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# Continuous Qualitative Data Collection of Canadians' Views – March 2021

## Executive Summary

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For more information on this report, please email [por-rop@pco-bcp.ca](mailto:por-rop@pco-bcp.ca)

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Canada 

# Executive Summary

## 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.

This report includes findings from 12 online focus groups which were conducted between March 2<sup>nd</sup> and 30<sup>th</sup>, 2021 in multiple locations across the country including Atlantic Canada, Quebec, Ontario, Manitoba, Saskatchewan, Alberta and British Columbia. Details concerning the locations, recruitment, and composition of the groups are shown in the section below.

The research for this cycle of focus groups focused primarily on COVID-19, as the pandemic continued in Canada. Related to COVID-19, topics explored included what Canadians were hearing about the Government of Canada in the news, what types of COVID-19 information were compelling and important to them, their outlook on COVID-19 and how that has influenced their behaviours, as well as their views on the vaccine rollout in Canada, including the basis of any vaccine hesitation, thoughts on the federal government's procurement and distribution of the vaccine and perceptions on the proposed timeline for the rollout.

Certain subgroups were also asked for their views on specific and relevant issues related to COVID-19. The research explored perspectives on the Atlantic travel bubble with residents of Atlantic Canada, employment insurance (EI) and recovery benefits recipients from across the provinces of Manitoba and Saskatchewan were asked about the repayment of the Canada Emergency Response Benefit (CERB), and young adults in the Greater Montreal Area (GMA) were asked about the effectiveness of two potential COVID Alert app QR code posters. Moreover, those who worked in sectors that were hard-hit by the COVID-19 pandemic public health restrictions were asked for their perspective on the various restrictions in place. Participants who identified as being heavier consumers of news and information were asked about their primary sources for news, the types of COVID-19 information they typically seek as well as how they filter and share news with their social networks.

In addition to the pandemic, non-COVID-19 related discussions were undertaken on a range of topics including mental health, the state of the French language, Indigenous issues, digital government and home retrofits. The research also explored what Canadians were expecting from the 2021 budget, their views on travel restrictions and the Canada-U.S. border, and their post-COVID-19 travel plans.

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 quantitatively to the overall population under study with any degree of confidence.

## Methodology

### Overview of Groups

#### Target audience

- Canadian residents, 18 and older.
- Groups were split primarily by location.
- Some groups focused on specific subgroups of the population including those who were vaccine hesitant, opinion leaders who were paying particularly close attention to the news, Anglophones in Quebec, EI/Recovery benefits recipients, those working in hard-hit sectors, people who were experiencing COVID-19 fatigue and exhibiting riskier behaviours, Indigenous people and young adults aged 18 to 30.

### Detailed approach

- 12 focus groups across various regions in Canada.
- Two groups were conducted with the general population in Atlantic Canada and in Victoria and Nanaimo.
- The other ten groups were conducted with key subgroups including:
  - Vaccine hesitant people residing the Lower Mainland B.C., and in mid-size and major centres across Quebec;
  - Opinion leaders and those paying close attention to the news in major centres in Ontario and in mid-size and major centres in Alberta;
  - Anglophones living in Quebec;
  - EI/Recovery benefits recipients residing in the provinces of Manitoba and Saskatchewan;
  - Those working in hard hit sectors in the Toronto, Peel and York regions of Ontario;
  - Those experiencing COVID-19 fatigue and exhibiting riskier behaviours residing in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA);
  - Indigenous people in Alberta; and
  - Young adults between the ages of 18 and 30 residing in the Greater Montreal Area (GMA).
- Groups in Quebec, with the exception of the group held with Anglophones, were conducted in French, while all others were conducted in English.
- All groups for this cycle were conducted online.
- A total of 8 participants were recruited for each group, assuming 6 to 8 participants would attend.
- Across all locations, 89 participants attended, in total. Details on attendance numbers by group can be found below.
- Each participant received an honorarium. The incentive ranged from \$100 to \$125 per participant, depending on the location and the composition of the group.

### Group Locations and Composition

LOCATION	GROUP	LANGUAGE	DATE	TIME (EST)	GROUP COMPOSITION	NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS
Lower Mainland B.C.	1	English	Mar 2	9:00-11:00 pm	Vaccine Hesitant	8
Major Centres Ontario	2	English	Mar 3	6:00-8:00 pm	Opinion Leaders/Influencers/Paying more attention to news/media	8
Mid-Size and Major Centres Quebec	3	French	Mar 4	6:00-8:00 pm	Vaccine Hesitant	8
Quebec	4	English	Mar 8	6:00-8:00 pm	Anglophones	7
Manitoba and Saskatchewan	5	English	Mar 9	7:00-9:00 pm	EI/Recovery Benefits Recipients	7

Toronto, Peel, York Regions	6	English	Mar 10	6:00-8:00 pm	People working/Worked in Hard Hit Sectors – hospitality, travel, food services, restaurants	7
Atlantic Canada	7	English	Mar 16	5:00-7:00 pm	General Population	8
Greater Toronto Area (GTA)	8	English	Mar 18	6:00-8:00 pm	People experiencing COVID-19 fatigue/Exhibiting riskier behaviours	7
Victoria/Nanaimo	9	English	Mar 23	9:00-11:00 pm	General Population	8
Alberta	10	English	Mar 24	8:00-10:00 pm	Indigenous Peoples	7
Greater Montreal Area (GMA)	11	French	Mar 25	6:00-8:00 pm	Young Adults, Aged 18-30	7
Mid-Size and Major Centres Alberta	12	English	Mar 30	9:00-10:00 pm	Opinion Leaders/Influencers/Paying more attention to news/media	7
<b>Total number of participants</b>						<b>89</b>

## Key Findings

### Part I: COVID-19 Related Findings

#### Government of Canada in the News (All Locations)

In response to a question about what they had seen, read or heard about the Government of Canada in the last few days, participants mentioned a range of issues, announcements and activities, although the topic of vaccine supply and distribution was top-of-mind. On the positive side, many participants commented on having heard about the following:

- Approval of additional vaccines;
- Vaccines were arriving in Canada faster than expected;
- Prioritization of Indigenous communities;
- High efficacy rates for the vaccines;
- The Government of Canada was avidly pursuing procurement of vaccines and was being transparent as to the number of vaccines distributed to date; and
- The federal government’s involvement in the COVAX initiative.

By contrast, a number of participants had heard information about the vaccines and the federal government's role in procurement and distribution which they felt was somewhat more concerning, including criticism of the Government of Canada over what was viewed as a slow rollout of vaccines and concerns about the safety of the AstraZeneca vaccine.

There was also some discussion of other aspects of COVID-19, including the spread of new variants, provinces experiencing a third wave of the pandemic, quarantine requirements for those arriving in or returning to Canada, reopening of interprovincial borders to permit more travel between provinces and rebates and/or financial assistance being offered to small businesses.

A variety of other issues surfaced in the context of this discussion about what participants had seen, read or heard about the Government of Canada, including: a possible federal election, the upcoming federal budget and discussions as to how the federal government will re-pay pandemic-related debts, issues between Canada and China, defeat of a private member's bill on pharmacare in the House of Commons (Bill C-213, the "*Canada Pharmacare Act*"), changes to Canada's Medical Assistance in Dying (MAID) law, and misconduct in the Canadian military.

In the one group held among Indigenous participants in Alberta, the discussion focused on issues pertaining to systemic racism in Canada, the federal government's role in providing clean drinking water to Indigenous communities and addressing issues regarding missing and murdered Indigenous women. Additionally, concerns were expressed about health care coverage provided through Crown Indigenous Relations and Northern Affairs Canada and the treatment of Indigenous peoples in regards to the right to hunt and trap in traditional territories.

### **The Supreme Court of Canada Ruling on Carbon Pricing (Mid-Size and Major Centres Alberta Opinion Leaders)**

All participants were aware of the Supreme Court of Canada ruling on carbon pricing which had been delivered just a few days prior to the focus group. On balance, participants supported the Supreme Court decision. A few participants felt this was a step in the right direction with respect to addressing the global issue of climate change. Conversely, several participants felt that the decision set a dangerous precedent, which they interpreted as allowing the federal government to levy taxes on provinces without their expressed consent.

When asked what they felt about the carbon pricing system in Alberta, a number of participants reiterated that they favoured the initiative, noting that it was needed to drive change and lower industrial emissions. On balance, participants felt that a 'made in Alberta' solution would be preferable, so that any profits could be kept in the province. They worried that without a provincial structure, industry may not have the confidence to continue to operate in the province. There was also a general belief expressed that any system established to address global warming should be more focused on reducing pollution across the board, rather than concentrating on carbon emissions alone.

While participants were aware that approximately 90% of direct proceeds from the Government of Canada's pollution pricing initiative were returned to residents of the province through Climate Action Incentive payments, there was nevertheless some degree of mistrust that the funds would be returned.

Participants felt it was important to be transparent about this and demonstrate accountability. Some also stated a preference to have more monies directed to municipalities to incentivize further improvements, as well as to local industries whom they felt would be more resourceful and creative in finding ways to lower their carbon emissions.

### **COVID-19 Information/In the News (Major Centres Ontario Opinion Leaders, Mid-size and Major Centres Alberta Opinion Leaders)**

A conversation about media consumption habits was held among two groups of participants who self-reported as heavier than average consumers of news and information.

Participants mentioned that they get their news and information from a wide range of sources, both domestic and international, drawing from both traditional and digital media. Many cited Canadian broadcasters and the print media, including CTV, Global News and CBC (both national news desk and regional news affiliates), the Globe and Mail, the National Post and local sources specific to the regions in which participants resided (i.e., the Edmonton Journal, the Calgary Herald, the Winnipeg Sun, the Toronto Star). Several participants commented that they monitor one or more of the following: CNN, the BBC, Al Jazeera, the Guardian, the Associated Press, and the Washington Post. Social media was also cited as a common source for news and information, with participants specifically identifying Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, Instagram and Snapchat.

When asked about the kind of news and information they seek regarding COVID-19, two areas of interest were predominant: trends related to COVID-19 (i.e., case counts, infection rates, hospitalizations, etc.) and the vaccine rollout (i.e., supply, distribution and eligibility for the vaccine). Much of this information was obtained from local, provincial and federal government websites, with some specifically citing their local public health unit. The World Health Organization (WHO) was also cited as a source.

Most participants said that they tend to share news articles they come across on social media with others, but generally only those containing scientific data from credible sources. The point was made that they are more inclined to share information that is visual (i.e., poster format), and easy for the recipient to understand and consume. Those who indicated that they do not share or have stopped sharing said this was mainly due to a high level of skepticism about the validity and credibility of information found online. Participants acknowledged regularly coming across false information or 'fake news' online, and felt they were readily able to conclude the legitimacy of a particular article based on the title, source and after fact-checking the content.

Responses were somewhat mixed when participants were asked if they typically corrected false information they see on social media. The general consensus was that many would tend to follow up with a family member. However, they would be less inclined to engage in debating a larger group online.

