Chapter III. Why Citizen Engagement?

a) The climate in Canada and the need for democratic renewal

It is no secret that voter turnout is declining in Canada, down to its lowest since 1898 during the 2004 federal election at 60.9\%\(^6\) and increasing only slightly in 2006. While it is difficult to pinpoint a single reason for this phenomenon, research indicates that Canadians are increasingly frustrated with and disconnected from their democratic structures and processes. Citizen engagement, a proposed deepening of representative democracy, is an important response to this democratic deficit – one that aims to reinvigorate and renew people’s faith in the democratic process.

While some studies point to citizen apathy as a root cause of this phenomenon, other findings reveal citizens’ deep longing for more meaningful ways to engage with political structures and decision-making. EKOS Citizen Engagement polling has revealed that:

- 85% of Canadians would be more confident in government decisions if it was clear that the government sought citizen’s input more regularly, and
- 68% of Canadians believe that there are not enough citizen engagement initiatives on issues of public policy.\(^7\)

It is often suggested that there is a need to move beyond consultation, which is at times perceived by those being consulted as tokenistic and without influence or impact.

Over the last 10 to 15 years, there has been a theoretical, “shift from a top-down model of government to horizontal governance, which is the process of governing by public policy networks including public, private and voluntary sector actors.”\(^8\) The fulfillment of this shift in practical terms is dependent on the politics of the ruling party. The rationale for this shift lies in the understanding that better decisions are made when the affected stakeholder groups are involved and that no one group has the answers to today’s “wicked”\(^9\) policy problems. Various models of collaboration have emerged which emphasize partnerships between government and different sectors. Within horizontal management, government is expected to take a holistic approach to policy, moving beyond departmental silos to embrace citizen-centered policy analysis and solutions. Governments are no longer expected to have all the answers internally, but rather to play the role of coordinating and facilitating a collective process of policy development.

Building on this momentum, citizen engagement proposes a philosophy and related methods to contribute to this new vision of networked governance.
The hopes and fears of citizen engagement

Apprehensions and scepticism regarding citizen engagement should not be ignored. Some question the value and benefit of engaging citizens, especially when it comes to addressing complex social or scientific questions. Others worry about citizens taking over or hijacking the delicate policy process or about raising expectations beyond reasonable limits. Pragmatists are reluctant to ramp up citizen engagement because of tight timelines and budgets. While these and other concerns are valid, many can be addressed with political commitment, proper planning, clear objective setting, transparent communication with participants and a flexibility to adjust course as required to deal with emerging realities.

The potential benefits of citizen engagement are elaborated below.\textsuperscript{10}

**Making Legitimate Decisions:** No decision is value free, and thus relying solely on fact-based expert opinions in decision-making is limiting and paints a narrow picture of reality. Ignoring public values is short-sighted and ultimately results in dissatisfied constituents. Decisions that are perceived by the public as “legitimate” are more easily arrived at when citizen’s values are taken into account.

**Making Better Policy:** As discussed above, current thinking has moved beyond the belief that one sector can provide all the answers. By drawing on the vast and diverse experiential knowledge of the public (usually in combination with other forms of knowledge), the chances of making decisions that are reflective of needs increases.

**Overcoming Polarization, Reducing Conflict, Looking for Common Ground:** Through a well-structured process of dialogue and deliberation, parties who disagree may come to understand why the others hold the position they do, greatly helping in the long journey towards common ground or positions from which compromise is more easily attained. Through citizen engagement processes, relationships of trust are built. Giving citizens appropriate public spaces to come to reasoned collective decisions (rather than relying on typical debate-based adversarial processes) makes it much more likely that people will come to more public minded – less privately driven – responses to public policy problems. In very pragmatic terms, this can save time and resources that would otherwise be spent resolving a conflict emerging from a government decision.

**Building Competent, Responsible Citizens:** Through citizen engagement processes, citizens can acquire skills, such as active listening, empathy, problem solving, and creative thinking that can be put to good use in their personal and community lives.

**Engaging Citizens in Political Life:** Citizens want to have a say in their lives, and a large part of what shapes their lives is public policy. Encouraging and enabling citizens to participate in ways that are meaningful to their lives will both enhance their own lives, by giving them a greater sense of political efficacy, and potentially increase their confidence in political practices and structures.

**Including Minorities:** Representative democracy is established on majority-based principles that can fail to address and incorporate the needs and concerns of minorities. Electoral institutions do not reflect the diversity of the Canadian population. With an increasingly diverse Canadian population, there are compelling reasons to create mechanisms to engage minority voices’ in decision-making at all levels.
For further reading:


