Hamilton, Trois Rivières and Kentville groups. Note that this issue in particular was not tested in Iqaluit. Once presented with some details about the proposed ban, most participants felt that they had seen, heard or read something about it recently. Almost all supported the idea and felt that plastic pollution is a significant issue for the country and an important priority for the federal government. Participants also widely supported the idea of greater corporate responsibility for cleaning up plastic pollution, and for the Government of Canada leading by example and reducing the use of plastics government-wide, across all departments and agencies.

The main concerns with the ban focussed on inconvenience and the costs of alternatives being passed along to consumers. Across the board, however, the perceived positives – producing less waste overall that needs to be managed and reducing pollution - seemed to far outweigh the negatives associated with this initiative.

In both Hamilton and Trois Rivières, awareness of carbon sequestration was non-existent. The term 'carbon capture' seemed to resonate more, but still relatively few seemed to have much knowledge of, or familiarity with, the term. Once the term was explained to participants, opinion about whether Canada should invest in this technology or industry clearly leaned towards opposition. This stemmed particularly from concerns around the unknown risks this would pose to the environment, as well as worry about unforeseen consequences of the storage system or area being damaged. Many, however, could see the other side of argument and recognized the potential of this technology to help Canada



achieve emissions reductions targets in the short term while creating economic benefits from a new industry that could position Canada to meet the demands of a global market.

Government of Canada Environmental Actions (Trois-Rivières)

Participants in Trois Rivières were each given a worksheet with a list of actions that the Government of Canada could take towards improving the environment and were asked to select the top two or three that would have the most impact, in their opinion. Consistent with their concerns about plastic pollution in Canada's lakes and oceans, participants unanimously identified the ban on single use plastics as the most impactful action. Other areas believed to have an impact were the creation of marine protected areas, the investment in the new Oceans Protection Plan, as well as the price on pollution the federal government has placed on larger emitters.

There was an overall sense among participants in these groups that the federal government is generally on track and "moving in the right direction" in terms of addressing the important environmental issues in Canada. Beyond the actions included in the exercise, participants identified a number of others they felt the Government of Canada might take to protect the environment, including increasing public awareness of current legislation/actions, doing more around waste management, taking increased measures to protect Canadian land and waters, and better addressing ways to reduce carbon emissions, mostly related to reducing reliance on oil and gas and increasing the uptake of electric vehicles.

Price on Pollution (Hamilton)

Participants in Hamilton had limited awareness of the government's plan to put a price on pollution , although there was more widespread awareness of the plan when referred to as a 'carbon tax.'

When provided with more information about how the plan would work, support was muted. While most favoured action on environmental issues, including efforts to mitigate or reverse climate change, questions remained about the fundamentals of this program. The general belief was that businesses would pass the costs onto consumers. And while giving revenues raised to residents in the form of an incentive was viewed as a good idea, some were confused about its purpose and felt that more funds should be directed towards research and development of new technologies to deal with carbon emissions. Moreover, few recalled receiving any information about the incentive or seeing it on their tax returns.

Climate Change and Clean Growth (Iqaluit)

Although participants in Iqaluit expressed some concern about the environment, relatively few across both groups pointed to specific challenges facing Canada with respect to climate change.

Most participants did not recall hearing much about climate change in recent weeks or months, although some were aware of what they described as the 'carbon tax.'

However, specifically with respect to the North, participants saw evidence of climate change in terms of reductions in permafrost area, melting of the polar ice cap, general air quality, changing weather patterns and water levels.



At the same time, there was an acknowledgement that many are not well versed on the consequences of climate change and there was general agreement that more education is required to engage residents of the North on the impact and, from a practical perspective, what actions individuals and communities can take. Many stressed the need to craft educational materials with a local perspective, including stories that would resonate with the Inuit and would be available in English, French and Inuktitut.

Housing (Iqaluit)

All participants were extremely concerned about both the availability and affordability of housing in Iqaluit. It ranked among the top infrastructure issues for the community in both groups.

While some had heard about the recent announcement by the Government of Canada to provide \$290 million over eight years to protect, renew and expand social and community housing in Nunavut, most were short on details and expressed considerable skepticism that this amount would suffice to address the need. Many suggestions were put forward regarding additional steps the government could take to address housing issues in Nunavut, ranging from more creative approaches to building or renovating homes in the North (i.e., purchasing and renovating abandoned homes, transforming shipping containers into tiny homes, erecting prefabricated units) to taking a longer term view of funding for housing development and employing more local contractors. On this last point, participants were critical of the fact that contractors and tradespeople are often flown in from the South, displacing local trades (or working against the development of skilled trades in the North), at a significant cost.

Nutrition North Canada (Iqaluit)

All participants were aware of the Nutrition North Canada (NNC) program launched in 2011 to make perishable, nutritious food more affordable and accessible to those residing in remote and isolated Northern communities. Food insecurity, specifically the cost of food, was raised as an important issue. And while the NNC was viewed as attempting to address this issue, and was specifically praised for including 'country' or 'traditional' foods within the program, the main perceived drawback was that the amount of the subsidy is relatively insignificant given the extremely high cost of many basic food items. Many concurred that they do not take much notice of the savings they receive through the NNC, feeling that it is a negligible amount in terms of their total weekly or monthly grocery bill.

Participants were somewhat hard-pressed to recommend other ways that the Government of Canada could address food insecurity in Nunavut. Some recommended further subsidies to cover freight or cargo costs. Others made suggestions that focused more on developing the local agricultural sector, such as supporting local hunters, harvesting more country foods, and providing assistance to those wishing to develop local horticulture or livestock operations.

Indigenous Issues (Iqaluit)

Participants clearly indicated that more could be done to improve the relationship between the Government of Canada and Indigenous people, although few described it as moving in the wrong



direction. That said, several participants underscored that the state of the relationship varies, depending on the location across Canada.

To make further inroads towards reconciliation and to better support Indigenous communities, especially in the North, participants felt that the government should demonstrate greater respect for Inuit traditions, culture and language, and that it should respect its commitment to deal with Inuit and other Indigenous peoples on a 'nation-to-nation' basis.

The term 'reconciliation' takes on different meanings for participants, from apologizing for historical wrongdoings, to providing funding to improve the prospects for Indigenous communities, and helping Inuit get access to community-based support services so they can heal and move beyond the legacy and traumas of the past.

The partnership between the Government of Canada and the Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami (ITK) to establish the Inuit Crown Partnership Committee was something that was not particularly well known or understood. Participants had many concerns about the effectiveness of these types of bilateral agreements. In particular, they questioned what specific improvements had been made as a result of this partnership and were skeptical of the claim to eliminate tuberculosis (TB) given what they believe to be increasing rates of TB since 2017.

A major concern was a seeming lack of consultation and engagement of Inuit elders and the broader community in the creation of this partnership with the ITK.

MORE INFORMATION

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