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Continuous Qualitative Data Collection of Canadians' Views – April 2021

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 online focus groups which were conducted between April 6th and 29th, 2021 in multiple locations across the country including Atlantic Canada, Quebec, Ontario, Manitoba, Saskatchewan, Alberta, the Northwest Territories, Yukon 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, their outlook on COVID-19 and how that has influenced their behaviours, as well as their views on local public health restrictions and 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. The research also explored Canadians expectations regarding the 2021 federal budget as well as their reactions to the federal budget after it was released.

Certain subgroups were also asked for their views on specific and relevant issues related to COVID-19. 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. Moreover, participants residing in Calgary and Edmonton who were experiencing COVID fatigue and exhibiting riskier behaviours were asked about an ad campaign developed by the Government of Canada for possible advertising regarding COVID-19.

In addition to the pandemic, non-COVID-19 related discussions were undertaken on a range of topics including mental health, Indigenous issues, housing issues, local issues and out-of-status workers in Canada.

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 opinion leaders who were paying close attention to the news, people who were experiencing COVID-19 fatigue and exhibiting riskier behaviours, those who had received their first dose of a COVID-19 vaccine, Indigenous people, those who were vaccine hesitant and parents of young children.

Detailed approach

- 12 focus groups across various regions in Canada.
- Three groups were conducted with the general population in Interior B.C., rural Quebec, and mid-size and major centres in the prairies.

- The other nine groups were conducted with key subgroups including:
 - Opinion leaders and those paying close attention to the news in Sudbury and Thunder Bay districts and mid-size and major centres Quebec;
 - Those experiencing COVID-19 fatigue and exhibiting riskier behaviours residing in Calgary and Edmonton, and Windsor-Essex, Lambton and Niagara regions;
 - Those who had received their first dose of a COVID-19 vaccine residing in the Greater Montreal Area (GMA) and in the Yukon and the Northwest Territories;
 - Indigenous people in central and southern Ontario;
 - Vaccine hesitant people residing in mid-size centres in Atlantic Canada; and
 - Parents of young children between the ages of 1 and 10 residing in major centres in Ontario.
- Groups in Quebec 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, 79 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
Sudbury and Thunder Bay Districts	1	English	Apr 6	6:00-8:00 pm	Opinion Leaders/Influencers/Paying more attention to news/media	5
Calgary and Edmonton	2	English	Apr 7	8:00-10:00 pm	People Experiencing COVID Fatigue/Exhibiting Riskier Behaviours (Age 20-34) COVID Hotspots	6
Greater Montreal Area (GMA)	3	French	Apr 8	6:00-8:00 pm	Received 1 st Dose of COVID-19 vaccine	7
Central and Southern Ontario	4	English	Apr 12	6:00-8:00 pm	Indigenous	6
Mid-size and Major Centres Atlantic Canada	5	English	Apr 13	5:00-7:00 pm	Vaccine Hesitant	8

Yukon and Northwest Territories	6	English	Apr 15	9:00-11:00 pm	Received 1 st Dose of COVID-19 vaccine	7
Windsor-Essex, Lambton and Niagara Regions	7	English	Apr 20	6:00-8:00 pm	Fatigue/Exhibiting Riskier Behaviours (Age 35-49) COVID Hotspots	7
Mid-size and Major Centres Quebec	8	French	Apr 21	6:00-8:00 pm	Opinion Leaders/Influencers/Paying more attention to news/media	6
Interior B.C.	9	English	Apr 22	9:00-11:00 pm	General Population	6
Rural Quebec	10	French	Apr 27	6:00-8:00 pm	General Population	7
Major Centres Ontario	11	English	Apr 28	6:00-8:00 pm	Parents of Young Children Ages 1-10	7
Mid-size and Major Centres Prairies	12	English	Apr 29	8:00-10:00 pm	General Population	7
Total number of participants						79

Key Findings

Part I: COVID-19 Related Findings

Government of Canada in the News (All Locations)

When asked what they were reading, seeing or hearing about the Government of Canada in the news in recent days, participants were principally focused on two areas: COVID-19/vaccinations and the federal budget. Few specifics in regard to the federal budget were mentioned, other than concerns about the size of the deficit given the proposed expenditures, in addition to announcements about childcare and the carbon pricing program. By contrast, participants cited a wider range of items in the news related to the pandemic, including:

- The Government of Canada’s role in procuring vaccines – comments both favourable and critical were offered as some participants felt there were shortages while others had heard about recent deliveries of vaccines which would lead to an accelerated pace of vaccinations;
- Issues related to specific vaccine brands, specifically AstraZeneca and Johnson & Johnson;
- A new provision in Ontario which required employers to offer workers three paid sick days, enhancing coverage already provided through the Canada Recovery Sickness Benefit (CRSB) offered by the federal government;

- Federal government assistance via the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) to frontline Ontario health care workers; and
- Travel restrictions, financial support to Air Canada and vaccine passports.

Several participants had also heard about other issues, including sexual misconduct in the Canadian Armed Forces and the state of diplomatic relations between Canada and China.