### **COVID-19 Information Preferences (Lower Mainland B.C. Vaccine Hesitant, Major Centres Ontario Opinion Leaders, Mid-size and Major Centres Quebec Vaccine Hesitant, GTA Experiencing COVID Fatigue and Riskier Behaviours)**

In several groups, participants were shown a series of social media posts from various sources, including from federal and some provincial levels of government which focused on various aspects of COVID-19. After viewing the posts (images of which are included in the Detailed Findings and the Appendix), participants were asked to comment on which of the posts appealed to them as well as their inclination to 'like' or 'share' any or all of them. Overall, the posts that got participants' attention were those that were:

- Timely and/or provided new information
- Relevant and relatable
- Deemed to be visually appealing
- Clear and data-driven
- Simple and to the point
- Viewed as reliable and from a known, credible source

While a number of participants did indicate they would consider sharing or liking certain posts, several said they would be unlikely to share any of them. The main reasons for not doing so centered on reservations about the validity of the data, concerns that followers may not have the required level of data literacy to consume the information contained in the posts and a general lack of interest in the information contained in the posts.

### **COVID Alert App QR Code Poster Testing (GMA Young Adults)**

Participants were shown a series of two QR code poster concepts individually, each of which had been developed by the Government of Canada as a possible tool to assist in COVID-19 tracing in coordination with the COVID Alert app. The two poster concepts can be found in the Detailed Findings as well as the Appendix. Prior to reviewing the posters, participants were first asked whether they were aware of the Government of Canada's COVID Alert app. Most had, however, few had downloaded it.

Participants' initial responses to the first poster were mixed. Some commented that it was clear in its messaging, while others felt it was not particularly captivating. Comments from those who did not find it attention-grabbing centered on the overall look and feel of the poster, specifically the colour scheme. Despite perceptions among some participants that the poster did not stand out sufficiently, they concurred that it did clearly communicate its purpose.

On balance, participants reacted more positively to the second poster overall. They perceived this poster to be more inviting, specifically as a result of the headline which some felt more clearly defined the benefits of participating in this initiative. A few also commented that the slight alteration to the colour scheme was more appealing. At the same time, some expressed confusion about the message '*Get notified if a visitor from today tests positive.*' Some felt that the message was unclear, particularly



regarding whether a user would be notified if an individual who had visited the business at any time during that day had tested positive or if the notification would only apply for those individuals who were present at the business within approximately the same timeframe as the user. Nevertheless, the fact that the headline included the phrase 'tests positive' got participants' attention.

After viewing the two concepts side-by-side participants overwhelmingly preferred '*Get notified if someone from today tests positive.*' Many felt the message aligned well with the directive and underscored why participation via the use of the COVID Alert app and the QR code would be advantageous. Overall, participants preferred the simplicity of the black and white colouring employed on the second poster. It was viewed as a cleaner presentation. There was minimal to no concerns or issues regarding the placement of the QR code in terms of capturing participants' attention.

Among those few who had already downloaded the COVID Alert app, most stated that they would scan the QR code from the poster and participate in this initiative as they felt it aligned with the general purpose of the COVID Alert app. Participants who had not already downloaded the COVID Alert app were unlikely to do so based on the information provided in the posters.

### **COVID-19 Outlook/Behaviours (GTA Experiencing COVID Fatigue and Riskier Behaviours, GMA Young Adults)**

Participants discussed the impact of COVID-19 and COVID-related restrictions on themselves and their households, and the extent to which they had altered or adjusted their behaviours over the past several weeks and months in response to the evolving situation.

Young adults residing in the Greater Montreal Area (GMA) were asked what they had been doing differently, if anything, relative to the last several weeks and months. For some, very little had changed. Participants also noted that their routine had acclimatized them to the public health guidelines. As such, they were finding it easier to adhere to protocols as compared to the early days and months of the pandemic. Nevertheless, some commented with a sense of disappointment that the closure of gyms and fitness studios meant they were engaging in less intense exercise and activities. There were a few participants who did indicate that, with the onset of somewhat warmer temperatures, they were more inclined to see people outdoors than they had been through the winter months.

### **Impact of COVID-19 and COVID-Related Restrictions (GTA Experiencing COVID Fatigue and Riskier Behaviours, GMA Young Adults)**

Participants commented on a range of impacts resulting from the pandemic and the related restrictions, with most expressing a sense of fatigue and frustration. Some mentioned feeling more socially isolated and others were experiencing a loss of motivation. Some participants also commented that the requirement to wear a mask was becoming tiresome and expressed concerns that doing so for an extended period of time could result in adverse health impacts. A few other participants, by contrast, mentioned that the restrictions had affected them in much more positive ways, bringing them closer to their family as they spent more time together.

When asked what they thought about the current restrictions in place in their region, young people residing in the GMA expressed concerns about the curfew. Instead, some were of the view that the province should have enforced stricter confinement for a period of two to three months instead.

Several participants from the group comprising residents of the GTA questioned the overall efficacy of the restrictions. They wondered why the pattern of opening and closing had been necessary especially as they felt that individuals, for the most part, had generally abided by the public health guidance.

When asked whether or not COVID-19 restrictions should be lifted or further enforced, participants were divided in their opinions. Some thought that restrictions should be lessened or lifted as vaccination rates increased while others emphasized the precarious situation given the variants of concern arguing that stricter guidelines were needed until the implications of the variants are fully known.

On balance, however, participants expressed greater concern about COVID-19 as opposed to the financial and economic impacts.

### **Vaccine Outlook (GTA Experiencing COVID Fatigue and Riskier Behaviours)**

Participants were asked about their views on taking the vaccine. The response was, for the most part, negative. Opposition to the vaccine centered on several issues and concerns including the speed at which the vaccine was developed and its subsequent safety, not wanting to be forced or pressured into being vaccinated and assumptions that, based on their health and age, they did not need to be vaccinated at this time. Those few who were more positive towards vaccinations used the experience of polio as an example underpinning the societal benefits of mass vaccination.

### **Atlantic Bubble (Atlantic Canada)**

Participants from Atlantic Canada discussed the impact of COVID-related restrictions and their views on the Atlantic Bubble which had been in place until November 2020.

