



Government  
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# Continuous Qualitative Data Collection of Canadians' Views – October 2020

## Executive Summary

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Canada 

# Executive Summary

## Introduction

The Communications and Consultation Secretariat of the Privy Council Office (PCO) has 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 October 1<sup>st</sup> and 29<sup>th</sup>, 2020 in multiple locations across the country including Atlantic Canada, Quebec, Ontario, Manitoba, Alberta and the Northwest Territories. 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. The research explored a wide range of related issues in depth, including what Canadians were hearing about the Government of Canada in the news, views on how the federal government was managing the spread of COVID-19 and how Canadians behaviours have evolved. The research also explored the intersection of COVID-19 and the economy, specifically in terms of federal government financial supports and the transition from the Canada Emergency Response Benefit (CERB) to Employment Insurance (EI) and three other recovery benefits. Two creative concepts, intended to inform Canadians about recently announced recovery benefits, were tested in several groups mid-month. Later in October participants were asked about the COVID-19 Alert App and discussed names for new employment and training programs targeted to youth.

In addition to the pandemic, these discussions broached other topics including the Speech from the Throne (SFT), the Nova Scotia fisheries, racism, Indigenous issues, western alienation, local issues of concern, and Zero Emission Vehicles (ZEV).

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 racialized Canadians, Indigenous peoples and those on EI or other recovery benefits.

### Detailed approach

- Seven groups were conducted with the general population in Nova Scotia, Quebec City, Northern Alberta, Manitoba, Yellowknife, the Ottawa-Carleton, Toronto, Peel Regions in Ontario, and in Southern and Eastern mid-size centres in Ontario.
- The other five groups were conducted with key subgroups including:
  - Racialized Canadians in the Greater Montreal Area (GMA) and the Greater Toronto and Hamilton Area (GTHA);
  - Indigenous people residing in Atlantic Canada; and
  - Canadians receiving EI/Recovery benefits residing in mid-size and major centres in Ontario and in mid-size centres Quebec.
- All groups in Quebec were conducted in French, while the 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, 80 participants attended, in total. Details on attendance numbers by group can be found below.
- Each participant received an honorarium. The incentive ranged from \$90 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
Nova Scotia	1	English	Oct. 1	5:00-7:00 pm	Gen Pop	8
Greater Montreal Area	2	French	Oct. 5	6:00-8:00 pm	Racialized Canadians	8
Greater Toronto/ Hamilton Area	3	English	Oct. 7	6:00-8:00 pm	Racialized Canadians	8
Atlantic Canada	4	English	Oct. 13	5:00-7:00 pm	Indigenous	8
Ontario – Mid-size & Major Centres	5	English	Oct. 14	6:00-8:00 pm	On EI/Recovery benefits	7
Quebec City	6	French	Oct. 15	6:00-8:00 pm	Gen Pop	4
Alberta – Northern Communities	7	English	Oct. 19	8:00-10:00 pm	Gen Pop	6
Manitoba	8	English	Oct. 20	7:00-9:00 pm	Gen Pop	7
Yellowknife	9	English	Oct. 21	8:00-10:00 pm	Gen Pop	6
Ontario – Ottawa-Carleton, Toronto, Peel Region	10	English	Oct. 26	6:00-8:00 pm	Gen Pop	6
Quebec - Mid-size Centres	11	French	Oct. 27	6:00-8:00 pm	On EI/Recovery benefits	4
Ontario – Mid-size towns in Eastern and Southern Ontario	12	English	Oct. 29	6:00-8:00 pm	Gen Pop	8
<b>Total number of participants</b>						<b>80</b>

# Key Findings

## Part I: COVID-19 Related Findings

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

#### COVID-19 in the News

Throughout the month of October, issues related to COVID-19 were very much top of mind among participants when they were asked what they had seen, read or heard about the Government of Canada. Most prominently, participants were aware of the extension of financial supports in terms of the Canada Emergency Response Benefit (CERB) ending and recipients being transitioned to Employment Insurance (EI) or the three newly launched recovery benefits. In addition to the CERB, participants were also focused on the rise in COVID-19 cases in Canada. When further prompted as to whether they had heard about the Government of Canada taking any additional actions regarding the current COVID-19 pandemic (other than the financial supports previously mentioned), participants cited the Canada-U.S. border closures, funding for COVID-19 vaccine trials and the COVID Alert App.

