Transparency, Trust and Citizen Engagement

What Canadians Are Saying About Accountability

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CPRN is a not-for-profit policy think-tank based in Ottawa. It has been using public dialogue for a number of years as a means to involve citizens more directly in research and public policy discussions. Past projects include the long-term management of used nuclear fuel, the Ontario budget strategy, the kind of Canada we want, health care reform, quality of life indicators, Canada's children, aging and the society we want. You can obtain further information about CPRN and its work in public involvement and other policy areas at www.cprn.org
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FOREWORD

It seems that every article we read about governments these days talks about accountability. In this sense, the media is reflecting what CPRN has been hearing directly from Canadians in our citizens’ dialogues.

Over the past two years, CPRN has engaged over 1600 Canadians in four dialogues about subjects ranging from health care to our social contract to Ontario’s budget to managing nuclear waste over the long term. Participants were randomly recruited from all walks of life, reflecting Canadian society.

In all four dialogues, as people had a chance to think hard about the issues involved and share different perspectives with each other, accountability emerged as a consistent theme and a core value. These participants provide rich insight into how Canadians think about accountability and what their expectations are.

In all cases, their views on accountability were linked to their faltering trust in governments and others in positions of power. They call for greater transparency in decision making and greater inclusion of the public in helping to make those decisions. Canadians are not asking for direct democracy – they don’t want to displace the politicians. But, they do want a space where their voices can be heard, along with stakeholders and experts.

This paper, prepared by Julia Abelson and François-Pierre Gauvin from the McMaster University Centre for Health Economics and Policy Analysis, in collaboration with Mary Pat MacKinnon and Judy Watling of CPRN’s Public Involvement Network, gives readers a sound assessment of citizens’ key messages to decision makers and offers guidance for acting on their messages. It offers valuable insight for decision makers to better understand how Canadians see their role in the accountability equation, and one path to help rebuild trust between citizens and their governments.

I want to thank the authors for their thoughtful analysis. It provides food for thought for people in positions of power and trust in all parts of society, and it gives new energy to CPRN in its pioneering work to develop new ways to give unaffiliated citizens a voice in public affairs.

Judith Maxwell
December 2004
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The expectation that governments will be accountable to their citizens is a cornerstone of democracy. As the public’s faith, trust and confidence in elected governments and public servants declines and traditional government-citizen accountability mechanisms have weakened, calls for new and improved accountability relationships signal a democracy in need of renewal. These calls are fuelled by, and extend to the private sector, where corporate misbehavior has led citizens to expect greater corporate-shareholder, corporate-government and corporate-community accountability.

Leaders in both public and private institutions in Canada have recognized the need to improve their record on accountability, and a variety of initiatives are underway. In this paper, we examine what Canadians are saying about accountability and offer a reference point to decision makers – particularly those in government – to assess whether current efforts to improve accountability will meet Canadians’ expectations. We draw on the findings of four recently completed citizens’ dialogues conducted by the Canadian Policy Research Networks (CPRN) on the future of health care, the kind of Canada Canadians want to see in the future, the Ontario budget strategy 2004-2008 and the long-term management of used nuclear fuel in Canada. In total, the four dialogues have engaged more than 1600 randomly selected Canadians since 2002.

The resounding message from our review is a re-affirmation of the role of government as guardian of the public interest, on the condition that citizens are given an active role in informing decisions and accountability is improved. For the most part, citizens do not differentiate between the roles of public servants and elected officials when it comes to their expectations for accountability, transparency, and ethical behavior. However, most of their comments are directed toward elected officials. It is the accountability relationship between democratically elected representatives and citizens that is the most immediate for them and where they can express their views with the greatest impact.

Accountability was not seen by dialogue participants as an end in itself, but as the means for re-establishing citizens’ trust in government. And while no explicit definition of accountability emerged from the dialogues, participants’ views about accountability were inextricably linked to three key concepts: transparency, trust, and citizen engagement, all of which lie at the core of a healthy democracy.
Calls for greater transparency went hand in hand with calls for accountability in all four dialogues and were linked to a deepening mistrust of government’s ability to manage taxpayers’ money efficiently and responsibly. Citizens want to hold the reins more tightly on government spending; they want to know how public funds are being spent and what society is getting in return, and they are reluctant to pay more taxes until they have evidence that public resources are being properly managed. Transparency in and of itself will not rekindle the public’s trust, but rather needs to be pursued with careful consideration of what types of information are needed, for what purposes, by whom and for whom.

The public’s growing mistrust of government has prompted calls for independent oversight bodies to protect the public interest in a variety of areas. Before moving down this path, thoughtful consideration must be given to the implications of such organizations for government’s ability to strengthen its accountability relationships with citizens and for renewing public confidence in government. The presence of third-party agencies has the potential to weaken direct government-citizen accountability in exchange for the provision of greater autonomy to third-party agencies. How would independent agencies be held to account if they were perceived by the public as not looking after the public interest? How would we avoid simply shifting or broadening the lack of trust to include these institutions as well? Who would they ultimately report to? These questions must be carefully considered and discussed openly as future directions for improving accountability are determined, while taking very seriously the underlying reasons that drive calls for more trustworthy institutions. Citizens are a key part of the accountability equation, and they need to be included along with elected officials, public servants and others in defining accountability. We need to understand citizens’ expectations of the people, institutions and mechanisms that support accountability.

Participants in all four dialogues asked for opportunities to become more involved in the public realm. They saw this not only as their right, but their responsibility. They are prepared to assign themselves a greater role in the accountability equation, which involves not only holding others to account through sanction and corrective measures, but actively contributing to decisions. Citizen engagement is not merely an input to or a product of strengthened accountability, but a form of accountability in its own right.