While many understood the rationale for stay-at-home orders and the public health restrictions, some participants lamented the inability to properly care for others who were ill or elderly. Further comments about the pandemic included some who had lost their jobs and had to draw down on their savings. Students in the group mentioned that they had essentially missed half a year of their studies, and a number of participants spoke about the negative mental health impacts of COVID-19. Finally, several participants missed traveling for work and for pleasure, including visiting other areas outside of the Atlantic region.

Participants were then asked for their opinions on reinstating the so-called Atlantic Bubble. Most agreed that the Atlantic Bubble should be reinstated, although there was some concern that this should not be done too quickly and that attention should be paid in particular to movement across the New Brunswick-Quebec border. Some were also concerned about the situation in Newfoundland and Labrador and recommended a 'Maritime Bubble' which would exclude them.

There were, however, a few participants who were less convinced of the need to reinstate the Atlantic Bubble. These participants were most concerned about the adverse impact of the Bubble on economic growth, the difficulties faced by those living in the Atlantic region who are working in another province outside the region and the perceived inconsistency in the application of the rules in other provinces.

Participants did express some worries when asked if they felt that new COVID-19 variants could potentially spread more quickly through Atlantic Canada if the Bubble were to be reinstated. The major concern was a lack of capacity within the health care system to handle a surge in cases of COVID-19.

When asked specifically about when travel should open up between Atlantic Canada and the rest of Canada, most participants were particularly concerned about the situation in Quebec. The general view was that this could occur when case numbers in Quebec were under control. That said, some degree of fatigue was expressed by several participants who recommended opening sooner than later, noting that a third wave was likely and even unavoidable regardless of the measures taken.

On the specific question of what criteria Atlantic Canada should use to decide whether to open up, participants mentioned when most Canadians are vaccinated, when case levels are low, and based on public health recommendations. This also led to a discussion that the standards should be the same for Canadians entering the region as for Americans.

Finally, participants were asked whether there should be an Atlantic Bubble first, or if the province should open up to all provinces and territories at the same time. Most agreed that the former approach was more appropriate.

### **COVID-19 Vaccine (Lower Mainland B.C. Vaccine Hesitant, Mid-size and Major Centres Quebec Vaccine Hesitant, Atlantic Canada, GTA Experiencing COVID Fatigue and Riskier Behaviours, GMA Young Adults)**

#### **COVID-19 Vaccines in the News (Atlantic Canada, GTA Experiencing COVID Fatigue and Riskier Behaviours, GMA Young Adults)**

Most participants appeared to be paying fairly close attention to news and information about COVID-19 vaccines in Canada. Many were anxiously awaiting the point at which they would become eligible to be vaccinated. Some were also paying attention to testing that was being done to determine vaccine efficacy among children and youth, aged 12 to 18. Additionally, a number of participants were aware that approval had been granted for the AstraZeneca vaccine, but worried about possible side effects, such as blood clots, although there was acknowledgement that these were rare.

#### **Assessment of the Government of Canada's Performance (Lower Mainland Vaccine Hesitant, Atlantic Canada, GTA Experiencing COVID Fatigue and Riskier Behaviours, GMA Young Adults)**

When asked if the Government of Canada was doing a good job in procuring and distributing vaccines to the provinces and territories, views were mixed and varied across locations. In Atlantic Canada,

participants were generally positive or felt the federal government was doing the best under the circumstances.

Those who were more negative in their response raised the following issues:

- A sense that the federal government had been slow in obtaining vaccines and/or was well behind other countries in placing orders;
- A perception that the Government of Canada was overly-reliant on a single vaccine manufacturer (Pfizer was cited) which had been unable to produce a sufficient supply in the early days. As a result, there was a concern that Canada was among the only G7 country to have to dip into its COVAX reserves; and
- Others felt that the U.S. had been able to distribute vaccines more quickly given domestic production, and commented critically that Canada was not in a similar position.

Comments from other participants suggested that they did not necessarily distinguish between the federal and provincial levels of government regarding their respective roles and responsibilities in the vaccine rollout.

#### **Vaccination Targets and Timing (Atlantic Canada, GMA Young Adults)**

Participants were asked how they felt Canada was doing compared to other countries in terms of getting people vaccinated. Opinions were, on balance, mostly positive.

While a number of participants were unaware that Canada planned to vaccinate three million Canadians by the end of March and everyone who wants a vaccine by the end of September, many were skeptical that these targets could be achieved. Some participants were under the impression that all eligible recipients could expect to receive their initial dose by July. Based on this, they felt it would be challenging to have all eligible Canadians fully vaccinated by the end of September.

Projections as to when they would personally be in a position to be vaccinated varied among participants. Some indicated it would likely be fairly soon – within the next two months – while others thought it might be up to six months or more before they would be eligible.

#### **Vaccine Intentions and Hesitancy (Lower Mainland Vaccine Hesitant, Mid-size and Major Centres Quebec Vaccine Hesitant)**

Two groups of participants were specifically recruited on the basis of their views regarding vaccination, having indicated that they were somewhat hesitant about receiving the COVID-19 vaccine. They listed a range of concerns and issues, including:

- An interest in further data and evidence with regard to the side effects and general efficacy of the vaccines;
- Uncertainty about the mRNA technology used in a number of the vaccines being distributed;
- Concerns about how the vaccines were being stored;
- What they viewed as an accelerated timeline for vaccine development;
- A lack of studies showing any possible long-term side-effects; and

- Concerns regarding the efficacy of the vaccines against the new COVID-19 variants.

The fact that the second dose was being delayed relative to the manufacturer's recommended interval between first and second doses was also a cause for concern among some participants.

When asked if they had questions about the COVID-19 vaccines, a few participants brought up the following:

- Why is there not a vaccine for children?
- When will things return to normal after everyone is vaccinated?
- Will vaccinations be mandatory?
- When will the vaccine be available to me?

### **Canada Emergency Response Benefit (CERB) Repayment (Manitoba and Saskatchewan EI/Recovery Benefits Recipients)**

While participants gave credit to the Government of Canada for its fast action in launching the Canada Emergency Response Benefit (CERB), concern was expressed about the fact that some people were not covered and there were perceptions that a subset of Canadians were unfairly treated as a result of the fast, broad-brush rollout. It was thought that some people who qualified for CERB payments may have been young, part-time workers living at home who did not need the \$2,000/month, while there were others struggling to get by on the CERB, specifically professional wait staff and bartenders who had lost their jobs.

Many participants felt that the federal government had opportunities to scale back the breadth of the program and to target it more effectively. It was specifically thought that a more targeted approach would result in an extension of the length of time for which the program could be in effect. It was also thought that taxes on the benefits should have been withheld from the start of the program to avoid recipients having to pay it back later, and the possibility that they may not have set adequate funds aside.

Participants thought that the Government of Canada's performance in this area had remained about the same since the beginning of the pandemic. The deduction of tax at source was an improvement, but overall, the program execution was viewed as being consistent, in terms of being both effective and helpful.

All participants believed that they would have to pay tax on the amounts that they had received. There was some concern about what the impact of having to pay the taxes owing was going to be, but no one reported expecting major hardship.

There was a strong consensus that interest relief was a positive initiative. There were questions though as to what the interest rate would be after April 30, 2022, and a range of comments as to why participants thought this grace period should be longer. The reasons for this varied from taking a similar approach to student debt, whereby repayment is tied to income generation, to stronger comments that this grace period should be kept in place for as long as the various pandemic income

support programs are in place (plus a year for recovery). Participants agreed that the timeline for interest relief should be based on the reopening of the economy, the ability of Canadians to return to work, and the end of pandemic income support programs.

### **Hard-Hit Sectors (Toronto-Peel-York Region Hard Hit Sectors)**

Participants working in sectors that had been adversely affected by the pandemic in the Toronto-Peel-York Region indicated they had experienced significant reductions in their annual income due to business closures and/or restrictions on gatherings that affected overall business revenues or their employment status. A number of participants indicated they had received support from the Government of Canada during the pandemic. Some commented that their employer had been eligible to receive the Canada Emergency Wage Subsidy (CEWS) and others specifically cited the Canada Emergency Response Benefit (CERB) and Employment Insurance (EI). When asked whether the support had been sufficient, participants responded with mixed to more positive views. There was general agreement that the initial support had been helpful, but that making ends meet was nevertheless a struggle. Most agreed that what was needed going forward was a plan to reopen businesses and more clarity from all levels of government on the indicators that would permit reopening. Ongoing financial support for those who remain unemployed was also identified as important.

When asked whether they were more concerned about COVID-19 itself or about the financial and economic impacts of the pandemic, most participants focused on the latter. At the same time, most were generally of the view that the Government of Canada was attempting to strike a reasonable balance in terms of managing the health and economic impacts of the pandemic. Some, nevertheless, expressed concerns about what they perceived to be inconsistencies in the approach and mixed messaging by all levels of government (e.g., why big box stores were permitted to remain open while smaller, typically independently-owned outlets were not).

Participants identified a number of sectors which they believe required the most help from the Government of Canada. These generally reflected the fields in which they had previously made a living, including small businesses/Independently-owned businesses, entertainment events, wedding and funeral industry and gyms/fitness studios. When asked what the Government of Canada has done to date to help these sectors, most commented that they felt they had been somewhat neglected over the course of the pandemic. As a follow-up question, participants were queried as to what the Government of Canada could do to assist these sectors. A variety of suggestions were put forward, with some referring to measures put in place by the provincial government. These included: applying the same restrictions to small businesses as to larger businesses and big-box stores, clarifying eligibility for financial support for individuals and businesses and introducing more widespread rapid testing capability for COVID-19.

Participants next discussed the current restrictions in place in the Toronto-Peel-York region and, as small business owners, some felt there should now be opportunities to open up with some restrictions in place. Participants further questioned why large big-box stores were permitted to open while smaller businesses remained closed and why some businesses faced tougher restrictions than others.

The specific issue of travel restrictions was also discussed. Although some participants felt that the travel restrictions had been implemented later than they would have liked, most were of the opinion that keeping the borders closed and limiting cross-border travel, particularly with the U.S., was critical. That said, participants questioned the effectiveness of some aspects of the travel restrictions, most notably the requirement to quarantine in a government-specified hotel, at the traveler's expense and confusion regarding restrictions when crossing the border by land versus by air.

## Part II: Other Issues

### **Mental Health (Victoria and Nanaimo B.C., Alberta Indigenous Peoples, GMA Young Adults)**

During the month of March, three groups of participants discussed the topic of mental health both generally and in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic. Virtually all participants acknowledged being affected by a mental health issue as a result of the pandemic. Many commented on a decline in their own personal mental health or expressed concerns for other family members, including children and elderly relatives, and others within their circle of acquaintances. Participants raised the following issues in the context of speaking about how the pandemic has affected their own mental health or that of others whom they know:

- Worries and anxiety about the future;
- An increase in substance use;
- The adverse effects of ongoing isolation, lack of socialization and opportunities to interact with others face-to-face or in a more intimate fashion (e.g., hugging); and
- Barriers to accessing mental health assistance as a result of the public health restrictions.

Participants were generally at ease when discussing mental health challenges, including their own experiences. When asked what the signs and symptoms are of someone affected by mental health challenges, participants noted: irregular sleep, eating disorders, atypical behaviours, a lack of initiative, a lack of ambition and/or motivation, generalized anxiety, withdrawal, introversion and isolation which were generally not viewed as being in character, and increased reliance on substances.

Participants expressed awareness, at a general level, of various mental health resources. When asked who or what they would turn to if they were going through a difficult time, participants mentioned hotlines, free counselling services, organizations such as Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) or those that provide services to people with lower incomes, in terms of formal resources or supports they were aware of and/or may access. A number of informal resources were also cited, including friends and family. Indigenous participants specifically noted the role of spiritual advisors and participation in spiritual ceremonies.