Participants residing in mid-sized and major centres in Ontario were specifically asked about COVID-19 testing capacity and procedures in their communities. Many had heard about revised guidelines for testing, lengthy wait times, and the potential for rapid testing. During the discussion, participants stressed the need for an increased number of testing sites and locations, more staff to process lab results, and the need for alternatives, such as rapid testing to produce faster results.

In the group conducted in Yellowknife, unprompted awareness of the Northern Business Relief Fund (NBRF) was low. Once provided with more information on the fund, many were worried about it being non-repayable and were concerned about the impact it would have on the federal budget deficit.

#### Other Federal Government News and Issues

Unrelated to COVID-19, participants referenced hearing about a range of other issues related to the Government of Canada including the Mi'kmaq lobster fishing dispute in Nova Scotia, the federal government's contribution agreement with the WE Charity, a ban on single-use plastics, the progression of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement and various mentions related to Canada-U.S. issues as the date of the American election approached.

Mid-month, various groups of participants were asked a series of questions around their awareness and opinions on recent news related to the Government of Canada's ban on plastics. Awareness varied widely by location, with participants in the East (Ontario and Quebec) being more aware of the ban compared to those in the West (Manitoba and B.C.). Those who were aware of the ban believed it was to be implemented in 2021 and included products like plastic straws, plastic bags, and take-out food containers and utensils. Most agreed that the ban on single use plastics was a good idea, primarily because they believed it would have a positive impact on the environment. However, some mentioned

that workable alternatives to single use plastics should be developed and stressed the importance of sanitary measures needing to be taken into consideration.

### **Government of Canada COVID-19 Management (Experiencing 2nd Wave Ontario, Mid-size Centres Quebec EI/Recovery Benefits Recipients, Southern and Eastern Mid-size Centres Ontario)**

There was a strong consensus in all groups that the Government of Canada had done a good job in responding to the pandemic. Participants credited the government with a prompt roll-out of financial supports for individuals and businesses, particularly the CERB. They compared Canada's response favourably to what had occurred in other countries and felt that daily briefings, transparency around decisions, efficient testing, extra screening, assistance to travellers and communications around safety guidelines had been handled well.

When asked specifically about the Government of Canada's performance in terms of protecting the health of Canadians, communicating information to prevent the spread of COVID-19 and providing financial support to Canadians affected by the pandemic, responses were equally positive. Most felt the federal government was doing about as well now, or better in the case of managing the health impacts, as they were earlier in the pandemic.

Nevertheless, when asked what else they could be doing in each of these areas a number of suggestions were put forward.

- On the health front, participants' suggestions focused on addressing issues in long-term care facilities, providing more assistance to schools and instituting more serious consequences for those breaching COVID-19 safety guidelines.
- With respect to communications, participants focused on improvements to the Government of Canada website, refinements to social media campaigns and a push to employ more mainstream media, including out-of-home. There was also a recommendation, in the interests of full transparency, to ensure that the promotion of vaccines by the federal government is accompanied by an evidence-based communications campaign.
- Participants called for more precision in the targeting of financial supports to those most in need as well as assistance to individuals in determining their eligibility for financial support and in completing the application, offered both online and via the call center.

Reaction to the suite of three new recovery benefits – the Canada Recovery Benefit, the Canada Recovery Caregiving Benefit, and the Canada Recovery Sickness Benefit – was overwhelmingly positive. In particular, there was strong support for the Caregiving and Sickness Benefits as they addressed what were viewed as key gaps in the previous financial supports offered.

## **Behaviour Change (Nova Scotia, GMA Racialized Canadians, GTHA Racialized Canadians, Atlantic Canada Indigenous Peoples, Mid-size and Major Centres Ontario EI/Recovery Benefits Recipients, Quebec City, Yellowknife, Experiencing 2nd Wave Ontario, Southern and Eastern Mid-size Centres Ontario)**

Participants were asked about how their behaviours and routines had changed, if at all, over the last weeks and months, in response to the evolving situation with COVID-19. Responses varied depending on personal circumstances, including their family and work situation, as well as in reaction to trends in COVID-19 cases in their area.