Participants in two groups held among residents of Sudbury and Thunder Bay Regions and Calgary and Edmonton were specifically asked about the recent ruling by the Supreme Court of Canada on carbon pricing which deemed the federal *Greenhouse Gas Pollution Pricing Act* to be constitutional. Participants were generally aware of this ruling, although they were short on details. When provided with additional information explaining that the judges had noted that global warming causes harm beyond provincial boundaries, and is a matter of national concern, participants' views were mixed. In Sudbury and Thunder Bay, participants tended to favour the ruling specifically noting that the contributors to and effects of climate change and global warming cross provincial boundaries, making it an issue of national concern. They felt this approach was necessary and that there were few workable alternatives to the proposed system. By contrast, participants in Calgary and Edmonton were more adamantly opposed to the ruling and the carbon pricing system, seeing it as unfair and unlikely to have a significant impact on the global situation given that countries like India and China were viewed as the major emitters. Further questions and concerns arose when participants were told that 90% of direct proceeds from the Government of Canada's pollution pricing are returned to residents of those provinces through Climate Action Incentive payments. Participants were not familiar with this aspect of the initiative and were skeptical of it. They were concerned that consumers would nonetheless end up paying more (i.e., at the gas pump). Their expectation was that companies would increase the price of their products to cover any additional costs.

The topic of federal government support to Air Canada was discussed in more detail in two groups – Atlantic Canada and the North. Participants were made aware of the specifics of the deal, including the financial support (loans and an equity investment), as well as key conditions for receipt of government funding which involved issuing refunds to passengers whose flights have been cancelled due to the pandemic, and restoring regional routes. The balance of participants in the North supported the deal while those in Atlantic Canada were more critical. Opposition centered primarily on the burden to taxpayers of a multi-billion dollar deal and whether or not government should be stepping in to support publicly-traded companies. At the same time, a few participants were reassured that taxpayers' interests were being protected via the equity investment. Some expressed concerns that a similar approach was not being taken to assist smaller businesses.

COVID-19 Information/In the News (Sudbury and Thunder Bay District Opinion Leaders, Mid-size and Major Centres Quebec Opinion Leaders)

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

Participants mentioned that they typically source their news and information from a variety of digital media ranging from online news sources for major media companies in Canada such as the CBC, the Globe and Mail, and the National Post, to social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter. Overall, participants remarked that they typically sought out this information online, through a mobile phone app or by accessing the websites for television news broadcasts.

Specific to COVID-19 information, participants stated that they typically follow both national and provincial trends such as COVID-19 infection rates, vaccination rates, vaccine distribution, hospital capacity and current public health measures. Given Canada's current vaccine rollout, participants noted they were especially interested in the number of vaccines arriving into Canada.

Most participants commented that they rarely shared information or news articles with others on their social media networks. Among those who stated they occasionally shared information, it was expressed that they would only share information if they perceived it to be either of particular interest or of some value to their friends and network.

When asked if they ever came across false information or 'fake news,' participants were equally as likely to say they had encountered some form of 'fake news' as they were to say they had not. Participants stated that when determining the legitimacy of information, they often verified the credibility of the source and its references and were not likely to question the information if it was from an organization with which they were familiar such as a university or public health organization.

Participants acknowledged that in most cases they were unlikely to do anything to correct false information which they encountered on social media. The general consensus was that they would only invest personal effort in correcting information when they felt they had the time to do so or if, in their judgement, the false information could have consequential negative implications.

COVID-19 Outlook (All Locations)

Participants discussed their views on the restrictions in their region as well as whether the restrictions should be strengthened or loosened at this time. On balance, most participants were generally comfortable with maintaining the restrictions (which had been strengthened in a number of provinces and territories) believing the measures were necessary to reduce the spread of COVID-19 and keep the public safe. Many participants commented that these restrictions should have been put in place much earlier. At the same time, there were several participants in almost every group who questioned the effectiveness of certain restrictions, found some of the public health measures to be confusing or contradictory, or who advocated for a loosening of the restrictions in their area.

Across the regions, views regarding the restrictions varied, to some extent, as did the nature of the restrictions themselves:

- In Atlantic Canada many participants felt it was too soon to reopen the bubble, expressing concerns that in doing so provinces would see a reversal in the gains that had been made in keeping the spread of COVID-19 under control in the region.

- Participants in Ontario were of the view that a stricter lockdown should have been put in place earlier and that the current lockdown should be in effect for longer than a two-week period. Not all participants were of the same opinion – those in Sudbury/Thunder Bay (Opinion Leaders) were more inclined to believe that government should not mandate restrictions and suggested that speeding up vaccinations was the most effective way out of the pandemic. A number of participants found the restrictions to be inconsistent and somewhat confusing. They also favoured a more targeted approach to implementing various public health measures rather than a province-wide strategy which did not account for regional differences in transmission rates. The issue of targeting specific workplaces where high rates of transmission were evident and providing workers with sick pay also arose in the context of this discussion.
- Most participants in Quebec were comfortable with the restrictions that had been put in place in the province and expressed hope that this would be the last time such extensive measures would be required. Participants generally supported the curfew and restrictions on Ontarians crossing the border into Quebec. At the same time, they felt the restrictions had been implemented belatedly and, as in other groups, found some of them to be confusing and, in some cases, conflicting. Moreover, the changing nature of public health measures made it difficult for some participants to keep track. When asked whether restrictions should be lifted or further strengthened most nevertheless felt they should stay in place for the time being or possibly be tightened.
- In groups held among residents of the Prairies, participants generally favoured the restrictions although they questioned the wisdom of restricting visits between households while at the same time permitting restaurants to remain open, with some limitations. And, there was a concern about hospital/ICU capacity should case counts rise dramatically. Participants from Calgary and Edmonton (experiencing COVID-19 fatigue or exhibiting riskier behaviours) were less aligned with their counterparts in other prairie provinces – they felt some restrictions could be slightly loosened to allow for more socializing and outdoor activities as well as to reduce the financial pressures on small businesses.
- Participants in British Columbia discussed the recent strengthening of restrictions in their province viewing this as a reasonable, short-term solution. However, similar to comments made in other groups, some participants questioned whether there was sufficient evidence to justify such extensive restrictions, describing the ‘cure as being worse than the disease.’ Concern was expressed that younger people in particular may become easily frustrated with the restrictions, leading to a surge in the spread of COVID-19. Others commented that they found the changeable nature of the public health response contributed to widespread confusion. Several participants also questioned the rationale for restricting movement across health authorities as they believed that the province continued to permit entry to international travelers.
- Participants in the Yukon and the Northwest Territories were supportive of the restrictions in place in their region and credited public health authorities with keeping case counts low, in particular by instituting a 14-day quarantine for those coming into the Yukon or the Northwest Territories. Most agreed that any sacrifice they were being asked to make was necessary to achieve the desired outcome.