Participants were asked about their awareness of resources to support mental health by the Government of Canada during the pandemic. While relatively few could identify specific resources,

there was some general awareness of websites and a hotline accessible to those needing support. There was low familiarity of Wellness Together Canada.

Views were mixed as to whether the Government of Canada was considered to be a valid source for resources and tools on mental health. Some participants felt that they should be, while others questioned whether any level of government would be a credible source for mental health supports, believing that local resources would likely be more useful and more readily accessible.

On the question of accessing mental health and substance use supports online, some participants expressed higher levels of comfort with in-person or telephone consultations, or using message boards.

### **Perspectives on Mental Health Advertisements and Messaging**

Participants discussed their thoughts and preferences with respect to effective spokespersons who could deliver messages in advertisements on information about mental health and wellness. A number of options were put forward, including a health or medical professional, someone with lived experience, celebrities, professional athletes/sports teams and teachers.

There was a general sense, however, that it was less important who delivered the message than it was that the information was shared, made more public, and publicly accessible.

### **Government of Canada Initiatives to Help Support Mental Health**

Participants were subsequently shown a series of initiatives undertaken by the federal government and asked which they thought would have the most meaningful impact on Canadians. Across the three groups, participants focused on two of the seven initiatives as being particularly impactful:

- *Increased funding of \$50M for Distress Centres to help them deal with the increased volume in calls, especially in light of pandemic-related challenges* – Many participants saw value in the ability to access assistance immediately. They felt this initiative would have the most immediate impact on many communities and were especially favourable to 24/7 assistance offered to groups and communities who may face challenges traveling to the locations where services are available.
- *A mental health portal (“Wellness Together Canada”) to connect Canadians with free resources, tools and professional support services (investment worth \$68M)* – Many felt this initiative was widely targeted and likely to provide assistance to a broad swath of the population, as opposed to focusing on a particular community or sub-group of the population.

### **Canada-U.S. Border and Travel Restrictions (Atlantic Canada, GTA Experiencing COVID Fatigue and Riskier Behaviours, Victoria and Nanaimo B.C., Alberta Indigenous Peoples, Mid-size and Major Centres Alberta Opinion Leaders)**

Participants were asked a series of questions regarding the current travel restrictions and the criteria for reopening the Canada-U.S. border to non-essential travel. On balance, participants felt the Government of Canada had made the right decision to close the borders to non-essential travel to and



from the United States. The view was that this was needed to limit the spread of COVID-19 resulting from cross-border traffic until vaccinations in both countries increased and/or hospitalizations decreased. Concerns about the spread of the new variants were also offered as a strong rationale for continuing the restrictions for several months to possibly a year.

When asked explicitly whether travel restrictions should continue as is, be opened up more or restricted more, most participants opted to keep the restrictions in place. Moreover, participants projected that the Canada-U.S. border would not reopen to non-essential travel until sometime in the fall of 2021 or December, at the latest.

Participants suggested various criteria the Government of Canada should consider when deciding whether or not to reopen the border and the timing:

- Vaccination levels – Some participants indicated that consideration of reopening should occur only when 70%-80% of those eligible to receive a vaccination have been vaccinated, while others felt comfortable opening once a majority of the population has been vaccinated and/or when herd immunity has been reached;
- Infection/transmission rate – Several participants commented that they would recommend reopening only when the daily number of cases of COVID-19, and mortality rates due to COVID-19 are very low;
- R-value/estimate (reproductive rate);
- Hospitalization rates and number of patients in Intensive Care Units (ICU); and
- Spread of the COVID-19 variants.

Participants discussed the idea of immunization passports to which some were opposed primarily on human rights grounds – they felt that having to demonstrate proof of vaccination restricted freedom of travel and choice, and violated personal privacy. Others, however, noted that proof of immunization is already required in order to travel to certain countries. Nevertheless, questions still lingered among some participants about the effectiveness of the vaccines against the variants. In this respect, they were not entirely convinced that proof of vaccination should be the primary or only criteria for a return to normal travel.

**Post-COVID-19 Travel (Lower Mainland Vaccine Hesitant, Major Centres Ontario Opinion Leaders, Mid-size and Major Centres Quebec Vaccine Hesitant, Quebec Anglophones, Manitoba and Saskatchewan EI/Recovery Benefits Recipients, Toronto-Peel-York Region Hard Hit Sectors)**

A number of participants had canceled plans for travel to the U.S. or overseas at the outset of the pandemic and were anxious to resume travel activities. When asked about their vacation plans post-pandemic, some participants explained that they planned on using credits or refunds from previously cancelled trips. Others were less enthusiastic about traveling domestically or internationally until more people had been fully vaccinated.

In discussion about their specific travel plans, about equal numbers of participants said they planned to travel overseas while others said they anticipated traveling to destinations within Canada. Many

expected their travel budgets would remain roughly the same, neither increasing nor decreasing beyond what they had originally budgeted pre-pandemic.

Those who said they had plans to travel to international destinations were asked what might cause them to rethink these plans and stay within Canada. Three considerations were particularly salient:

- Cost;
- The evolving pandemic and conditions both with respect to case counts here in Canada and internationally, as well as the requirements to quarantine;
- Distance (i.e., flying time); and
- Weather – traveling to areas with more moderate climates was viewed as desirable.

Participants were shown a list of seven different things the Government of Canada could do to encourage Canadians to travel within Canada post-COVID-19 as a way of supporting the Canadian tourism sector. Most participants gravitated to those offers which reduced the cost of travel, including:

- A \$200 promotion enabling travelers to fly anywhere in Canada;
- Third night of a hotel stay for free;
- Travel passes allowing children to travel free on airlines and trains; and
- Free admission to museums for all Canadians.

The offer of free admissions to Parks Canada was of interest to some, but several participants questioned the availability of camping spots. Tax credits and refunds which one could apply for via an app, while appreciated, were less appealing overall and viewed as overly complex or complicated. When asked what else the Government of Canada could do to encourage people to travel within Canada, participants volunteered a number of suggestions which could be grouped into several categories:

- Raising awareness and enhancing promotion of travel within Canada;
- Providing additional discounts or rebates, targeted to families and/or groups as well as to those traveling by land or rail (i.e., rebates on gas, discounts to attend galleries, promotions for travel by rail, free local transit passes, etc.); and
- All-inclusive packages which would include hotel and meal plans, and extending partnerships to include rental companies (i.e., Airbnb) in addition to collaborating with hotels.

Participants favoured incentives which encouraged family travel, patronage of local businesses and which raised the profile of unique and interesting Canadian venues and activities.

**Budget 2021/Economic Growth (Quebec Anglophones, Manitoba and Saskatchewan EI/Recovery Benefits Recipients, Toronto-Peel-York Region Hard Hit Sectors, Atlantic Canada, GTA Experiencing COVID Fatigue and Riskier Behaviours, Victoria and Nanaimo B.C., GMA Young Adults, Mid-size and Major Centres Alberta Opinion Leaders)**

In seven groups throughout the month participants discussed their expectations for the federal budget, including their priorities, and their perspectives on economic growth relative to ongoing support for Canadians through the pandemic.

Most felt that the upcoming budget should focus predominantly on health care and economic recovery. Participants remarked that the pandemic had illuminated issues within Canada's health care system and were of the view that increased funding and access to a broader range of health care services was required, particularly with respect to mental health and addictions counselling.

The general consensus was that a primary focus on mapping out an economic recovery plan would and should encapsulate the plans and activities required to deal with the ongoing COVID-19 crisis and set out a vision for what life will be like post-pandemic. Getting people back to work and supporting small, independently-owned businesses was viewed as vital to Canada's economic recovery. Additionally, participants felt there was an opportunity at this time for initiatives that would support economic diversification, with a particular focus on sustainable economic activity promoting green or clean technologies.

Other areas on which participants felt the next federal budget should focus included: education, climate change, infrastructure, national childcare, affordable housing, tourism, interprovincial trade, equal pay and a living wage.

At the same time, some participants expressed concerns about the projected deficit given the federal response to the pandemic and predicted expenditures which would likely be included in the next federal budget in support of economic recovery. There were also concerns raised about accountability and transparency by the federal government given the length of time that has elapsed since the last federal budget was tabled.

Participants offered their views on the term *economic growth* and, specifically, what this meant. Most interpreted it positively, associating it with increased societal wealth, employment and financial security. However, for some, the term was more closely associated with the interests of big business. This was a particular issue for a number of participants who commented that Canada's economic recovery plan should prioritize the interests of small business owners whom they felt had been most adversely affected through the pandemic.

When participants were queried about their perspectives on a budget that focused on job creation and economic growth versus one which focused on supporting people through the pandemic, most stated a preference for the former. They viewed economic growth and job creation as foundational to providing ongoing support to people through the pandemic. In practical terms, for participants this meant a sizable investment by the federal government in areas such as housing and infrastructure along with clear incentives for businesses and support for green initiatives. Some participants were

insistent that any stimulus intended for business should not be used to enrich Canada's largest corporations which they felt were less in need of support relative to small businesses.

On balance, those who supported jobs and growth felt that expanding the economy would be an effective means of addressing the welfare of Canadians. They viewed employment as a key pillar supporting the overall well-being of the Canadian population. The predominant view was that personal financial security and stability underpinned a good quality of life. Among those who preferred that the budget take a different focus, less singularly focused on economic growth, some felt that a focus on growth was premature at this time. They were of the view that the ongoing pandemic and associated restrictions were incompatible with large-scale economic reopening. It was felt that until the pandemic was more under control, the focus of the federal government should be on supporting Canadians who continue to struggle with the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic.

### **French Language (Quebec Anglophones)**

Anglophones residing across the province of Quebec participated in a discussion about the French language and the Government of Canada's proposed amendments to the *Official Languages Act*. Awareness of the proposed amendments by the federal government was low, with very few participants stating they had read or heard anything.

To gauge participants' thoughts related to the modernization of the *Official Languages Act*, five of the various amendments were highlighted and discussed with participants: increasing French immersion outside of Quebec, increasing Francophone immigration, strengthening the role of Radio Canada, appointing only bilingual Supreme Court justices, and strengthening the powers of the Commissioner of Official Languages. Overall, most participants were supportive of the proposed amendments. In particular, most felt that appointing bilingual Supreme Court justices should be a top priority. Reactions were also generally positive to increasing French immersion programs outside Quebec and strengthening the role of Radio-Canada. Participants also felt strongly that in addition to protecting the French language, the rights of Anglophones within Quebec were being overlooked and required protection as well.

A few participants expressed slight concerns with strengthening the powers of the Commissioner of Official Languages since some expressed hesitation enhancing the authorities of the Commissioner and how this might impact the lives of Canadians residing outside Quebec. At the same time, participants did not necessarily view strengthening bilingualism as a major issue. Moreover, few participants felt the proposed amendments to the *Official Languages Act* would have much impact on the health of the French language in Canada.

### **Indigenous Issues (Alberta Indigenous Peoples)**

When asked what important Indigenous issues required greater federal government attention, Indigenous participants identified racism and discrimination in addition to greater sovereignty and self-governance, greater input into the administration of criminal justice with respect to Indigenous

communities and people, better support for low-income housing, mental health support and for the high cost of living.

Furthermore, participants spoke about the need for equity in federal government funding. Comments centered on the need for additional support for Indigenous youth within the child welfare system and the lack of equity which had led to the implementation of Jordan's Principle.

On the topic of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) many participants had heard of UNDRIP, although most were vague on specific details. When asked if they had heard about how the Government of Canada had responded to UNDRIP, most felt that the federal government had made little progress in implementing the specific rights and actions of UNDRIP. Participants were then told the Government of Canada had recently introduced legislation to implement UNDRIP and it was generally felt that tangible changes would not necessary occur as a direct result of this legislation.

Most participants had heard of the Government of Canada's efforts to lift long-term drinking water advisories and were also aware that the original deadlines had not been fulfilled. Some questioned why the work had been delayed and expressed frustration that other infrastructure projects of similar scope and dollar value were often completed within their targeted deadline. It was thought that a new timeline of a year to 18 months was reasonable to complete this work.

To conclude the discussion, participants were encouraged by information on a new Government of Canada website which tracks the progress on lifting drinking water advisories. They felt that the website was a step in the right direction.

### **Digital Government (Lower Mainland B.C. Vaccine Hesitant, Major Centres Ontario Opinion Leaders, Mid-size and Major Centres Quebec Vaccine Hesitant, Quebec Anglophones, Manitoba and Saskatchewan EI/Recovery Benefits Recipients, Toronto-Peel-York Region Hard Hit Sectors)**

Over the past year, many participants indicated having interacted with the Government of Canada online for a variety of reasons, principally Employment Insurance and/or CERB claims, income tax filings, and passport applications/renewals. For most, the experience was a positive one. It was generally viewed as easier and more efficient compared to interacting by telephone, where call centre queuing systems resulted in longer wait times than they had anticipated. In particular, those who had applied for the CERB described the online experience as fast and easy.

Participants were generally supportive of the shift to digital government and online access to services, although they assumed that most Government of Canada services were already online and that more promotion of the full range of online services should be undertaken to raise awareness among Canadians. Nevertheless, some noted that continued improvements to the online offering would be more efficient for users, especially if there was a single point of entry which could be accessed by using one's social insurance number (SIN) as the password. A few concerns were raised regarding the security of digital services and the prospect that a shift online could result in the elimination of other channels, such as telephone. Participants felt it was important to retain the option of speaking to a

service agent, particularly for those who may be less digitally savvy as well as for citizens who may have very specific queries unique to their personal circumstances.

Participants discussed the benefits of online service in more depth. They were prompted with a series of three statements, each of which incorporated various benefits associated with online service, and asked for their views. Many felt that the most valuable benefits were encapsulated in those statements which underscored the ability of governments to move quickly in implementing policy changes, as well as for Canadians to avoid commuting time to service locations and long line-ups, in addition to being able to interact with government anywhere and anytime. While a few participants did feel that the benefits for businesses, specifically small businesses, were also of value, they underscored the importance of ensuring online services for businesses were well executed. Some had experienced poor service online and, as a result, felt more comfortable reaching out by telephone to get the information they and their business required.

When participants were shown a series of objectives that could be used to develop the Government of Canada's digital strategy, most supported emphasizing digital services that are accessible across multiple devices, easy to use, convenient, and that work for them. Statements which focused on transforming government and emphasized access to services anywhere and anytime were also viewed positively. There was a desire to underscore an online service experience that was being specifically designed for Canadians.

And, while participants appreciated the emphasis on security, reliability and ease of use as a key objective with respect to the Government of Canada's digital strategy, there was no strong consensus as to which of these three attributes was most important. Participants did not necessarily prioritize one of these over another. When asked what other aspects of digital service delivery were as or more important, some participants focused on speed of service, accessibility in different languages as well as services which are easy to find. Consistency in the experience offered and user-friendliness were also stressed.

Most were confident that the Government of Canada could make the switch to provide more services online which are secure, reliable and easy to use, although the regular occurrence of cyber-attacks was flagged as an ongoing concern for businesses and government alike. The real challenge for the federal government was seen to be the time it would take to execute on this strategy as well as the requirement to continually update various websites, ensuring both the functionality and information provided are current.

When participants were asked if the ability to deliver services online impacted their level of trust in the Government of Canada, views were split. Some indicated that it was an indication of greater transparency and accountability, while others noted that a complicated and cumbersome user experience online could significantly undermine public trust. A few participants saw no direct link between the two, noting that their sense of trust was more a factor of policy decisions rather than how services were delivered.

## **Home Retrofits (Victoria and Nanaimo B.C., Alberta Indigenous Peoples, Mid-size and Major Centres Alberta Opinion Leaders)**

In late March, a few groups of participants engaged in a discussion regarding their familiarity with home retrofitting, future renovation plans and what the Government of Canada could do to further support and encourage home renovations. There was moderate familiarity among participants on the concept of home retrofits. Unaided, participants believed the term referred to the upgrading of appliances and other home features to make them more energy efficient and environmentally friendly. When prompted with the term 'energy efficient home retrofits,' awareness and understanding increased.

Few participants had plans to undertake any energy efficient home retrofits. Among those few who did, their plans centered on replacing old appliances with new energy efficient appliances. Those who did not have plans to undertake any retrofits mentioned the cost as a primary barrier or that they lived in rental housing where retrofitting decisions were made solely by the landlord.

When asked if an interest-free loan from the federal government would encourage participants to undertake an energy home retrofit, most were not swayed. As such, participants perceived a grant or rebate to be a better option. When asked how much of a grant they would need to make it worthwhile, some felt the grant should cover approximately 60-75% of the cost. Those who were less enthusiastic about a grant worried that accessibility would be an issue. They felt that many deserving families would not qualify because of other factors, such as their insurance.

Among those who were considering a home retrofit, the main motivator was financial, specifically reducing long term costs. Additionally, many mentioned the environmental aspect of an energy efficient home retrofit as very appealing.

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### **MORE INFORMATION**

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