For some, very little had changed. These participants indicated that they had adapted to a routine in the early months of the pandemic that had become fairly sustainable. They were practicing COVID-19 safety measures and had become more acclimatized to doing so.

Others did acknowledge they were continuing to adapt and adjust as the situation warranted. Many spoke about being more vigilant in response to rising case counts in their region – they were wearing masks more regularly, going out less frequently to restaurants and retail outlets, and using public transportation less often. Several participants were taking more precautions in light of what they felt would likely be a challenging winter and the onset of flu season, which they predicted would stress the healthcare system. Others were making conscious decisions to limit visits with friends and older family members outside their bubble whom they felt would be more vulnerable if exposed to the virus. A number of participants spoke about the impact of the change and their deep sense of frustration at the prospect of not being able to attend family gatherings at Thanksgiving and Christmas.

Even those who had started to venture out more in recent weeks said they were being quite cautious about their activities and interactions. However, there were a few participants who did mention feeling more comfortable visiting older, immune-compromised parents or other relatives. It was their belief that others were being equally vigilant and, as such, they felt it was safer now to expand their bubble.

### **Spending Habits**

About equal numbers of participants indicated their spending had increased as a result of COVID-19 as said it had decreased. Increased expenditures were mainly a factor of the rising cost of living, associated with higher prices for groceries, fuel, and electricity. In some families, additional expenses had been incurred to purchase laptops for children who had shifted to online learning from home. Other increased expenditures were of a discretionary nature, including online shopping and expenses related to hobbies and home renovations. Those who had seen a decline in their spending attributed it primarily to lower expenditures on transportation (gas and transit passes) as a result of the transition to working from home and less discretionary spending on entertainment and recreational pursuits. Spending patterns tended to mirror the cycle of businesses opening and closing as communities and regions moved through various stages in the response to COVID-19. Most agreed that, overall, the cost of living had increased and pointed to rising costs for food, electricity and gas at the pump as the main drivers of this trend.

### **Views on a Second Wave**

The general consensus among participants was that many parts of Canada, with the exception of Atlantic Canada, were either currently experiencing or heading into a second wave of COVID-19. Participants from the Atlantic region did concur that a second wave was inevitable in the region, despite much lower case counts relative to other parts of Canada.

At the same time, participants were mostly optimistic about the preparedness of governments and health officials to handle a second wave. From the standpoint of public response, many also felt that people were more accustomed to the guidelines and thus may find it easier to comply for the duration of a second wave. Nevertheless, there was an expectation that winter and the impending cold/flu season would exacerbate the challenges of addressing COVID-19 and may lead to more confusion. The prediction was that there would be another round of closures, although the hope was that the response to a second wave would be less severe in terms of the scope of a lockdown and/or required isolation. Some participants raised the spectre of mental health issues becoming more acute in a second wave, speculating that many people may find it difficult to cope with limited social activity and the typical 'winter blues.'

Participants were reluctant to offer recommendations regarding the conditions under which restrictions should be reinstated to address a second wave of COVID-19. Most thought any measures taken should be dependent on rates of infection. And, the expectation was that governments could make decisions on a more targeted, localized basis, rather than regionally or province-wide. Ultimately, participants were most worried about further adverse impacts on the economy, people's mental state, and the financial implications for those who have experienced job loss as a result of the pandemic.

### **Impact of COVID-19**

As noted, participants were very concerned about the impacts of COVID-19 on themselves, their families, communities and businesses, especially with winter approaching and the perceived inevitability of a second wave across Canada. Issues were raised regarding the impacts of the pandemic and the recommended public health behaviours on families, young children and elderly relatives in particular. Concerns very much focused on the psychological toll linked to a lack of social interaction and physical companionship. Many expressed worries about the effects of prolonged isolation, and anticipated that loneliness combined with financial insecurity may lead to an increase in those experiencing a range of mental health issues, including depression and suicidal ideation. There were also concerns about rising rates of domestic abuse. Participants felt that access to mental health services and supports would become vital in order to deal with these issues as well as to help individuals and families coping with loss. Beyond this, they were also empathetic to the plight of businesses and were not overly optimistic about the ability of smaller businesses in particular to withstand several more cycles of opening and closing. In general, participants were feeling the effects of what they described as a lack of freedom. And, while their comments suggested they would adhere to the recommended safety guidelines, some acknowledged it would be challenging from a mental health perspective.



### **Financial Supports (Nova Scotia, GMA Racialized Canadians, Mid-size and Major Centres Ontario EI/Recovery Benefits Recipients, Northern Alberta, Manitoba, Yellowknife, Mid-size Centres Quebec EI/Recovery Benefits Recipients)**

Effective September 27, 2020, the Government of Canada transitioned to a simplified Employment Insurance (EI) program to ensure continued income support for those Canadians who remained unable to work due to COVID-19 and who were eligible for a suite of temporary recovery benefits. Awareness and views on the recovery benefits were explored with participants in the above-referenced focus groups.

Many participants had heard that the Canadian Emergency Response Benefit (CERB) was coming to an end and that those currently on CERB would automatically be transitioned to EI. Overall, participants agreed that the CERB had been useful and some concurred that those previously receiving CERB should continue to qualify for benefits. Many were pleased to see more groups being eligible for EI and for the new suite of benefits (e.g., small business owners, seasonal operations).

A more detailed discussion of the three recovery benefits – Canada Recovery Benefit, Canada Recovery Caregiving Benefit and the Canada Recovery Sickness Benefit – was conducted after giving participants some basic information about these programs. With very few exceptions, most participants reacted positively and were supportive of the simplified EI and the suite of recovery benefits. They felt the programs were clearly explained and straightforward. And, they saw particular value in those benefits which were targeted to caregivers and people who do not receive paid sick leave. Any criticisms pertained to regional variations in the cost of living and the fact that benefit amounts did not take into account family size or household expenses. There was also some concern that a few segments of the population had been overlooked: youth, seniors, low-income employed Canadians, people who are unable to accumulate the necessary work hours, foreign workers and marginalized groups (e.g., homeless).

When participants were questioned about the length of time the recovery benefits should stay in place, most felt that they would be needed for at least several months or until the threat from the pandemic had subsided and the economy had begun to recover. When asked whether keeping the programs in place for a year seemed reasonable, participants generally responded affirmatively – they felt these measures were vital as a means of stimulating the economy.

Finally, participants were told that under the previous system EI payments were taxable income. When asked whether they thought this would also apply to the simplified EI system and the new recovery benefits, participants' responses reflected some confusion although most assumed they would be taxable.

### **Ad Concept Testing (GTHA Racialized Canadians, Mid-size and Major Centres Ontario EI/Recovery Benefits Recipients, Quebec City)**

In several groups, two different ad concepts were tested – an animated storyboard and a social media ad.

#### **Recovery Benefits Animated Storyboard (GTHA Racialized Canadians, Mid-size and Major Centres Ontario EI/Recovery Benefits Recipients, Quebec City)**

In the three above-noted locations, participants were shown an animated storyboard aimed at informing Canadians about the new recovery benefits intended to support Canadians affected by COVID-19.

Overall, participants responded quite positively to the ad. They liked its simplicity and brevity. They also appreciated that the message was clear and direct. The use of animation was also well received, as participants felt it allowed the messaging to stand out. Participants were fairly consistent in describing the ad's main message – the main takeaway was that the federal government was providing broader, more all-encompassing financial support programs to Canadians.

The primary weakness was that the ad lacked a sense of cheerfulness or vibrancy and this was associated mainly with the colour palette employed. Participants felt that the ad was too muted and monochromatic. In particular, they commented that the grey colouring made the ad look gloomy, sad, or, in some cases, apocalyptic.

When asked if the ad was informative, participants' opinions were mixed. Some felt that the ad was vague and did not provide enough detail, specifically regarding information about the programs and/or who would qualify. Other participants felt the opposite. They thought it was important to keep the ad brief and believed it effectively directed viewers to the website for more information.

In order to gauge message comprehension, a series of lines from the ad script were reviewed in more details. Most participants liked the statement '*Continuing to support Canadians now will help keep Canada safe and strong*'. They felt this phrase was reassuring and suggested that the Government of Canada was supporting Canadians. An alternative line, '*Continuing to support each other today can help us keep safe, and help make Canada more resilient*' yielded a more mixed response. Some found it to be fresh and different relative to other federal government communications on the pandemic. But others held more negative views, describing it as too long and wordy. And, some did not like the use of the word 'resilient' in this context. On balance, most participants preferred the first statement. When asked to expand on their interpretation of the phrase '*an expanded, more accessible EI*', all agreed that it suggested EI would be available to more Canadians, particularly for those who were unable to receive it before such as self-employed persons.

#### **Canada Recovery Caregiving Benefit Social Media Ad (Quebec City)**

In Quebec City, participants were shown a social media ad followed by an alternative image (see Appendix C) to gauge their impressions and determine preferences. Almost all participants had positive reactions to the original social media ad and stated that it was clear, specific, and did a good

job communicating its message to Canadians. However, when asked to compare the two ad images, in terms of which would be more effective for an ad about the Canada Recovery Caregiving Benefit (CRCB), most participants preferred the alternative image presented because they felt it was more relatable and better aligned with the CRCB.

### **Youth Supports (Southern and Eastern Mid-size Centres Ontario)**

Participants in one focus group held at the end of the month were invited to provide feedback on several options for names for two programs targeted to youth, aged 15 to 30, which were being launched by the Government of Canada.

The first was described as a program which would aim to help young Canadians find work placements, both full and part-time, through partnerships with employers from in-demand sectors. Of the four options considered, participants tended to converge around *Youth Skills, Training and Employment Program* or its acronym *Y-STEP* viewing it as clear, descriptive and professional in its tone while also providing sufficient details within the name itself to identify the target audience for the program as well as the purpose. Comments were more mixed around the other options and participants actively debated whether the term 'youth' was appropriate given the wide range of the target age group, especially for those between the ages of 20 and 30 whom many felt could not reasonably be described as 'youth,' and would not likely see themselves as the target audience for this program.

The second program was designed specifically to support the employability of vulnerable youth, including youth with disabilities, low-income households and Indigenous youth. Of the various options presented to participants with respect to names for this program, *Skills Builder Program* was favoured for its emphasis on skills development, while some gravitated to *Experience Building Program* because the term experience was viewed as fairly expansive and all-encompassing in terms of alluding to different ways to develop skills and experience. A few participants favoured *Youth @Work* mostly for its memorability and adaptability to social media.

### **COVID-19 Alert App (Quebec City, Manitoba)**

In Quebec City and Manitoba participants were engaged in a brief discussion of the COVID Alert App to assess overall awareness of the app and the experience of those who had downloaded it. The discussion also explored the likelihood of participants who had not yet downloaded the app to do so, based on the information provided.

There was a high level of awareness of the app and a reasonably good understanding of how it worked. Some understood that the app employed Bluetooth technology. Others who were unaware of the app's Bluetooth component nevertheless still understood the basic premise that the app relied on locational data to pinpoint when a user had come into contact with someone who had tested positive. Some participants, however, were unsure how the app functioned, believing it required manual input of locational data by the user. Others viewed the app as more of an informational device rather than a

contract tracing tool, thinking that its primary purpose was to relay new information about COVID-19 to users.

Relatively few participants had downloaded the app. Those who had done so described the experience in positive terms. In particular, they found the process of downloading and using the app to be quite easy. Those who had not yet downloaded the app, simply indicated that they needed a reminder or a nudge to do so and, after discussing the app, said they would consider doing so or that they would at least spend more time checking it out.

In terms of any concerns related to the app, a few participants were worried about having to keep Bluetooth turned on, the potential increased data charges associated with having the COVID Alert App constantly running in the background, and the likelihood it would drain their cellphone batteries. A small number of participants also expressed concerns about the possibility their personal data may be hacked or unwittingly used for other purposes. Beyond this, a few participants noted they did not own or use a smart phone and therefore did not believe they could access or effectively use the COVID Alert App.

## Part II: Other Issues

### **Speech from the Throne (Nova Scotia)**

Awareness of the Speech from the Throne (SFT), delivered on September 23, 2020 was modest with only a few participants citing that they had listened to it or read about it in the news.

After being shown the four main pillars from the SFT, participants were asked to consider if there were any important opportunities missed or other areas on which they believed the Government of Canada needed to focus. Suggestions generated included an increased focus on environmental initiatives, improving Canada-U.S. relations on a full suite of issues, enhancing Canada's self-sufficiency and a better utilization of Canadian resources, national unity, and Canada's Arctic and Northern Policy.

