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# Continuous Qualitative Data Collection of Canadians' Views – February 2020

## Executive Summary

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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 in-person focus groups which were conducted between February 11<sup>th</sup> and 24<sup>th</sup>, 2020 in six locations across the country including in New Brunswick, Quebec, Ontario, Saskatchewan, British Columbia and the Yukon. Details concerning the locations, recruitment, and composition of the groups are shown in the section below.

Among the specific objectives for this cycle of focus groups, the research explored awareness and perceptions of a wide range of issues, many of them in-depth, including recent Government of Canada stories in the news, the upcoming federal budget, and specific initiatives and issues related to the environment. Issues related to the Wet'suwet'en protests, coronavirus, and the Canada Student Loans Program were tested in certain locations. In addition, the research explored issues of local or regional concern in Whitehorse and Regina.

A series of exercises were also completed by participants, depending on the location and topic being discussed. In various locations, participants were asked to complete exercises intended to identify priority themes for the budget, environmental initiatives for the federal government, conditions for approving the Frontier Mine, or possible names for the Canada Student Loan Program. Participants' responses to these exercises were formally captured and recorded, as were the ensuing discussions exploring these topics in more detail.

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 gender

### Detailed approach

- 12 in-person focus groups across 6 Canadian cities
- Two groups conducted per location, in North York, Ontario (Feb. 11<sup>th</sup>), Montreal, Quebec (Feb. 12<sup>th</sup>), Moncton, New Brunswick (Feb. 13<sup>th</sup>), Nanaimo, British Columbia (Feb. 18<sup>th</sup>), Whitehorse, Yukon (Feb. 20<sup>th</sup>), and Regina, Saskatchewan (Feb. 24<sup>th</sup>)
- Groups in Montreal, Quebec were conducted in French, while all others were conducted in English
- A total of 10 participants were recruited for each group, assuming 8 to 10 participants would attend
- Each participant received an \$90 honorarium in respect of their time
- Across all locations, 106 participants attended, in total. Details on attendance numbers by group can be found below.

## Group Locations and Composition

LOCATION	GROUP	LANGUAGE	DATE	TIME	GROUP COMPOSITION	NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS
York Region, ON	1	English	Feb. 11, 2020	5:30-7:30	Women	9
	2			8:00-10:00	Men	8
Montreal, QC	3	French	Feb. 12, 2020	5:30-7:30	Women	9
	4			7:45-9:45	Men	10
Moncton, NB	5	English	Feb. 13, 2020	5:30-7:30	Women	10
	6			7:45-9:45	Men	10
Nanaimo, BC	7	English	Feb. 18, 2020	5:00-7:00	Women	9
	8			7:30-9:30	Men	8
Whitehorse, YT	9	English	Feb. 20, 2020	5:00-7:00	Women	8
	10			7:30-9:30	Men	6
Regina, SK	11	English	Feb. 24, 2020	5:30-7:30	Women	8
	12			8:00-10:00	Men	11
<b>Total number of participants</b>						<b>106</b>

## Key Findings

The following outlines a summary of the key findings from each topic discussed during the cycle of focus groups undertaken in February, 2020. Unless otherwise noted, topics were explored in all locations.

### Government of Canada News

Overall, it was difficult for respondents to recall any recent news related to the Government of Canada without prompting. However, ideas could be brought out through discussion.

The blockades across the country related to the construction of the Coastal Gaslink pipeline through Wet'suwet'en territory in Northern British Columbia were widely top of mind among participants. They increasingly dominated mentions in the groups over the course of the month, as protests and disruptions across the country intensified.

Among the other stories mentioned, the Prime Minister's trip to Africa in early February was referred to in the York and Moncton groups. Immigration was mentioned in Nanaimo and Regina. And while references to coronavirus were not especially prominent, they came up unaided in a few of the groups (please note the date of these groups as being mid-February).

### **Wet'suwet'en Protests (Whitehorse, Regina)**

#### *Awareness and understanding*

A number of participants commented on the extensive media coverage of events, and most were following the story to some degree, if only in the headlines.

Most had only a rudimentary understanding of what they viewed as a complex issue, and many felt that they did not have all the facts. Regardless of their level of information or engagement, however, most viewed the story in similar ways. Participants focused on the barricades and disruptions around rail lines, and their effects on transportation, economic activity, and livelihoods. Most felt that the issue was an urgent and challenging problem to be solved. And most associated current events with Indigenous issues and pipelines, and what they saw as long-standing challenges in these areas.

#### *Views of the federal government's response*

Asked for their assessment of the federal government's response to date, opinions were mixed. A number of participants said they did not know enough to judge. Others felt that the federal government was making good efforts or doing what it could to try to peacefully de-escalate the situation.

Among the positive steps mentioned, participants said they had heard about the government reaching out to the Wet'suwet'en, that the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) had stepped back to allow for negotiations, and that the Prime Minister had cancelled a trip abroad to manage the issue. On the other hand, many were at least somewhat critical, given the persistence of the problem. Some felt the government needed to be "more forceful," while others felt that more needed to be done to resolve the underlying issue with the Wet'suwet'en. Most agreed that the federal government should move forward on all fronts to peacefully resolve the protests and disruptions as quickly as possible.

### **Teck Frontier Mine Project (Regina)**

Only a few participants were aware of this project and most knew that it had been cancelled. Opinions ranged from viewing that decision as a good one, to emphasizing the loss of jobs, to linking it to the Wet'suwet'en protests and a possible chill around new oil and gas projects. Participants were not sure what this cancellation meant for the future of the oil industry.

### **Federal Budget (Moncton, Montreal, York Region, Regina, Nanaimo)**

#### **Awareness and preferences**

There was very low awareness of the upcoming Budget. When asked about it, participants said they both expected and wanted to see a focus on health care, cost of living, and also the environment. Presented with a list of potential themes for the federal Budget, participants most widely chose *a Health Care Budget* as their clear number-one priority, followed by *A Budget to Make Life More Affordable* and *a Climate Budget*.

### **Climate versus environment budget**

Asked what kind of spending and policies they would expect to see in a climate budget, participants most commonly identified the development of green energy and innovations and technology to assist with the transition to a low-carbon economy. Many also said they would expect to see financial incentives for businesses and households to assist them in reducing greenhouse gas pollution and investing in energy efficiency. Investments in electric vehicle uptake, public transit, and recycling programs were other common mentions, as were initiatives to reduce or ban plastics.

Most preferred the idea of an 'environment' budget to a 'climate' one and felt it would be broader in scope, more inclusive of other important environmental priorities and allow for more efforts and accomplishments over a shorter period of time. Some felt that an environment budget sounded more appealing to the public compared to what some viewed as a more abstract sounding 'climate budget'. Those who preferred a climate budget, on the other hand, felt that it would bring focus to an urgent issue.

### **A budget to improve quality of life**

When asked to suggest what kind of spending and policies they would expect to see in a budget focused on "improving quality of life", participants responded with a view that was far-ranging. It encompassed initiatives in education, health and jobs, and addressing the high cost of living.

Specific elements were mentioned. These included pension issues, long-term care, homecare and support for vulnerable populations such as people with disabilities or living in poverty. Other issues raised included a four-day work week, family leave and options for paying for all of the above (either tax increases or increased deficit spending).

## **Northern Issues (Whitehorse)**

### **Local challenges**

Three main challenges were identified in Whitehorse. The first was housing. Participants described overall shortages, a lack of availability and choice, and extremely high prices. The second was healthcare, specifically a lack of doctors and services, long waits, overcrowding, and the need to travel to other cities for diagnosis and treatment. The third was public transit, as the local system was viewed as insufficient, forcing people to drive.

### **Local impact of federal government initiatives**

There was some sense of the federal government having an impact on Whitehorse, although not in relation to the big issues of local concern. Positive mentions included perceived investments in a post-secondary school, a science building, and a power plant, as well as financial assistance through the child tax credit or transfer payments. Negative mentions included a "carbon tax" which some felt had resulted in increased costs, exacerbating already high prices.

Asked what the city needed in terms of infrastructure investment, public transit was mentioned most commonly, followed by low income or seniors' housing, and improvements to a local power plant.

A few had heard of the Atlin Hydro expansion, and some felt that the federal government could be doing more to support the hydroelectric industry in the Yukon. But others were hesitant, concerned about environmental issues or changes to water levels associated with hydroelectric projects.

### **Canada's Arctic and Northern Policy Framework**

Few had heard of this initiative. Provided with some background and asked what a "more integrated decision-making process" between federal, territorial and Indigenous partners might look like, some were not sure or found the question hard to answer. Others focussed mostly on the need for this kind of initiative and felt that First Nations communities, as well as cities and mayors, needed to have more input into decision-making to produce better outcomes.

### **Travel deduction**

Some were aware of the travel deduction program, but only vaguely. Most focussed on the employment benefits portion and felt that it was restrictive, not always offered by employers, and provided too small of a reimbursement. There was confusion regarding the deduction overall, including who qualifies, how much it amounts to, and how it is claimed.

### **Reconciliation**

Most had heard about federal government initiatives associated with reconciliation, especially compensation for survivors of the "Sixties scoop" or residential schools, and local events that had benefitted tourism and boosted the number of cultural and social activities. Areas for future focus included more investments in trauma counselling for families, greater investments in Indigenous youth, and more public education.

### **Immigration policies in the north**

There was low awareness of policies related to immigration in the North. Some were aware of a foreign worker's program and had heard some mixed reviews. Many felt that immigration services in Whitehorse were limited, requiring travel to other cities as part of the process for permanent residency or citizenship.

### **Investments in post-secondary education**

Some had heard, vaguely, about investments in post-secondary education or training by the federal government, and a number of participants felt the Government of Canada had something to do with Yukon College becoming a university. Most indicated that more investment was needed in post-secondary education, in order to support economic development, create jobs, and build a skilled local labour force.

## **Firearms restrictions**

Most had heard about plans to restrict access to certain types of firearms. Few had clarity and many were resistant to the idea of restrictions on gun ownership or the federal government implementing a buy-back program for assault rifles.

## **Environment**

### **Awareness of environmental news**

The environmental issues that were top of mind included climate change, greenhouse gas reductions, and events such as forest fires and warming temperatures in the North. Participants also commonly mentioned pipelines and related controversies, including the Wet'suwet'en protests. Some commented on pollution from the oil and gas industry or stories about accidents, leaks and spills. Issues related to plastics in oceans, recycling, landfill, and waste were also commonly mentioned.

There was very low awareness of Government of Canada news related to the environment. The most common mentions were thematic ones focused on pipelines, climate change, and emissions reductions. A few participants mentioned or alluded to carbon pricing.

### **Environmental priorities**

Participants were provided with a list of environmental initiatives and asked to identify the ones that would make the greatest positive difference. Differences were not especially striking, however. Most initiatives on the list were viewed as only marginally better or worse than others. The exception was the national price on carbon, which had very little support overall.

### **Carbon pricing**

Participants were presented with information on the carbon pricing rates in place for the next two years and told that the federal government would make a decision in 2022 about whether to continue to increase the price on carbon, freeze it, lower it, or eliminate it entirely.

Asked for their recommendations, participants had mixed views. The most common recommendation, overall, by a small margin, was to freeze the rate at \$50 per tonne. This was a prevalent response among participants who felt ambivalent about the program or wanted the government to re-evaluate and make sure that it was working as planned, without negative effects on the economy, jobs, or consumer costs.

Most other participants were about equally split between recommending that the federal government eliminate the program or increase the rate. Those who recommended a rate increase supported the goals of the program and felt that the price had to be high enough to induce behaviour change. Those who recommended eliminating the program tended to think about it as a tax and added cost to them. There were also a number of participants who recommended that the federal government lower the rate in 2022. These participants were concerned about negative impacts of the carbon pricing on costs for consumers and businesses, as well as jobs and the economy, overall.



The decisive factor for many who recommended freezing, lowering or eliminating the carbon price was their lack of information or awareness about whether or not the initiative was working to reduce emissions or having a negative impact on consumer costs and the economy.

### **Reducing personal emissions**

Most said that they were making personal efforts to reduce their emissions, which included better transportation choices, recycling, waste reduction, and lowering household energy consumption. Most also admitted to gaps in their knowledge about their own personal footprint and ways to reduce it. Despite this, not all saw the value of greater public education or the usefulness of tools such as an online carbon calculator.

Meanwhile, some felt that public education could be effective in changing people's behaviour and contributing to emissions reduction. These participants wanted to know more themselves. Others felt that resistance, costs, and inconvenience were bigger barriers to behaviour change than a lack of information. Many of these participants did not want to learn or do more about their carbon footprint for the reasons they described. Many were also skeptical that personal emissions reductions would make a big difference. When asked, more participants felt that a few big polluters changing in major ways would have the biggest impact, compared to a large number of Canadians making small changes. Many others were not sure or felt that everyone had a role to play in the effort to reduce emissions.

Among the tips that participants said might be useful to them, many wanted to know what the benchmarks were for responsible energy use, and how their usage compared to others. Participants wanted to know what the big culprits were for personal or household emissions, where the greatest and easiest improvements could be made, and how various options compared, in terms of costs, benefits, and reductions to their footprint. Many also expressed interest in knowing how their city or province fared against others or how Canada compared to the rest of the world.

## **Western Issues (Regina)**

### **The federal-provincial relationship**

Asked to describe the relationship between Saskatchewan and the federal government, most felt that their province was neglected or overlooked in favour of others in central Canada. Participants commonly described Saskatchewan as forgotten, irrelevant or disrespected, and some described the relationship with the federal government as strained, or lacking in cooperation.

Many felt that there had been a lack of investment and support for Saskatchewan's economy and industries and wanted to see more equal treatment and more investment.

### **TMX Pipeline**

Only a few participants in these groups had heard about the pipeline and most had superficial knowledge of the project. Among those with an opinion, the consensus was that the pipeline would likely not be built on schedule, given the kinds of delays and opposition it had already encountered.

### **Equalization payments**

Many were unfamiliar with the term 'equalization payments', especially in the women's group, and most had only a superficial understanding of the system. Participants described it as a pool of provincial contributions that gets redistributed based on GDP. A few felt that the system should be changed to benefit Saskatchewan more, and was currently unfair, but no one had any concrete suggestions for how it might be improved.

### **China's boycott of the Canadian canola industry**

There was mixed awareness of this issue in these groups. Most did not know any details. Asked if the federal government should make concessions to China, retaliate with sanctions, or continue to financially support farmers while trying to negotiate a solution, most participants chose the latter. This was widely felt to be the safest and most constructive option.

### **Top federal priority for Saskatchewan**

Of the various issues above discussed with these groups, participants were asked to select one as their top priority for the Government of Canada. Despite many having little previous awareness of the program, most chose equalization payments, based on their sense that Saskatchewan was not getting enough support overall or in comparison to other provinces.

### **Frontier Mines (Montreal, York Region, Moncton)**

On February 23, 2020, Teck Resources made the decision to withdraw its application for the Frontier oilsands mine. This decision came after the focus groups in Montreal, York Region and Moncton had been held.

Most had not previously heard of the Frontier Mines. Asked for their opinion, there was widespread opposition among participants in Montreal, most in York felt that the government should approve the project with environmental commitments in place, and participants in Moncton were split between those two choices.

Economic benefits, job creation and the need for oil were the main reasons given by those who sided with approval for the project, in addition to believing that economic and environmental concerns could be balanced. Among those who opposed the project, most felt that such a large mine and the emissions it was expected to produce were a move in the wrong direction, and at odds with the federal government's commitment to reduce greenhouse gases and be a global leader on the environment.

Some said they would be more supportive of the project if the company pledged to offset emissions to net-zero by 2050, but the concept of net-zero first needed to be explained to most participants, and some felt that this date was too far off.

### **Negotiating a deal with Alberta**

Asked to consider the possibility of the federal government negotiating with Alberta to establish acceptable conditions for going forward with the project, some supported the idea and others did not.

Whether they supported this approach or not, most felt that the conditions on the list were not strong enough. Participants wanted to see firm, legally-binding commitments to meet environmental standards that included enforcement and penalties. They tended to dislike *promises* or what they viewed as vague or ambiguous language. The year 2050 felt far off for many, as well, and most did not like references to carbon pricing.

### **Canada Student Loans (Moncton, Nanaimo)**

Most had heard of this program and said they were familiar with some of its features. Top of mind, many had negative comments about the debt associated with the program. Beyond that, participants described the program as a loan to help cover the costs of post-secondary education, tied to financial need, and, some assumed, paid back on good terms with a grace period on interest and better rates overall. Some also felt that the repayment schedule was also tied to income. Many did not know if the program offered grants. Despite some frustration about the debt, many felt that the program was valuable.

Asked to consider a list of possible new names for the program, the top two choices were *Canada Student Grants and Loans* and *Canada Student Financial Assistance*. The first was seen as a good description, especially since some had not known whether grants were provided. Many liked the phrase 'financial assistance' in the second name. But few felt that any of the new names offered a significant improvement on the current one.

### **Coronavirus (Montréal, York Region, Regina, Nanaimo)**

#### **Awareness**

All participants were aware of the coronavirus and attuned to media coverage and new developments. They tended to have a lot of information and details about the evolving story, and a number of questions, too. Most acknowledged the many unknowns associated with the new virus and its status as an evolving public health threat. And many thought that the information they were getting could be confusing or unreliable at times. That said, most felt that they had a good enough understanding of what was known to-date about the virus, especially in relation to key issues, such as spread, threat, risk, transmission, and prevention.

#### **Perceived risk**

Most felt that their personal risk was low, and that the situation was not serious in Canada at the time of these groups. There was general awareness of confirmed cases in the country, but most understood the numbers to be low. And most participants said they had confidence in the handling of the virus by

public health officials and governments in Canada. They felt that the country was fairly well prepared, taking the threat seriously, and putting screening, testing and quarantines in place to contain the virus and its spread. Some were concerned that the spread of the virus and its effects in Canada could or would get worse, but most said they were not too concerned at the moment.

### **Federal government response**

Some felt that the federal government may have been a bit slow to respond initially, or could be implementing stricter measures such as restricting incoming travel and tightening up the border. Participants generally felt that the Canadian government was being measured and prudent in its response, neither over- nor under-reacting to the threat. Many were aware that the federal government had brought Canadians home from Asia and tended to view this as a positive response, given that it involved screening and quarantines.

### **Information seeking**

Participants had a lot of questions about the virus, especially related to its severity and origins, and whether there was additional information available about transmission. Few felt that they faced serious or urgent information gaps, however, given their perception of a low level of personal risk.

That said, everyone understood the issue to be a major public health concern and one that was evolving. Most wanted to be up-to-date on key information, especially regarding spread, any increased threat to Canada and themselves, and the public health response and actions being undertaken by government.

Most were following the story, and many were actively seeking out information. The sources of information being relied on were broad, including traditional media in Canada and abroad (accessed both online and offline), social media from various sources, word of mouth, employers, schools, and health care professionals, as well as official sources, such as the World Health Organization, governments, and public health officials in Canada and beyond. Health Canada was mentioned as a go-to source of information by some.

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### **MORE INFORMATION**

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