Participants experiencing COVID fatigue described feeling frustrated, disheartened and tired. While generally following rules such as masking and physical distancing, they questioned why adherence to the public health guidelines over the last year had not had a greater impact on reducing cases of COVID-19. Most acknowledged the seriousness of the issue, but simply felt they needed to socialize with friends face-to-face in order to maintain positive mental health. As such, many participants were willing to take some risks, although they deemed the risk of contracting COVID-19 themselves to be quite low. While most supported a continuation of restrictions to some degree, a few advocated for a full and unrestricted opening.

Concerns about a Third Wave and COVID-19 Variants

Most participants were concerned about the rapidity with which the variants were spreading and the severity of illness for those who contracted one of the variants. They were particularly concerned about the transmissibility of the variants given what they viewed as more lax adherence to public health measures. There was a general consensus that a resurgence of the virus and a possible third wave was likely. Some emphasized the need to raise public awareness regarding the nature and consequences of the spread of the variants in Canada.

Those who had received at least one dose of the vaccine and participants who expressed some hesitancy to being vaccinated considered the issue of the variants somewhat differently. The former group felt less threatened, having been vaccinated, while the latter group favoured an approach which lead to fewer restrictions and letting the virus follow its natural trajectory.

When asked whether they thought the spread of COVID-19 was going to get worse or improve throughout the spring, most participants felt things would likely improve given the pace of vaccinations, the ability for people to get outside as the weather improved and more informed and prepared public health officials who were now better able to meet the challenge (compared to the situation in the early days of the pandemic).

Government of Canada Assistance to Ontario (Major Centres Ontario Parents of Young Children, Windsor-Essex, Lambton and Niagara Regions Experiencing COVID Fatigue and Riskier Behaviours, Mid-Size and Major Centres Quebec Opinion Leaders, Interior B.C.)

In several groups participants were asked about the Government of Canada's announcement to provide more help to Ontario in response to the province's request for assistance (i.e., support from the Canadian Armed Forces to augment or relieve staff within medical facilities, transfer medical personnel from outside the province to the front lines in Ontario, undertake rapid testing in hot spots, as well as deploy the Canadian Red Cross to help with mobile vaccination units). Participants generally agreed that the help offered by the Government of Canada was both necessary and useful. That said, some participants expressed disappointment that Ontario had arrived at this point. They questioned the associated expense and felt that Ontario should have better managed resources at the local level. Others felt the pace of vaccinations in the province should be accelerated as part of the response.

COVID-19 Vaccine (All Locations)

Most participants were closely following news and information about the vaccines. Items that caught their attention included:

- News about the AstraZeneca vaccine, including age restrictions for those eligible to receive the vaccine, evidence pertaining to the risk of blood clots (although it was understood to be a low probability), and pronouncements by Canadian public health officials that the vaccine was safe;
- Withholding on the distribution of the Johnson & Johnson vaccine in Canada due to safety issues at the manufacturing facility in the U.S.;
- Adverse reactions and side effects associated with vaccinations; and
- The organization and pacing of vaccinations across Canada, with some participants having heard that vaccines may expire in certain regions before they are used and that the U.S. would be providing Canada with assistance in sourcing additional vaccine supply.

On balance, participants generally felt the Government of Canada was doing a reasonably good job in procuring and distributing the vaccine to the provinces and territories. Positive views were based on the number of agreements that the federal government had signed with a range of vaccine manufacturers and a perception that Canada was doing better than many other countries in securing a large supply of the vaccines. Those who were more critical of the Government of Canada focused on issues such as delayed deliveries of vaccines, the extension of the interval between first and second doses and what some felt was a slow rollout in Canada compared to the U.S. A few were also concerned about Government of Canada recommendations to permit mixing of vaccine doses.

When asked more directly about Canada's performance relative to other countries, most participants were of the opinion that Canada was lagging behind countries such as the U.S., the United Kingdom (U.K.) and Australia in terms of the rate of vaccinations. They attributed this to a slow start but also felt that vaccinations were now picking up. At the same time, participants acknowledged Canada's reliance on external suppliers of vaccines and, as such, many felt that the country was doing as well as could be expected.

Throughout the month of April, as vaccinations progressed across the country, data was shared with participants about the percentage of Canadians who had received at least one COVID-19 vaccine dose (between 25% and 31% depending on the date on which the group was held during the month) and regarding Canada's ranking both internationally (climbing from 17th to 14th over the course of the month) and within the G20 (3rd, after the U.S. and the U.K.). Upon hearing these statistics, the balance of participants were pleasantly surprised by Canada's performance. For a number of participants, this information positively shifted their views on Canada's progress with respect to vaccinations. Regardless of whether participants reacted positively, negatively or with indifference to the information provided, a number of questions and comments arose from this discussion, as follows:

- Is Canada doing better in the rankings, among the G20, because it has extended the interval between doses? And, was this decision made based primarily on medical evidence or for reasons of political expediency?

- Are vaccines being distributed expeditiously (i.e., is Canada building a stockpile of vaccines rather than distributing them to the provinces and getting them in the arms of Canadians?)
- Does the national rate of vaccinations belie some regional discrepancies within Canada?

With the exception of Indigenous participants (from Central and Southern Ontario), most participants were generally aware as to their eligibility to be vaccinated. Some were in the process of booking an appointment, had an appointment scheduled, or had already had their first dose of the vaccine. Those participants who had received their first dose of the vaccine spoke about their experience in mostly positive terms and commented that they felt safe, better protected and relieved. At the same time, most continued to take standard precautions and comply with public health measures. When asked if their behaviours would change following receiving the second dose, some contemplated the prospect of socializing with larger groups of people and of traveling outside Canada. A number indicated they would continue to be cautious given that others may not be vaccinated.

A few participants in select groups were adamant they would not be getting vaccinated, expressing concerns about the rapidity with which the vaccine had been developed, perceived health risks, and the changing nature of information regarding the interval between first and second doses, while others simply felt comfortable waiting as they did not consider themselves to be a priority group at this time. Among this group some were weighing factors such as the efficacy of the vaccines, side effects and long-term consequences, current case counts in their region and the prevalence of the variants. A video which relayed information about the approved vaccines in Canada was shown to these participants and met with considerable skepticism particularly with respect to statements that the vaccines had gone through the same regulatory processes as other vaccines, 'but faster.' They wondered if a speedier process may have resulted in the evaluation team missing important information which could result in adverse effects. Overall, participants were not strongly reassured by the video although some said it helped to explain aspects of the vaccines which they were concerned about and answered a few of their questions. At a minimum, they felt the video had provided direction as to where they could go to get answers.

Some participants were supportive of the decision to delay the second dose of the vaccine, feeling it was advantageous to provide some level of protection against the virus to more Canadians. Others were less convinced and questioned whether this decision reflected poor planning. They also worried that it would adversely affect the efficacy of the vaccine. Ultimately, most participants felt that completing the full round of vaccinations (i.e., two doses) was preferable to delaying the second dose in order to vaccinate more people with the first dose as quickly as possible.

Estimates varied on the anticipated timeline for completing vaccinations for all Canadians who wanted to be vaccinated – the general consensus was that this would occur by late summer or sometime in the fall of 2021. At the same time, many felt that the public health restrictions would need to remain in place for some time to come. Concerns were expressed about the spread of the variants, the need to develop vaccines to boost immunity against the variants, the variable rate of vaccinations across the globe, and the likelihood of reaching herd immunity through vaccinations given vaccine hesitancy. At the same time, a few participants felt some of the measures could be scaled back and that it may only

be necessary to reinstate stricter measures as necessary in hot spots, as cases of COVID-19 or the variants arise.

Travel Restrictions (Rural Quebec, Major Centres Ontario Parents of Young Children, Mid-Size and Major Centres Prairies)

Some participants were aware of travel restrictions including a ban on flights from India and Pakistan, the need to quarantine in a government-approved facility (hotel) upon arrival in Canada, and the requirement to show proof of a negative test for COVID-19 prior to entry. Once provided with a few more details on these requirements, participants expressed a high level of comfort with the restrictions, especially given concerns about the spread of new variants of concern. Several also wanted the current restrictions to be more strictly enforced. A few participants favoured halting all air travel, while others were of the view that the same restrictions should apply to those coming into Canada over land.

The requirement for travelers arriving by air to pay for the mandated 3-night stay in a Government-approved accommodation (hotel) while awaiting the results of their arrival test prompted some debate in both groups. Several participants viewed this as a violation of their rights and thought travelers should be permitted to quarantine in their own homes, to avoid the expense. Most, however, felt the mandatory hotel stay was fair especially as travel for non-essential reasons was viewed as a personal choice. Participants generally placed societal well-being ahead of the rights of any one individual in this particular situation.

On the question of whether the travel restrictions should be reinforced or made tougher, most agreed that further action should be taken – fines for those who do not comply with the mandatory 3-night requirement to quarantine and reinforcing the application of the same restrictions for those coming into Canada by land. A few felt that some exceptions should be considered particularly for those traveling due to a death in the family, for example. At the same time, participants also favoured more testing as a means of monitoring and limiting transmission of the virus by those entering the country.