Asked if they had heard anything about the Government of Canada's projected budget deficit, most had not. However, once prompted participants were not overly-surprised to learn of the projected \$343 billion deficit this year given the amount of financial support the federal government has provided to Canadians thus far through the pandemic. While many were supportive of the financial aid offered by the federal government, there were underlying concerns about abuse by Canadians who may not have been eligible for the assistance and that, going forward, there should be more encouragement to get Canadians back to work and a more tailored and equitable approach in terms of how support is distributed.

### **Nova Scotia Fisheries (Nova Scotia, Experiencing 2nd Wave Ontario, Mid-size Centres Quebec EI/Recovery Benefits Recipients, Southern and Eastern Mid-size Centres Ontario)**

The topic of the fisheries in Nova Scotia was discussed in a number of groups throughout the month with participants residing in Ontario, Quebec and Nova Scotia, including among Indigenous participants in Atlantic Canada (reported separately under the section titled Indigenous Issues).

When asked what they had heard about the fisheries in Nova Scotia, participants' familiarity with the issue varied quite widely by location. In Nova Scotia, most participants exhibited a high level of awareness and understanding of various aspects of the issue. There was a consensus among this group that Indigenous fishers were pursuing their right as per the *1999 Supreme Court of Canada Marshall Decision* to hunt, fish and gather in pursuit of a 'moderate living.' As such, they generally felt that Indigenous fishers were acting within their rights. In the other locations, awareness of the dispute was more modest. Participants were familiar with the issue only based on what they had seen in the headlines and only provided vague details, mostly stating that there had been protests and a conflict between Indigenous and non-Indigenous fishers. Overall, participants tended to be most concerned that the conflict would continue in the absence of further discussions between the parties and a negotiated settlement.

Regardless of participants' awareness and familiarity with this issue, most agreed that the Government of Canada should step in to address it, although this view was voiced most strongly in Nova Scotia. Participants advocated for the federal government to enforce laws, mediate or negotiate between stakeholders, and establish clearly defined rules for both parties. In Nova Scotia, the point was made that it was unlikely the issue would resolve itself without intervention by the Government of Canada.

### **Racism (GMA Racialized Canadians, GTHA Racialized Canadians)**

Two groups comprising racialized Canadians were held during the month, one in the Greater Montreal Area (GMA) and the other in the Greater Toronto and Hamilton Area (GTHA), in which participants were engaged in a broad-ranging conversation about racism in Canada.

When asked whether racism was a problem in Canada, participants in both groups held slightly differing views, but there was general concurrence that racism exists in Canada and tends to be more subtle. Some commented that the less overt nature of racism in Canada may in fact be more insidious, resulting in it being more difficult to directly confront, challenge and address. Participants noted many ways in which racism manifests itself in their daily lives and within specific institutions and systems, specifically identifying issues in the workplace, law enforcement and the judicial system.

A number of participants raised the issue of stereotyping which they felt was common, if not necessarily intentional. The general perception was that while Canada is considered a diverse society, there is much more that could be done to promote a better understanding and acceptance of diverse cultures and backgrounds.

Systemic racism was viewed as a complex and complicated issue which some felt could best be addressed through education. Specifically, participants recommended developing and instituting a

more diverse curriculum in schools, beginning in the early years, but also rolling out a broader public education initiative. Additional recommendations included highlighting diverse role models, showcasing the accomplishments and contributions of diverse groups to Canadian life, and targeting resources and intervention strategies specifically to high-risk youth in lower income communities to improve outcomes for these groups.

Participants discussed a series of announcements recently made by the Government of Canada to address systemic racism. Overall, they viewed all 10 action items as important, and as having merit. However, five in particular were identified as likely to make the most difference. These centered primarily on actions related to the criminal justice system and law enforcement, but also those which addressed online hate and empowered specific communities through economic opportunities. Many participants supported the federal government introducing legislation and making investments to address systemic inequities in all phases of the justice system. Equally, they favoured efforts to modernize training for police and law enforcement. They felt that these initiatives were an important starting point that would ultimately lead to a fairer and more equitable justice system. Participants were also concerned about the growing phenomenon of online hate speech and emphasized the need for social media platforms to take a more proactive role in monitoring and addressing this issue. Increasing economic empowerment for specific communities was interpreted as providing more support for racialized groups in finding employment as well as advancing greater diversity in hiring. Participants were generally of the view that implementing workplace diversity policies, specifically within the public service, was an important starting point and would lead to more diversity in those holding positions of leadership.

### **Indigenous Issues (Atlantic Canada Indigenous Peoples)**

In October one focus group was held among Indigenous participants residing in Atlantic Canada. The discussion was wide-ranging, eliciting participants' views on key priorities for Indigenous peoples, the Nova Scotia fisheries, the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), systemic racism and the issue of improving drinking water on reserves.

In terms of priorities, there was a consensus among participants that Canadians are generally poorly informed about Indigenous rights, culture and values and that this leads to misinformation, stereotyping and fear. Other issues raised in the context of this discussion included racism, poor economic opportunities for Indigenous people, especially for those living on reserve, lack of funding for Indigenous communities, and the need for greater representation of Indigenous peoples in decision-making bodies. Participants emphasized a desire to see the Government of Canada fulfill on its promises to Indigenous people, expressing disappointment with what they viewed as a clear disconnect between the federal government's actions and words.

Some participants were aware of the issues related to Indigenous fishers and commercial fishers in the lobster fishery in Nova Scotia. A few remarked that, if the situation had been reversed, this issue would have received much more attention at the federal level. Participants felt strongly that the Government of Canada should demonstrate its commitment to protecting Indigenous treaty rights by

acting more firmly and swiftly and that, in doing so, it would help to correct public misperceptions about Indigenous rights (e.g., that Indigenous fishers are acting illegally).

Familiarity with the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People (UNDRIP) was minimal. When asked what changes they would expect to see if Canada fully implemented UNDRIP, participants were skeptical about this possibility, describing it as a utopian vision. They felt that full implementation was a very distant possibility at best and would require the Government of Canada to cede considerable, if not full, control of lands and rights to Indigenous people. As a starting point, participants felt the Government of Canada should begin to negotiate land use agreements on an individual basis with each reserve, providing each Indigenous community with greater autonomy, and working cooperatively to create a plan which would protect the environment.

The discussion shifted to the topic of racism against Indigenous people which most believed was pervasive in Canada. Many had personally experienced racism to varying degrees. They pointed to the role of various institutions and systems in perpetuating this cycle including the media, healthcare, public education, policing, the judicial system, and governments.

A final topic for discussion centered on the Government of Canada's efforts to lift long-term drinking water advisories on reserves. Participants were given some information showing the federal government's commitment and progress to date in this area. Many participants, while previously unaware of the particulars of the data which they were shown, were not overly impressed. They were of the opinion that the issue was not a high priority for the Government of Canada underscoring that the issue should not have been allowed to occur in the first place in a country as advanced as Canada. They also expressed skepticism about follow-up in terms of maintenance and quality control. At the same time, the consensus view was that this was a very high priority issue for the federal government and comments were made that addressing drinking water advisories would fulfill a key principle in UNDRIP to protect Indigenous people from discrimination.

### **Western Alienation (Northern Alberta, Manitoba)**

In two focus groups conducted among participants residing in western locations a portion of the discussion was devoted to issues relating to western alienation.

Asked to provide three words that would best describe the current relationship between their province and the Government of Canada, participants' responses varied greatly by province. Those residing in Northern Alberta expressed more negativity and frustration, primarily related to the province's economic performance and what they perceived as a lack of support from the federal government and influence in decisions affecting their province. Most used descriptors such as frustrated, avoidance, irreparable and lip-service to describe the relationship.

Conversely, Manitobans were generally more positive about the relationship between their province and the federal government, specifically noting that they did not see Manitoba being treated much differently from other provinces. They described the relationship as fair, acceptable and cooperative but also as polarized, strained, divided and secretive. Participants attributed any divisiveness largely to

different viewpoints between the two levels of government, as well as a propensity for the provincial government to take a critical stance in relation to federal policies and programs.

On the question of whether their province was treated fairly by the Government of Canada, views were equally divergent. Participants from Northern Alberta generally agreed this was not the case, stating that Government of Canada appeared to be more concerned about jobs and employment in Central Canada. Further, many participants felt Alberta was unfairly contributing more to the federal government in terms of equalization payments than it was receiving back. When asked what the federal government could do to show they were in touch with the concerns of people in Alberta, many participants advocated for more communication and collaboration with the oil and gas sector as the province transitions from a fossil-fuel dependent economy to one which is more diversified. By contrast, participants in Manitoba had little to say in response to this question. Most thought that Manitobans were generally treated fairly and this opinion was based on their perception of reasonably good access to healthcare and education in the province.

### **Local Issues (Northern Alberta, Yellowknife)**

Local issues were discussed in Northern Alberta and Yellowknife, with a specific focus on identifying priorities for the Government of Canada.

In Northern Alberta participants raised a number of issues including employment, healthcare and mental health awareness, education, homelessness, and Indigenous reconciliation. They had little to say on any initiatives the federal government had undertaken which had benefited the province, with the exception of the Trans Mountain pipeline. By contrast, they were generally supportive of its efforts to address orphan wells as they felt this would be beneficial for the environment and would create needed jobs in the short-term. The primary criticisms of this initiative pertained to concerns about using public funds to undertake remediation which was more directly viewed as the responsibility of the companies that had operated and abandoned the wells. There was also a push for investments that would lead to more sustainable economic growth in the province and long-term employment.

In Yellowknife, participants generated a large list of issues in response to the question about important local concerns, including homelessness, the high cost of living, insufficient affordable housing, lack of employment opportunities and low wages, greater access to post-secondary education, supports for those with mental health and/or addictions issues, and access to healthcare professionals. While the federal government was given credit for funding the construction of a new hospital and various other infrastructure improvements as well as for the financial supports in response to COVID-19, some participants were frustrated with what they felt was very minimal attention paid to the Territories. They attributed this to insufficient representation in Parliament. In addition to the above-noted issues, participants identified access to high-speed Internet as a priority issue for the Government of Canada. They commented on the high cost of Internet access, issues of connectivity (e.g., slow Internet speeds) and lack of competition with respect to Internet providers in the region. Many advocated for the federal government to promote greater competition in the region which they expected would lead to better, less expensive services.



### **Zero Emission Vehicles (ZEV) (Northern Alberta, Manitoba, Yellowknife, Major Centres Ontario, Southern and Eastern Mid-size Centres Ontario, Mid-size Centres Quebec EI/Recovery Benefits Recipients, Southern and Eastern Mid-size Centres Ontario)**

Most participants were aware of Zero Emission Vehicles (ZEVs) and expressed interest in purchasing one in the future. They clearly understood the environmental benefits and the reduced carbon footprint associated with ZEVs. Moreover, they were intrigued by the lower maintenance required for these types of vehicles as well as the introduction of more powerful EVs, the latter issue being of particular importance to those interested in trucks and heavy duty vehicles. However, reactions were somewhat tempered by concerns mainly around the initial outlay. There was a common perception that ZEVs were more expensive to purchase. Other concerns related to battery range and disposal, the availability of charging stations, and the utility of such vehicles in remote and Northern areas.

Most felt that the price of ZEVs in Canada was heading to a point of equivalency with other conventional internal combustion engine vehicles, but felt this would occur over a fairly lengthy timeframe (anywhere between 5 to 25 years in the future). Many also found it difficult to make a prediction, given their lack of expertise on the technology and how the various players in the auto industry were responding. Others also spoke about the broader life cycle impact of ZEVs in terms of their overall environmental impact from manufacture through use and disposal, as well as issues related to resale value.

Participants discussed their reactions to a recent Government of Canada announcement to provide funding to a Ford auto plant in Oakville to make ZEVs. Some had heard of the announcement. Regardless of awareness of a joint federal-provincial investment of \$590 million in Ford's Oakville plant, reactions were split. Some were supportive of promoting the technology in Canada, while others questioned making a significant investment of this nature to a private sector company and questioned how it could ultimately benefit Canadians.

When asked how they felt about the Government of Canada setting targets with respect to the percentage of cars sold in Canada which would need to be electric and/or mandating that all new cars sold in Canada must be ZEVs by 2035, opinions were somewhat varied. Some were supportive based on the environmental benefits. Others were concerned that Canada's unique geography and climate would pose some challenges and were opposed to any initiatives that would adversely affect consumer independence and choice.

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#### **MORE INFORMATION**

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