Ad Testing – Success Check (Calgary and Edmonton Experiencing COVID Fatigue and Riskier Behaviours)

Throughout the pandemic, the federal government has run various advertising campaigns to inform Canadians about COVID-19 and public health measures, as well as to encourage Canadians to continue following these measures. In a focus group with participants from Calgary and Edmonton, participants were shown two 15-second videos developed by the Government of Canada for possible advertising regarding COVID-19. The videos are included in the Detailed Findings and the Appendix.

Overall, participants' initial impressions were not overly-favourable toward the ad. Most felt the message was banal or worn out and had already been widely disseminated via various other previously aired COVID-19 ads. Participants commented that the ad lacked any significant or new information leading to sentiments that the ad campaign would be unlikely to capture the target audiences'

attention. Many felt, as a result, that the campaign would be ineffective and, in particular, not highly influential.

When asked about the main message, participants understood the point that gathering with others indoors and not adhering to public health measures could result in negative consequences for community members beyond their social circle. Although many understood the main takeaway of the ad, they reiterated their belief that this particular message was overused, and thus, no longer impactful in terms of changing Canadians' behaviours.

Budget 2021 (Sudbury and Thunder Bay District Opinion Leaders, Calgary and Edmonton Experiencing COVID Fatigue and Riskier Behaviours, GMA Recipients of First Dose of COVID-19 Vaccine, Central and Southern Ontario Indigenous Peoples, Windsor-Essex, Lambton and Niagara Regions Experiencing COVID Fatigue and Riskier Behaviours, Mid-size and Major Centres Quebec Opinion Leaders, Interior B.C., Rural Quebec, Major Centres Ontario Parents of Young Children, Mid-size and Major Centres Prairies)

Over the course of the month of April, participants engaged in discussions about the federal budget which was released on April 19, 2021.

In groups which were conducted in advance of the budget, participants were asked about their expectations regarding the focus of the budget. Economic recovery and job creation were foremost on their minds, with a particular focus on assistance to small businesses. Others mentioned that they would like or expect to see a focus on assistance to the energy sector, addressing climate change, promoting green technologies and clean industry, and investing in infrastructure. In terms of other issues which participants hoped would be included in the budget, health care, mental health, education, housing and Indigenous issues were cited. In the context of this discussion, some felt that there should be a greater focus on debt and deficit reduction and a few raised concerns about the length of the time between budgets, which some felt reflected a lack of transparency on the part of the Government of Canada.

Participants discussed three options as possible overarching themes or areas of focus for the budget: *Dealing with the COVID-19 crisis*; *Mapping out an economic recovery plan*; and *Mapping out a vision for what life will be like after COVID-19*. Overall, participants continued to state a preference for a focus on economic recovery with many feeling that the pandemic was sufficiently under control at this point to permit the Government of Canada to shift its focus to the health of the economy. Those who preferred to maintain a singular focus on the COVID-19 crisis held the opposite view. They felt the federal government should be accelerating vaccinations, although some did acknowledge that developing a recovery plan and mapping out a post-COVID-19 vision should be undertaken simultaneously.

In further discussion, and when asked specifically about the term economic growth, most interpreted it positively. It was associated with a growing economy, prosperity and employment security. At the same time, several participants commented that they associated the term with big business and with growing disparity and inequality in society.

Several groups were held following the release of Budget 2021. Many participants were aware of the budget announcement, both generally and in terms of specific initiatives, most notably the creation of a national childcare plan. To varying degrees, some were also aware of initiatives pertaining to job creation, small businesses, infrastructure, climate change, housing, Old Age Security benefits, long-term care, a tax on foreign real estate investors and on luxury cars, and a strategy to address domestic violence, among other areas.

Many had not heard much, in detail, about the budget. Nevertheless, impressions were generally positive if somewhat vague, and perceptions were linked mainly to the focus on childcare, families, small business and climate change. That said, a number of participants were concerned about the dollar value associated with the various initiatives and worried about the impact on the debt and deficit. There was a concern that future generations would be burdened with these costs.

Participants were shown a select list of 10 measures included in the Budget 2021 as follows:

- *Creating a national childcare system, with the goal of bringing down fees for regulated child care down to \$10 per day on average;*
- *Increasing regular Old Age Security payments by 10% for seniors 75 years of age or older;*
- *Investing in clean technology, so that Canada can reduce its greenhouse gas emissions;*
- *Expanding the Canadian Workers Benefit to provide more Canadians in low-wage jobs with a sizeable tax refund;*
- *Introducing the new Canada Recovery Hiring Program to encourage businesses to hire employees;*
- *Implementing a tax on non-Canadian owned residential real estate that is considered to be vacant or underused;*
- *Introducing a luxury tax on expensive cars, personal aircrafts, and boats;*
- *Investing to help ensure standards for long-term care are applied and permanent changes are made;*
- *Providing up to 12 additional weeks of Canada Recovery Benefit, meaning it will be available until September 25, 2021. The last 8 weeks will be paid at \$300 per week, down from \$500 per week currently;*
- *Helping homeowners complete deep home retrofits through interest-free loans worth up to \$40,000.*

While most viewed all of the initiatives favourably, creating a national childcare system was among those viewed as the best and most impactful. There was a general consensus that childcare is expensive and placements are scarce. Additionally, it was felt that access to childcare would allow both parents, and specifically women, to remain in the workforce. Some noted that the program would benefit larger families with multiple children in daycare as well as low income households for whom the cost of childcare is particularly onerous. There was, however, some confusion as to how the \$10 a day aspect of the initiative would work and participants questioned whether the federal government would pay childcare centers directly, or whether parents would receive money to put towards care.

The proposed increase to Old Age Security (OAS) was highly supported as many felt that the cost of living had increased for elderly people. At the same time, some felt the increase in the OAS should be extended to everyone over 65 years of age.

Participants reacted enthusiastically to the clean technology initiative as climate change was a concern for many. They saw green technology and clean industry as the future of industry in Canada and around the world. Most had not heard of the Net Zero Accelerator (NZA), but thought this was a good way to incentivize the creation of green technology and cleaner industry. Some remarked that the program could lead to the creation of more domestic jobs in the clean technology sector.

Participants' opinions of the Canadian Workers Benefit were largely positive. Many felt that a tax refund would be a good way of helping to supplement the wages of low income workers. Any concerns raised were based on perceptions that paying workers a living wage, rather than providing a tax refund, may be a better solution.

Participants were generally supportive of the Canada Recovery Hiring Program. Most viewed it as a necessary component of economic recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic. It was felt by many that getting Canadians back to work should be a high priority for the Government of Canada.

Several liked the idea of a tax on non-Canadian owned residential real estate that is left vacant or under-occupied, although many were unsure that the tax would have a direct impact on lowering housing prices.

Participants favoured the idea of a tax on luxury vehicles, although they felt that the \$100,000 price threshold for vehicles at which the tax comes into play was too high and, as such, would not necessarily impact many.

There was a strong consensus among participants that the COVID-19 pandemic had uncovered serious problems in the long-term care system in Canada and that immediate action must be taken to rectify shortcomings in the system. This was a personal issue for a number of participants who felt that upholding a certain standard of care in these facilities was a priority.

Changes to the Canada Recovery Benefit were viewed with mixed reaction although it was selected, alongside national childcare, as one of the options that would have the greatest impact given its relevance to a wide swath of Canadians whose employment has been adversely affected by the pandemic. Some participants were opposed to a reduction in the amount offered over the last eight weeks, feeling that until economic recovery is well underway this may hurt some people and families who are much in need of financial assistance.

Among those who had an opinion on deep home retrofits, reactions were also mixed. Some expressed interest in the program, saying that it would be a good way to encourage Canadians to invest in their homes. A few others were more critical, seeing it as incentivizing Canadians to take on more debt at a time of great uncertainty.

Part II: Other Issues

Mental Health (GMA Recipients of First Dose of COVID-19 Vaccine, Mid-size Centres Atlantic Canada Vaccine Hesitant)

In two groups participants engaged in a wide-ranging discussion on the topic of mental health. Most indicated a reasonably high level of comfort in discussing mental health issues and many spoke about the impact that the pandemic has had, either directly or indirectly, on their own mental health or the mental health of a loved one. The loss of friends and family members had been experienced by some, while others commented on the effect of isolation and the inability to readily access mental health resources and supports. While most participants indicated that their mental health had either remained about the same, or had slightly improved, through the pandemic, they also underscored that both the duration and the fluidity of the situation presented challenges. Most commented that they were trying to maintain a positive attitude and adapt to evolving circumstances throughout the pandemic.

Participants indicated that they would tend to rely more on informal assistance from friends and family members if they were going through a difficult time and needed some support. While a few suggested they would seek out medical advice from a family physician or psychiatrist, the lengthy wait times to access mental health providers was noted as a barrier. Many also expressed comfort accessing information, tips and resources online.

There was a general consensus among participants that hearing from those with lived experience was helpful – it had the effect of reassuring them that they are not alone in facing a mental health challenge and underscored a level of vulnerability that helped to destigmatize the issue. It was felt that any advertising on this topic should leverage those with lived experience as spokespersons as they were more trusted and their stories viewed as more compelling, compared to medical professionals, government officials and celebrities.

Most participants were not aware of any mental health support resources provided by the Government of Canada during the pandemic. This was also the case when asked specifically about Wellness Together Canada, an initiative funded by the Government of Canada to provide free mental health and substance use support for those struggling during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Views on the credibility of the Government of Canada as a resource on mental health issues were mixed – participants in Atlantic Canada had no issue but felt that efforts should be made to increase broader awareness of federal government resources and services, while those in the GMA were of the view that the provinces would be better placed to deliver mental health services based on a more in-depth understanding of the needs and realities of their residents.

When reviewing a list of things the Government of Canada has done to support mental health, two initiatives in particular struck participants in the GMA (the only group in which this discussion was held) as having the potential for a meaningful impact:

- *Increased transfers of \$200M to provinces to expand their virtual care services* – Participants reiterated their view that the provinces could provide more personalized solutions and that this funding would address the critical issue of under-resourcing in mental health services across the country.
- *Investing \$4.9M per year in the Mental Health Prevention Innovation Fund to support the delivery of community-based programs in mental health promotion* – Similar to participants' view that provinces should have an increased role in mental health programs, those supportive of this initiative noted that local community programs would be better suited to address the needs of the community – possibly more so than the provinces.

There was also modest support for *investing \$10M over 5 years in the Mental Health of Black Canadians Fund to support culturally focused mental health programs for Black Canadians*. Participants felt this would be helpful in countering the stigmatization of mental health issues within the black community and, in particular, in addressing issues that have arisen as a result of police brutality and racism affecting marginalized communities.

Indigenous Issues (Central and Southern Ontario Indigenous Peoples)

Indigenous participants identified a series of issues deemed to be important to Indigenous communities. Uppermost on their list was the issue of clean drinking water on reserves. Other issues put forward by participants pertained to abolishing the *Indian Act*, addressing Indigenous treaty rights with respect to land and resource ownership, providing support and hope to Indigenous people, and addressing the high price of food in Northern communities.

While there was some acknowledgement that the Government of Canada had effectively raised the profile of Indigenous issues in Canada, participants were disappointed in a general lack of progress. They were not optimistic that real change would occur in the near term and some felt it would take at least several generations before they would see some progress.

When specifically asked what the Government of Canada could improve on, participants reiterated prioritizing the issue of clean water in addition to ending the legal challenge of the ruling to compensate First Nations children taken into foster care. Others felt there were opportunities to further enhance the engagement and inclusion of Indigenous voices in the federal government's decision-making process.

On the topic of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) and the Government of Canada's response, there was minimal awareness. Once participants were informed that the Government of Canada had recently introduced legislation to implement UNDRIP, few were convinced that much would change as a result. While most were generally supportive of the initiative, the 14 years that has elapsed since the UN adopted UNDRIP in 2007 gave many pause to believe that very little of a positive and concrete nature would occur in the near term.

The issue of clean drinking water on reserves was discussed in more detail. Participants expressed considerable disappointment that the original deadline which had been set by the federal government

had already passed and that some 60+ reserves in Canada continued to face boil-water advisories. Most were unaware that a new timeline for lifting all long-term drinking water advisories had been announced or that the federal government was making additional investments to end long-term water advisories and cover the cost of ongoing support for daily operations and maintenance of water infrastructure on reserves. Participants remained skeptical of resolving the issue within the new timeframe. In addition, they emphasized the need for accountability and stressed that access to clean drinking water is a fundamental right.

Participants were also unaware of the federal government's plan to launch a website, with the assistance of an Indigenous firm, to track progress on lifting drinking water advisories which would include a web page for each affected community showing a detailed plan and progress reports. While supportive of the accountability aspect of the website, participants were concerned that a lack of Internet access on Indigenous reserves would render this tool useless for most of those affected by this issue.

This led to a wider discussion about infrastructure issues in general affecting Indigenous communities with participants agreeing that Indigenous communities need both access to the Internet and access to clean drinking water.

Housing (Mid-size Centres Atlantic Canada Vaccine Hesitant, Yukon and Northwest Territories Recipients of First Dose of COVID-19 Vaccine, Windsor-Essex, Lambton and Niagara Regions Experiencing COVID Fatigue and Riskier Behaviours, Mid-size and Major Centres Quebec Opinion Leaders, Interior B.C.)

Issues related to housing and the housing market in various regions were discussed in several groups, including participants' awareness and views on current and proposed federal government housing initiatives. Participants agreed that housing prices had increased over the past year and that several factors were responsible for this trend. Migration from larger to smaller centres, inadequate supply of small starter homes for first-time home buyers, increasing costs of home building materials, and an influx of foreign investors were all seen as contributing to a tighter supply of homes within the Canadian real estate market and to increasing housing prices. In a number of groups several participants made the point that increased housing prices were also having an adverse impact on renters.

The conversation with participants in the Yukon and Northwest Territories (NWT) flagged a number of additional issues specific to housing in the North, including: a lack of adequate, affordable housing options, particularly low income housing and shelters for those who are homeless, overcrowding, and an anticipated influx of workers into the region as a result of increased mining activity which some thought would reduce the overall inventory of housing and put upward pressure on housing prices in the Yukon in particular. Participants in this group suggested that initiatives were also needed specifically to address the housing crisis for Indigenous people in the North.

A few participants were aware of the first-time home buyers incentive. Once provided with some information about this particular federal government initiative, most reacted positively as they felt the

plan would provide much needed support for first-time home buyers who might otherwise not be able to afford their own home. At the same time, some worried about the aspect of the plan which requires the homeowner to repay CMHC 5% of the sale price upon the sale of the home. And, a few participants remarked that the program, as it now stands, would likely benefit only a small portion of those looking to get into the housing market.

Reaction to the idea of a foreign buyers tax was equally positive and some felt that the tax should be extended to foreign owners of AirBnB properties and summer homes in Canada. There were, however, some questions as to whether the net effect of this program would be beneficial as it was felt that it would dampen activity among a specific group of prospective home buyers which would disadvantage sellers in some regions. Moreover, a few participants felt that it did not sufficiently address affordable housing which they viewed as the real issue, rather than simple the availability of housing.

Few participants had heard about the mortgage stress test. Once it was explained, most responded favourably although there was acknowledgement that some homeowners would be disappointed if they were unable to meet the threshold for the test. On balance, however, participants felt it was better to reduce the likelihood of a homeowner defaulting on their mortgage. When told that the Government of Canada had recently announced that, as of June 1, 2021, loan applicants – regardless of the mortgage rate they have been offered by their lender – will need to prove they can manage an interest rate of 5.25% before getting approved for funding, up from the previous benchmark of 4.79%, participants accepted the proposed change. Most felt this adjustment was acceptable and reflected current realities.

The final part of the discussion on housing issues focused on a number of measures in the recent Budget related to affordable housing, including the acceleration of the creation of new units, support for the repair of transitional housing for women and children fleeing violence, the conversion of vacant commercial property into rental housing, the creation of affordable housing units for people with accessibility challenges, direct financial assistance for low-income women and children fleeing violence to help with their rent and for community housing providers to deliver long-term housing for vulnerable people. Participants reacted positively to all of these proposals, seeing merit in a focus on supporting housing for vulnerable and marginalized groups.

At the same time, there were concerns that these proposals did not directly address the issue of affordable housing. Others questioned how these initiatives would help the average person to buy a new home. Some participants suggested that the Government of Canada should focus on building smaller dwellings and/or assuming the role of lender to first-time home buyers in place of the banks. Participants also advocated for a more direct emphasis on renting as a springboard to home ownership (e.g., rent-to-own programs). They felt that none of these programs directly addressed the aspirations of many people, including vulnerable Canadians, to transition from renters to homeowners.

Local Issues and Priorities (Sudbury and Thunder Bay District Opinion Leaders, Yukon and Northwest Territories Recipients of First Dose of COVID-19 Vaccine)

Participants residing in northern Ontario (Sudbury and Thunder Bay District) felt that mining and forestry were the most important industries, followed by tourism. It was added that health care and education were also important sectors in the region, however, they were viewed to be below the others in priority.

Participants in the Yukon and Northwest Territories group had a broader view of what the most important sector was in the region when compared to those in northern Ontario. While mining was similarly seen as the most important sector, a longer overall list emerged including:

- Aviation;
- Tourism;
- Hospitality;
- The “government” in general;
- Health care; and
- Education.

When asked about the mining sector and support from the Government of Canada, participants were unfamiliar and responded that they had not heard of any Government of Canada supports for the sector. When asked what the federal government should do to support the sector, participants responded with doubt as to whether the sector needed any support.

Participants residing in the Yukon and Northwest Territories were more familiar with some of the Government of Canada’s actions in support of the mining industry. Specifically, they referred to quarantines having been lifted for mining workers to help them getting in and out of mining camps, although there may have been some confusion regarding this measure and whether the decision was undertaken by the territorial government rather than the federal government. When asked what more the Government of Canada could do to help the mining industry in the region it was suggested that there could be more support for trades training, which would help prepare local people (including Indigenous) for employment in the mining sector.

There was however a vigorous and focused discussion of infrastructure needs in northern Ontario, and these were seen to be the public priorities in the region. Highway widening and broadband internet were seen as major issues for participants.

Unlike northern Ontario, housing was viewed as the top infrastructure priority in the Yukon and Northwest Territories. There was seen to be an insufficient supply of housing in the far north, leading to significant overcrowding.

In addition to housing, mentions of other infrastructure issues included:

- Water quality and access to clean drinking water – this was viewed as an urgent issue, especially in First Nations’ communities.

- Power shortages – it was seen as unacceptable that some communities still operated on diesel generators for electricity generation.
- Telecommunication networks – the poor quality of internet service was noted with an acknowledgment that the federal government had already committed to making improvements.
- Airports and runways – participants commented that this had been a longstanding issue and that the federal government had pledged assistance.

Out-of-Status Workers (Rural Quebec, Major Centres Ontario Parents of Young Children, Mid-size and Major Centres Prairies)

The topic of out-of-status workers was discussed in three groups in April, focusing on participants' familiarity with the term and their views on offering them a path to permanent residency and citizenship in Canada.

Many were at least somewhat familiar with the term 'out-of-status' or 'undocumented' workers, although some had not heard it in use. The general assumption was that these were people working illegally in Canada and that, while they may have arrived with legal documentation in hand, for a variety of reasons their papers had lapsed. At the same time, there was some degree of confusion with the category of workers classified as temporary foreign workers – several participants presumed out-of-status workers were primarily seasonal and working in the agricultural sector, for example. Participants ventured that out-of-status workers could comprise a relatively small portion of the workforce to quite a large share – between 35,000 to a million – although many were unsure what the actual numbers might be.

When asked if out-of-status workers should be given a path to permanent residency and citizenship participants held mixed to more favourable views. Relatively few were outright opposed to this proposal. Participants had some empathy for these workers – they viewed them as having arrived in Canada with the appropriate documentation, taken on demanding work as labourers and tradespeople, and as having paid taxes. Others saw them as operating illegally, and therefore questioned the likelihood that they would become upstanding citizens, and as "queue-jumpers" disrupting an existing legal process towards citizenship. A few participants felt that each case should be considered on its own merits.

As to whether an economic argument could be made in support of providing a path to permanent residency and citizenship for out-of-status workers, many participants disputed this. Some did not accept that there were labour shortages. Others felt the real issue was unethical employers taking advantage of these workers to increase their profitability by suppressing wages. The view was that more could be done to bring these businesses, small businesses in particular, out of the underground economy by lowering tax rates and/or adjusting the regulatory regime. A number of participants could not see a way to offering permanent residency to this group based simply on the principle of fairness. By contrast, those few who upheld the economic argument felt that it would be advantageous to these workers and to Canada to set them up as long-term taxpayers, contributing to the funding of Canada's social safety net, specifically health care. Several also took the position that Canada's record of relatively high annual levels of immigration meant that taking this step would not

put undue pressure on Canadian infrastructure or social programs and that the economic benefits would outweigh any costs.

MORE INFORMATION

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