Based on what Canadians in the four dialogues have said, they are not seeking direct democracy on specific policy issues. They are looking for meaningful opportunities to influence decision making, and complement, not replace, the voices of experts and other stakeholders.
Canadians are no longer content to turn things over to their elected representatives for four or five years – they want a space between elections to give their views and advice.

Citizens are also looking for accessible and credible information to support their efforts to contribute constructively to public policy processes. Governments need to assess the relevance and quality of information they currently provide and the means by which it is made available. Democratic renewal initiatives currently underway at the federal level and in a number of provinces offer the opportunity to build into our institutions meaningful mechanisms that engage citizens in using this information for a purpose.

Improving the public’s trust and confidence in citizen-government accountability will require substantial efforts and should proceed on multiple, related fronts, including being more transparent about how and why decisions are made, particularly around financial management. More meaningful involvement of citizens, on a routine basis and with a clearly established purpose, is also of paramount importance and needs to be supported by credible information that reflects reality.

Citizens’ calls for improved accountability through greater transparency and citizen engagement are a symptom of their mistrust of officials and institutions. Efforts to strengthen citizen-government accountability relationships should be pursued carefully to promote governance arrangements that result in more rather than less trustful relationships between citizens and governors.
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We also wish to acknowledge the Treasury Board Secretariat of Canada for providing funding support for an earlier and shorter version of this research report.
1 INTRODUCTION

The expectation that governments will be accountable to citizens is a cornerstone of democracy. Calls for new and improved accountability relationships between governments and citizens are a sign of democracy in need of renewal. There is growing recognition that despite the considerable resources governments are devoting to the design of accountability and public reporting procedures, these efforts are not translating into higher levels of citizen confidence and trust among citizens. Rather, citizens’ confidence in public institutions continues to decline as does their participation in the electoral system. Voter turnout during federal elections has dropped precipitously from 75% in 1988 to 60.5% in 2004 and is even lower for younger voters (Elections Canada, 2004.) The reasons for this decline are multifaceted but one perceived contributor is that governments are not adequately meeting the accountability expectations of citizens. This perception has been reinforced by a number of high profile events in recent years.

Citizens are also looking for new ways to define democracy – ways that recognize their desire to play a more active role in decisions that affect them at the individual and societal levels. Reforming traditional political institutions will not, on its own, solve the problems of voter turnout unless that reform includes a space for citizens. There are “…low levels of trust and confidence in government and their representatives to advance and respond to the views, preferences and interests of Canadians overall; and more generally, the pervasive sense of a disjuncture between citizens and their elected representatives in the House of Commons” (Aucoin, Turnbull, 2003: 437). In his recent paper on Addressing the Accountability Deficit, Tom Axworthy writes, “We will not cure the “structural” democratic deficit until we eradicate the accountability deficit.” (Axworthy, 2004)

Governments have picked up on the public’s dissatisfaction and have identified strategies for improving government accountability to citizens. In the February 2004 Speech from The Throne, the federal government stated its commitment to better engage Parliament with Canadians:

“We must re-engage citizens in Canada’s political life. And this has to begin in the place where it should mean the most — in Parliament — by making Parliament work better. That means reconnecting citizens with their Members of Parliament. That means a new partnership with provinces and territories, focused on the interests of Canadians. That also means greater transparency, ethical standards, and financial accountability in how we govern.”

(Governor General, Speech from the Throne, February, 2004)
The October 2004 Speech from the Throne of the minority Liberal government gave only a general reference to this earlier commitment but made a new commitment to “examine the need and option for reform of our democratic institutions, including electoral reform” (Governor General, Speech from the Throne, October, 2004). This commitment was strengthened in accepting an Opposition amendment to the Speech from the Throne that instructed the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs “to recommend a process that engages citizens and parliamentarians in an examination of our electoral system with a review of all options” (Hansard, October 18, 2004). At the provincial level, British Columbia is well advanced in its efforts to bring in electoral reform, led by the work of the BC Citizens Assembly. 1 On November 18, 2004, the Premier of Ontario announced the creation of a citizens’ assembly on electoral reform and a citizens’ jury to look at political spending and contribution limits. New Brunswick and Quebec are also engaged in electoral reform initiatives.

The Auditor General has repeatedly identified accountability and public trust as an issue that needs to be addressed, including the recommendation that “government seek the views of Parliament and the public on how to reconcile new governance arrangements with accountability to Parliament” (Auditor General 1999:5). The 2003 and 2004 federal budgets, the Clerk of the Privy Council, provincial governments (several have established democratic renewal offices), academics and public opinion research firms have all reinforced the need to examine and improve the way governments exercise and define accountability and the means by which they are held to account.

If the ultimate goal is to improve the public’s trust and confidence in their governments, citizens need to have a voice in defining accountability, the roles, responsibilities and relationships among all parties involved and in determining what mechanisms are needed and acceptable to uphold that trust. Citizens need to be included along with elected officials, public servants and others in defining accountability and articulating their expectations of the people, institutions and mechanisms that support it.

The purpose of this paper is to provide a vehicle for airing citizens’ voices on this critical subject by summarizing what Canadians have been saying about accountability over the last few years, and to encourage more in-depth dialogue with Canadians about accountability. Four recently completed citizens’ dialogues conducted by the Canadian Policy Research Networks (CPRN) provide a useful starting point to examine Canadians’ views about accountability:

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1 At time of writing, the BC Citizens’ Assembly on Electoral Reform is finalizing their report that recommends a proportional single transferable vote system. The final question will be put to a referendum for BC voters in the next provincial election, to be held May 17, 2005.
• **Citizens’ Dialogue on the Future of Health Care in Canada (2002)**
Throughout the winter of 2002, CPRN, in partnership with Viewpoint Learning Inc., organized a series of citizens’ dialogues on behalf of the Commission on the Future of Health Care in Canada (Romanow Commission). The dialogues gathered 500 randomly selected Canadians in 12 locations across the country to discuss their vision for the health care system and how to develop a plan of action to realize this vision (Maxwell et al., CPRN, 2002).

• **Citizens’ Dialogue on Canada’s Future (2002)**
In the Fall of 2002, CPRN, in partnership with Viewpoint Learning Inc., organized a series of citizens’ dialogues to understand how Canadians view their relationships with each other and with the state in the 21st century. The dialogues involved more than 400 randomly selected Canadians in different locations across the country who discussed the kind of Canada they want in the future, and the roles that governments, markets, families, and communities should play to realize that vision (MacKinnon et al., CPRN, 2003).

From February to March 2004, CPRN held a series of citizens’ dialogues as part of the Ontario Government’s *Delivering Change: Budget Town Hall 2004* consultation process. More than 250 randomly selected Ontarians came together in 6 locations across the province to discuss the values and principles that should guide the 2004-2008 budget strategy (Nolté et al., CPRN, 2004).

• **Citizens’ Dialogue on the Management of Used Nuclear Fuel in Canada (2004)**
From January to March 2004, more than 460 people participated in a dialogue organized by CPRN as part of the Nuclear Waste Management Organization’s (NWMO) efforts to better understand citizens’ values with respect to the long-term management of used nuclear fuel. Dialogue sessions were held in 12 locations across the country. The results of this dialogue are being used by NWMO to inform its further work in assessing options and making a recommendation to the Minister of Natural Resources Canada in 2005 on how best to manage Canada's used nuclear fuel in a manner that is environmentally responsible, socially acceptable, technically sound and economically feasible (Watling et al, CPRN, 2004).

Although none of the dialogues were designed to explicitly address the subject of accountability, it emerged as a major theme across all four, prompting our interest in examining the dialogue participants’ discussion of this topic in more depth. In addition to these dialogues, our synthesis also included a review of relevant public opinion polls, EKOS’ *Rethinking Citizen Engagement Study*, recent contributions to a CPRN commissioned series of papers on Health Care Accountability and several recent papers related to governance and democratic reform (Cameron, 2002; 2004; Aucoin and Turnbull, 2003).
THE CENTRAL MESSAGE

“Citizens expect all institutions and individuals to be ethical in their behaviour, to be honest in action and word, and to be open about their actions. Accountability and transparency are seen as the essential underpinnings for trust – in public institutions, as well as community and business organizations. These demands reflect a more educated, aware population, which is not prepared to defer to authority. In effect, the standard for good governance has been raised.”

(MacKinnon et al., 2003:36-37)

The resounding message that emerges from the CPRN dialogues and the other sources reviewed is a re-affirmation of the role of government as guardian of the public interest, but on the condition that citizens are given an active role in informing decisions and that accountability is improved. They expect governments to use taxpayers’ money responsibly and to demonstrate “good management” practices. Whether they are discussing the future of their country, their health care system, provincial budgeting processes or managing used nuclear fuel, Canadians are seeking the same assurances from all levels of government: that they will 1) spend taxpayers’ money as though it were their own; 2) provide better and more accessible information on how public funds are being used and what outcomes result from public expenditures; 3) keep the promises that they make; and 4) provide independent, non-political oversight to monitor whether governments are fulfilling their responsibilities and provide citizens with trustworthy information – especially with respect to health, safety, the environment and the sound management of resources.

These calls are fuelled by, and extend to, the private sector where corporate misbehaviour has led citizens to expect greater corporate-shareholder, corporate-government and corporate-community accountability (Canadian Democracy and Corporate Accountability Commission, 2004). But citizens’ preoccupations are clearly with government accountability to citizens. They are frustrated and disappointed with unethical behaviour of public office holders. Underlying their calls for accountability and transparency in the use and reporting of public funds, decisions and actions, however, is a much more fundamental cry for governments and other parties to re-kindle the public trust in institutions that has eroded since the 1980s. A key element of this re-kindling process is the demand for more direct citizen involvement in public policy-making, on a more routine basis, and between elections. In short, Canadians’ views about accountability are consistent and coherent: they are inextricably linked to transparency, trust and citizen engagement, all of which lie at the core of a healthy democracy. We use subsequent sections of the paper to expand on these points.
3  ADDING CONCEPTUAL CLARITY TO THE MESSAGE

While dialogue participants articulate a clear overarching message about the need for accountability, details about how they defined accountability, their preferences for specific mechanisms, and approaches and procedures for improving accountability are less clear. This is not surprising given that the four dialogues did not focus on accountability per se. To provide a conceptual guide for our synthesis, we have drawn on two key sources: the work of Aucoin and Heintzman (2000) and work recently completed for CPRN’s Health Care Accountability series. Aucoin and Heintzman (2000) identify three key functions of accountability that are relevant to our discussion. These functions include: 1) assurances that public resources are being allocated to serve the public interest; 2) the promotion of learning for improved governance and public management; and 3) control for the abuse and misuse of public authority. Building on these functions, Fooks and Maslove (2004) in their background paper for CPRN’s Health Care Accountability series identify six core elements that underpin most definitions of accountability (Table 1).

**TABLE 1, SIX ELEMENTS EMBEDDED IN THE CONCEPT OF ACCOUNTABILITY**
(from Fooks and Maslove, 2004: 3-4)

| Establishment of a Relationship: | creating accountability requires a relationship between those making decisions and those who are affected by those decisions. The accountability process is based on a connection between the two. |
|--------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------
| Agreed Upon Defined Responsibility: | accountability requires the individual or organization being accountable has a defined responsibility to make decisions that has been agreed to and can carry out an action. |
| Delegate or Confer Authority: | accountability requires that those with the authority to take action can delegate or confer it to someone else. This is particularly important for governments who regularly delegate authority for the delivery of social programs. |
| Answerability: | accountability requires that those who are accountable will answer for decisions made and actions taken. This can be, but is not always, a public accounting. |
| Performance: | accountability requires that the accounting for action includes an element of judgment about performance. |
| Sanction/correction: | accountability requires a process for correction if expectations are not met or performance is deemed to be sub-optimal. |
The concept of accountability described here is a helpful guide but it may overlook certain nuances such as the potential to be answerable but not fully accountable. For example, government decision makers are answerable and accountable to the public, but they can also be answerable to those to whom they have delegated their authority, for the impact of decisions that could directly affect their ability to fulfill their mandate. We use these key accountability functions and features throughout the paper as a reference point for our discussion of what Canadians are saying about accountability.
4 DECODING THE MESSAGE

Sometimes the frequency with which a message is conveyed can be as compelling as the message itself. In the cases that we reviewed, accountability and the related concepts of transparency, trust, responsibility, relationships and citizen engagement were repeated over and over, either in the quotes from dialogue participants or in the dialogue summary report. The consistency and centrality of this message is striking given the range and diversity of subjects covered in the dialogues and given that accountability was not explicitly addressed in any of the dialogue themes. In the Romanow dialogues, accountability was identified as one of eight “health care values” that formed the basis of citizens’ recommendations for a revised health care contract among citizens, and between citizens and the health care system, namely governments, managers, and providers. The accountability value was defined as follows: “everyone is accountable for how they use or affect the system; decision making and spending are transparent” (Maxwell et al., 2002:15). In the Canada’s Future dialogues, accountability was the second most frequently cited theme (of six overarching themes) highlighted in participants’ closing statements. Similarly, while considering different approaches to developing the provincial budget, Ontario Budget dialogue participants emphasized accountability along with efficiency, fairness, shared responsibility, conservation and balance as principles that should guide the budget process. Accountability in this dialogue, was defined as “government should be accountable, ethical and transparent” (Nolté et al., 2004: vi). In the Used Nuclear Fuel dialogue, participants called for increased accountability and transparency in decision making and monitoring. They want to know if safety and security standards are being met or not, and they want full disclosure of management and financial information (Watling et al, 2004:24).

Accountability Relationships: Who should be Accountable to Whom?

Canadians are primarily concerned about the lapses in government accountability to citizens. However, they also underlined the importance of enhancing accountability relationships of other societal actors such as those between private corporations, citizens and government; and between different levels of government. They also recognized the need for citizens themselves to take greater responsibility for their actions and be more accountable to society as a whole through their enhanced involvement in the public policy process, not only through the ballot box (MacKinnon et al., 2003).
“I am interested in accountability – and not just on the part of the government, but the people who use the money given by the government and by individuals like myself who use the services.”

(2004 Budget Dialogue, Windsor participant)

“We need to persuade Canadians to be more accountable for their health. When I think back I know lots of people who could have made different choices and reduced costs of the care they now need.”

(2002 Romanow Dialogue, Ottawa participant)

“…the one thing I really want is accountability on this issue….the stakes are so high with this …that I think there should be real accountability and real infrastructure put into it so that the people do have a say in what’s going on and we can solve the problem.”

(2004 Used Nuclear Fuel Dialogue, Toronto participant)

Recent high profile cases of corporate misbehaviour have raised the ire of Canadians who want governments to hold corporations accountable for their actions and to ensure that governments do not permit corporate interests to override the public interest. While they see the private sector serving the public interest as well as private interests, they do not have “confidence in the ability of markets to self-regulate when issues of environment, health and safety are at stake. They are clear that governments have a fundamental responsibility that cannot and must not be delegated to markets whenever public health or safety could be endangered” (MacKinnon et al, 2003: vii). This view was reinforced in the Used Nuclear Fuel dialogue. Citizens hold the federal government ultimately responsible for safety and security and for acting in the broad public interest, taking into account the advice of citizens, experts and stakeholders (Watling et al, 2004: 24).

In the health sector, citizens focused on the need for clearer accountabilities among and between patients, providers, and governments, but they also suggested the need to hold industry to account for their negative impacts on health care needs. Moreover, concerns about drug companies’ undue influence over drug costs and prescribing practices prompted calls for more transparent relationships between physicians and pharmaceutical companies and for more transparency about the types and extent of their research and development activities in Canada. The processes through which new products are accepted into publicly covered systems and through which their prices are set were also considered to warrant more openness (Maxwell et al., 2002:46).
“We need to look at the issue of prescription drugs at the broader level of drug companies’ accountability – the role that they play in the development of drug patent laws. They are the beneficiaries of that. So I think the federal government has to be involved at that level as well.”

(2002 Romanow Dialogue, Toronto participant)

Role of the Media

Participants in the Romanow dialogue, called for greater accountability on the part of the media, to report more balanced perspectives on how the health care system is performing and what citizens are saying (Maxwell et al., 2002:48). While the media was not an explicit subject of discussion in the Canada’s Future dialogue, participants “expressed serious concerns about the media’s failure to reflect the opinions and views of citizens and the implications of this gap….They cautioned politicians and governments not to assume that the media provides an accurate portrayal of citizen views, and asked why the media reflects such different perspectives from their own. Citizens questioned the extent to which citizens’ views are truly reflected in the media” (MacKinnon et al 2003: 30).

“…the consensus here seems to be very different (from what’s) portrayed in the media and so government should really, really be listening to real people in groups such as this and not assuming that what they read in the newspapers which are increasingly owned by very special interests are the views of Canadians…”

(2002 Canada’s Future Dialogue, Ottawa participant)

Citizens recognized that much of the information they have about public policy issues is generated by the media, and they called on them to be a responsible and independent source of information. In the Used Nuclear Fuel dialogue, citizens were surprised how little information was in the public eye on this issue, and saw a role for media in providing information and raising awareness among the general population about this and related issues.

“I have seen the commercials on TV…that talk about how good and safe nuclear power is. So maybe the public education should have an element of education about the costs of nuclear energy and the trade-offs and the things we have to deal with while we’re enjoying the electricity.”

(2004 Used Nuclear Fuel Dialogue, Ottawa participant)

There is room for more civic journalism in Canada, to present issues in a factual, objective and thoughtful manner, representing the broad diversity of perspectives on any given issue, rather than polarized extremes. Media could be an enabler of a more informed public who
would in turn be better able to fully engage in our democracy. The role of the media must be part of the discussion surrounding the need for accountability mechanisms and reform of our democratic institutions.

Achieving Accountability through Transparency and Public Accounting

As illustrated in the previous section, calls by the public for greater transparency go hand in hand with calls for accountability and often represent the core element of accountability that Canadians are seeking. In Table 1, this is depicted through the *answerability* dimension which requires those who are accountable to answer for their decisions and actions. Transparency was a key theme in all four dialogue processes. Participants in the Romanow dialogue called for improvements to the management of the health system, to be achieved largely through increased transparency:

- **Greater transparency.** Citizens want to know where the money is going. They want to see regular reports for their region and jurisdiction that show how the system is being used and how the money is spent.

- **Earmark taxes for health care.** To further increase transparency, citizens want to be sure that any additional taxes for health care will be spent on health care.

- **Create an auditor general for health.** Citizens want documentation of value for money, and of how their jurisdiction is doing in relation to its past performance and to other jurisdictions. (Maxwell et al., 2002: viii)

Further exploration is needed to better understand the potential benefits and drawbacks of ideas such as earmarking tax dollars or establishing a legislative audit function by policy area.

Participants in the *Canada’s Future* Dialogue were also insistent on the link between transparency and accountability. Governments “need to provide information to make their own activities more transparent to citizens, in order to promote accountability and to enable citizens to determine how well the political system and civil society is functioning…” (MacKinnon et al., 2003: xii).

In the *Used Nuclear Fuel* dialogue, participants expressed the view that the low public awareness of the issue was due in part to secrecy around all nuclear issues. They are not
willing to trust simply being told that everything is safe. In order to have confidence that the used fuel is being managed safely, they want meaningful information to be easily available.

“Well you always did hide the fact that you had the problem so that education aspect does become very much in the nuclear waste solution...They've always refused to talk about it. We have it, it's safe, you don't have to worry about it.”

(2004 Used Nuclear Fuel Dialogue, Toronto participant)

“Accountability – the first one was financial accountability. It should be understandable to the general public and ...it should be an ongoing thing. It should be generally accountable as well, so we must meet safety standards, we must have ongoing testing and there must be public disclosure regarding what is being found, what is being done, so on and so forth.”

(2004 Used Nuclear Fuel Dialogue, Toronto participant)

Government Spending: The “Lightning Rod” of Accountability

Dialogue participants articulated profound concerns about accountability in their discussions of government spending and public management. In all four dialogue processes held since early 2002, Canadians have communicated their loss of confidence and deepening mistrust of governments’ ability to manage taxpayers’ money efficiently and responsibly. Citizens were speaking to three elements of accountability: answerability, performance and sanction/correction (see Table 1). Citizens want to hold the reins more tightly on government spending; they want to know how public funds are being spent and what society is getting in return for these public expenditures. They are reluctant to pay more taxes until they have evidence that public resources are being properly managed. These conditions apply to domestic as well as international aid spending where citizens are also seeking greater assurance that international aid "really gets to the people in need" (MacKinnon et al., 2003: 41).

“I've seen a lot of misspending and a lack of accountability. And because of that I don't have a lot of confidence in the government today. Not only provincially but federally. So if I knew there was some accountability, I wouldn't mind spending more money for the services I was being provided.”

(2002 Romanow Dialogue, Regina participant)
“If we trust our financial minister, we’ll be willing to pay the taxes. But how many do? And I personally believe that proper financial accountability goes a long way to proper government. And as you know, we can twist and turn a financial accounting to any picture that you want to present. Now we need to have more stringent policies in accounting in order to take care of that part.”

(2004 Used Nuclear Fuel, Thunder Bay participant)

“The cynical would say that the Conservative government in 02/03 minimized the deficit and the Liberals may, on entering government, be exaggerating it by the way that they are keeping the books.”

(2004 Ontario Budget Dialogue, Ottawa participant)

Another aspect of government spending that is a source of frustration to citizens is the perceived opaqueness in the roles and fiduciary responsibilities that are at the core of federal-provincial disputes, particularly in the health care context. These disputes are seen as adding costs and delaying decisions without improving service delivery, or making the real reforms that are needed. Citizens want to have responsibilities clearly laid out, so the responsible party can be held to account (Maxwell et al., 2002: viii). In the Used Nuclear Fuel dialogue, they wanted a “roadmap”, clearly describing the roles and responsibilities of the different organizations involved in managing used nuclear fuel.

**Restoring Trust in Government through Accountability**

As depicted in Table 1, a key dimension of accountability is the *relationships* that are established between those making the decisions and those affected by those decisions. While these relationships can be defined through formal governance arrangements, the strength of the accountability lies in the level of trust that is built into the relationships (O’Neill, 2003). For dialogue participants, improved accountability was not seen as an end in itself but as a means for re-establishing citizens’ trust in government which has been in decline for decades. For example, participants in the Ontario Budget dialogue want to trust their government to use their money wisely but they do not feel they can do this until they have evidence that public services are being well managed and that those responsible are held to account for their actions.

“Trust goes back to the idea of accountability….I don’t think we trust them to listen to what we’re telling them, to actually manage the stuff that they’re trying to manage now or to do the next step properly.”

(2004 Budget Dialogue, Ottawa participant)
“…to the decision-makers, …be aware just how much cynicism there is, justified cynicism about the decisions you make, (the) reasons you make them and your ability to execute them, because you’re not very highly regarded.”

(2002 Canada’s Future Dialogue, Vancouver participant)

“If you’re a decision maker,… people have elected you to lead. You have to be prepared to stand up for us because there are going to be some very tough decisions over the course of the next 20 years. Leave your personal agendas at the door. Represent your constituents. Govern with the Canadian identity in mind. Spend the allocated dollars like they are your own, because the citizens of Canada are trusting you with them.”

(2002 Canada’s Future Dialogue, Ottawa participant)

This message, again consistent through all four dialogues, is supported by extensive public opinion research which has documented disintegrating public trust in governments, private corporations and professions. A public opinion survey, conducted earlier this year, by Leger Marketing, ranked twenty professions in terms of trust. Politicians obtained the lowest trust ranking of all – 14% – trailing car salespeople at 19% (Leger, 2004). Declining trust is closely associated with loss of confidence in public institutions and public service in particular. In Breaking the Bargain, Donald Savoie analyzes the accountability relationships between elected and permanent government officials and documents public opinion surveys conducted throughout the 1980s in which Canadians reported having less confidence in the public service than in any other institution, save for the trade union movement, politicians and the tobacco industry (Savoie, 2003). Savoie also cites a federal government-commissioned research report (EKOS, 1995) based on extensive opinion surveys that captured the public’s sentiment as follows:

“[The report] rang the alarm bell in 1995. It revealed that ‘general attitudes to government have deteriorated. Most Canadians are cynical and hostile to government. There is a widespread belief that governments are self-serving, inefficient and ineffectual.’ It added that it was important to distinguish between popularity and legitimacy. It explained that the government of the day was clearly quite popular [but] popularity is, however, more ephemeral and elastic than legitimacy … There is … a long road back to re-establish trust in government.” (Savoie, 2003:8)

Dialogue participants did not, for the most part, differentiate between the roles of elected officials and public servants. Most of their comments, however, are directed toward elected officials. It is the accountability relationship between elected representatives and citizens that is the most immediate for them, and where they can express their views with the greatest impact.
Accountability without Trust? Looking after the Public Interest

Canadians appear to be at a crossroads when it comes to sorting out the types of accountability mechanisms they would like to see put in place. Although part of the public's message illustrates a desire to be able to trust governments again, another part of the message says: “We don’t trust you to protect the public's interest, so we need independent, oversight bodies to do the job for you.” In the absence of an effective relationship between those making decisions and those affected, citizens are turning to sanction/correction mechanisms to achieve accountability (see Table 1). Pal and Maxwell (2004) discuss the role of these types of bodies in representing the public interest. As a representative institution, Parliament, and the legislation it produces, is presumed to reflect public opinion, the public will, and to be in the public interest. In contrast, regulatory bodies and other third party, arm’s length agencies, while no substitutes for legislatures (i.e., selected on the basis of expertise rather than political representation) and engaged in discretionary decision-making guided by case law and precedent are presumed to be guided by the principle of what is in the best interests of the public (Pal and Maxwell, 2004).

Despite their more opaque role in serving the public interest, citizens’ lack of confidence in and deep mistrust of government has prompted calls for independent, third party, watchdog bodies to protect the public’s interest in a variety of areas. For example, participants in the Dialogue on the Future of Health Care in Canada (Romanow Dialogue) recommended that “an independent agency, such as an auditor general for health with an overall purview of the state of medicare” (Maxwell et al., 2002: viii) be created.

“We need an independent auditor general, who is not appointed by the government, to review and ensure that the administration of costs and the health care system itself are cleaned up”. [Translation]

(2002 Romanow Dialogue, Québec City participant)

Participants in the Canada’s Future dialogue expressed their views about how health, safety and the environmental risks should be managed through the regulatory process. Of central importance is the need for high standards that are enforceable and “vigorously enforced” through transparent and accountable systems (Pal and Maxwell, 2004).

Ontario Budget dialogue participants spoke about the need for an independent audit of provincial finances prior to any provincial election campaign – they called for a “report on the state of the deficit before the end of the mandate” (Nolte et al, 2004:18). Calls for an independent, non-partisan oversight body by citizens who participated in the Used Nuclear Fuel
dialogue reinforced this lack of trust in elected governments and industry. They wanted long-term interests to drive decisions around this issue, not political expediency or profit motives. They expect this body to be comprised of experts from many fields and citizens, to monitor the government and other key organizations and provide reliable information on whether or not they are meeting their obligations“ (Watling et al, 2004: 25).

“…we wanted a third party watchdog that had representation of all the stakeholders and the point was, there should be full disclosure to all the public so everybody knows and makes an informed decision.”


“…a well funded, independent citizens’ watchdog committee…they would have the funds that make it possible for them not just to report to a government agency or make a report to parliament, but also to be able to launch public awareness and education programs of their own and raise the issues…the public would be made aware if this watchdog was not satisfied that the government agency was doing its job to the best of its ability.”

(2004 Used Nuclear Fuel Dialogue, Ottawa participant)

“…we need an organization that answers directly to the public…that is there to protect us. It needs to answer directly to us. It must act as a go-between for us and the government.” [Translation]

(2004 Used Nuclear Fuel Dialogue, Moncton participant)

In their recently released report, the Panel on the Role of Government in Ontario (2004), recommended the provincial government consider the creation of an “independent, non-partisan advisory body” in the health care field that would have the following features:

“At arms-length, and outlasting any one government’s mandate, this body can offer a system-wide perspective, as well as examining or monitoring local experience, provide advice on standardized performance management frameworks; research; develop and identify local and international best practices that can be adopted; undertake benchmarking …and provide a mechanism for transparency through regular reporting.”

(Panel on the Role of Government in Ontario, 2004: 65)

The Panel recommended that this body include representatives from the health care field, other stakeholders and members of the public.
Others have also called for the creation of independent third party dispute resolution bodies for specific arenas such as the Canadian health care system (Cameron, 2004:125) and for the purposes of giving the public a stronger voice in these dispute resolution processes:

“…giving the public a voice in the proceedings is a potentially powerful tool for aiding the resolution of disputes in a manner that advances the public interest and not simply the interests of the participating governments.”

(Cameron and McCrea-Logie, 2004:125)

Calls for these independent watchdog organizations reflect concerns that government is failing to look out for the public interest. These concerns need to be taken very seriously, but before moving down the path of establishing these types of bodies, thoughtful consideration must be given to the implications for government’s ability to strengthen its accountability relationships with citizens and for renewing public confidence in government. The presence of third-party agencies has the potential to weaken direct government-citizen accountability in exchange for the provision of greater autonomy to third-party agencies. How would independent agencies be held to account if they were perceived by the public as not looking after the public interest? How would we avoid simply shifting or broadening the lack of trust to include these institutions as well? Who would they ultimately report to? Dialogue participants did not explore these issues in depth, but there was an understanding that this type of body would raise issues of its own, and the question of ‘who watches the watch dog?’ was raised by some participants in the Used Nuclear Fuel dialogue. These questions must be carefully considered and discussed openly as future directions for improving accountability are determined, while addressing the underlying reasons that drive the calls for more trustworthy institutions. Further examination could include, among other things, revisiting the mandates of existing arms-length regulatory bodies, as recommended in the report of the Used Nuclear Fuel dialogue.

**Strengthening the Relationship: Accountability and Citizen Engagement**

We have argued here that Canadians are seeking strengthened accountability (and transparency as an integral accountability element) as a means for re-establishing their trust and confidence in government. Our review of the CPRN dialogues and related material also reveals a related, and equally important motive for improved accountability: citizens’ desire to understand more about what governments do so that they can contribute more tangibly to public policy decisions. Participants in all four dialogues asked to become more involved in the public
realm. In the 10 sessions conducted for the Canada’s Future dialogue, public involvement was the most dominant theme identified in participants’ closing statements (government and individual accountability was the second most dominant theme) (MacKinnon et al., 2003:27). In the Used Nuclear Fuel dialogue, participants identified inclusion as a value they want to see reflected in a management approach. They do not want to replace experts or stakeholders, but they do want to have a voice in public policy decisions – especially those that impact health, safety and the environment. A process where citizens had the chance to have their say would give them more confidence in the decisions taken (Watling et al., 2004:26).

This is not surprising given the inextricable links between accountability and citizen engagement. As we have argued elsewhere, the route through which citizens are able to obtain a fuller understanding of government actions include participatory opportunities like the citizens’ dialogue. In this way, citizen engagement is not merely an input to or a product of strengthened accountability but it is a form of accountability in its own right (Abelson and Gauvin, 2004).

“Citizen engagement processes wield their accountability through the formation of strong relationships built upon trust, openness and responsiveness between citizens and government or public institutions. Answerability in the form of transparency, clear objectives and means for involving citizens and linking their input back into the decision process are also essential.” (Abelson and Gauvin, 2004:ii)

The most basic form of ‘political participation’ – voting – is synonymous with ‘political accountability’, where elected representatives must demonstrate their responsiveness to citizen voters as they are held to account for their actions through the electoral process. Recalling the history of public participation through the managerial era, “the main justification for public involvement was accountability: to ensure that government agencies were acting in the public interest” (Beierle and Cayford, 2002: 4-5). More recently, the “accountability provision” of public participation has shifted from ensuring that governments act in the public interest to allowing for the direct establishment of public interest in the development of public policy (Beierle and Cayford, 2002). The concept of ‘direct accountability’ and its emphasis on the provision of citizen rights to participate in and influence decisions, also captures the essence of the accountability function served through citizen engagement processes.

Canadians’ desire to participate in public policy decisions has become stronger over the past number of decades. Despite sliding electoral participation rates, Canadians still rank political rights near the top of their list of quality of life indicators (CPRN, 2002). This suggests that Canadians are looking for new and different ways to participate in the political life of their
country including calls for a stronger voice in public policy debates, in addition to exercising their
democratic rights at election time (Wyman et al., 1999; Nevitte 1996; Nevitte 2002; Forest et al.,
2002).

The reforms proposed in the 8-point plan of the federal Liberal government in February
2004 have the potential to help redress the power imbalance between the executive and
Parliament but they “…cannot assure citizens that their MPs, however much they are freed from
party discipline, will be sufficiently responsive to their constituents’ wishes, preferences or
interests, as constituents themselves define them. Nor, of course, do these reforms speak to the
issue of citizens having a more direct say in government decision-making.” (Aucoin, Turnbull,
2003: page 440-441)

Dialogue participants examined their own role, and looked not only at their rights, but
their responsibilities as citizens and gave themselves a greater role in the accountability
equation. In the Health Care dialogue, they understood their responsibilities as users of health
services resources and to improve and sustain their own health. In the Canada’s Future
dialogue, they recognized the need to take a greater responsibility for their consumer choices
and become more informed about the impact of their choices on the environment and their own
health. They also spoke of their responsibility to become better informed so they can make
better policy choices. In the Used Nuclear Fuel dialogue, they acknowledged their own
responsibilities as users of the electricity, and spoke of the need to reduce consumption in order
to reduce the quantity of used fuel that needs to be managed.

To encourage citizens to take greater responsibility for their own actions and to help
citizens assess how governments are performing and whether they are keeping their promises,
governments must provide the information to make their own activities more transparent to
citizens.

Participant concerns about the media’s poor representation of public views (reflected in
both the Romanow and Canada’s Future dialogues) provided an additional impetus for seeking
public’s views directly. Participants in all dialogues spoke of wanting to engage more fully in
public policy discourse. They agreed to come to the dialogues because they wanted to have a
say, and to have their voices heard. They found it a rewarding experience and they wanted
other Canadians to experience the dialogue process as they had. They see active participation
in the democratic process – beyond voting – as part of their citizen responsibilities.
“I believe we have to trust in government to finally make the decision. That’s where the buck stops. But what’s impressed me today is that all of us have a responsibility to speak up in one way or another to try and make those decisions the best decisions possible.”

(2004 Used Nuclear Fuel Dialogue, Halifax participant)

There is accumulating evidence that citizens who participate in meaningful, face-to-face citizen engagement processes, where the purpose of the citizen engagement process and its relationship to decision-making is clearly articulated, are highly satisfied with these experiences and willing to participate in similar types of citizen engagement processes in the future (Abelson et al., 2004; Saxena, 2003; Public Policy Forum, 2002). Moreover, there are also signs that these processes may produce longer-term effects that include citizens increasing their efforts to be informed on public policy issues and their activity in public affairs (Saxena, 2003: iv).

In the health care context, recent polling data reports that close to 80% of Canadians believe it is very important for citizens to be involved in major decisions affecting the health care system in Canada and that a rising proportion of Canadians (from 80% in 1998 to 84% in 2000) would feel better about government decision-making if they knew that government regularly sought informed input from average citizens (EKOS, 2002). Participants in the 2002 Citizens’ Dialogue on the Future of Health Care in Canada confirmed these findings, articulating demands for transparency and accountability, for a new, more open policy process based on regular and comprehensive reviews of achievements and results attained by public authorities (Maxwell et al., 2003).

These views were echoed in the Canada’s Future Dialogue where “participants emphasized the need for a ‘healthier democracy’. They wanted a democracy where a) citizens’ input would be taken into account by decision-makers, and b) governments truly listen to what they have to say” (MacKinnon et al., 2003: 19).

“…the government should stop playing these power games, who will govern, who will be appointed where…and start thinking …listening to what people have to say, being aware of what their daily life is, their little pleasures and their little miseries. . . . In other words, …being closer to them.” [Translation]

(2002 Canada’s Future Dialogue, Montréal participant)
“I have to become involved. I believe that in this debate, we elect leaders and then we stand idle, we struggle to earn money and pay our taxes, but I think we have to get involved. We are getting tools to that end. For me, it is an onerous and tiring duty which requires a lot of effort. I readily admit that, but I say so anyway”. [Translation]

(2002 Canada’s Future Dialogue, Québec City participant)

Mounting evidence from polls and public participation research studies convey a consistent message that citizens have been disappointed by public consultation experiences they feel have ‘pre-determined outcomes’ and tightly controlled agendas that preclude meaningful public contributions (Abelson et al., 2004; O’Hara, 1998). The frustration and cynicism associated with these experiences have prompted calls for more “accountable consultation” (Litva et al. 2002) where decision makers are pushed to provide citizens with an accounting of how the public’s input was considered or helped shape the final decision or recommendations that were taken. These views were echoed in the Ontario Budget Dialogue where citizens communicated clear accountability requirements for the consultation process: that the dialogue report reflects what was heard in the dialogues; that the 2004 - 2005 budget incorporates advice given by citizens; and ultimately, whether the deficit is reduced during the mandate.

“If I had to communicate one message to the government it would be: Look at the energy that is in this room and what has come out of it. Keep doing it. Keep talking to us and listening to us too – because we will judge based on how well we are listened to.”

(2004 Ontario Budget Dialogue, Toronto participant)

A small but vocal minority of participants questioned the motives behind the dialogue process and emphasized that “they would suspend (sic) judgment until they saw proof that the government had heard their views” (Nolté et al., 2004: 22).

Based on what Canadians have said in the four dialogues we reviewed, they are not seeking direct democracy, nor are they looking to replace expert voices or other stakeholders. But they are seeking meaningful opportunities to influence decision-making processes. They understand very well that public policy issues are complex, and neither believe nor expect their elected representative to be able to represent their views accurately on these issues without hearing from them.
“Citizens do not expect governments to talk directly to 30 million people. But they do want existing institutions – Parliament, legislatures and their communities, as well as the public service – to provide opportunities for people to participate in public discourse on policy issues. Currently, these institutions engage actively with expert and opinion leaders in formal public settings. Citizens are asking for a space where they can be included – not in debate, as typically happens in town hall meetings, but in dialogue, learning from each other and contributing their own ideas.” (MacKinnon et al, 2003: viii)

They are no longer content to turn things over to their elected representatives for four or five years – success at the polling booth does not translate into carte blanche for elected representatives. Citizens want a space between elections to give their views and advice. Aucoin and Turnbull refer to the “…increasing, perhaps prevailing, normative preference of citizens to have their MP function as a delegate – a spokesperson for the views, wishes and self-defined interests of constituents – rather than as a trustee – an elected representative who decides what he or she judges to be in the best interests of his or her constituents” (Aucoin, Turnbull, 2003: 441).

Citizens are also looking for accessible, credible information to support their efforts to contribute constructively to public policy processes (Abelson et al., 2004a). This will require governments and organizations to define transparency and accountability as something much more active than one way, passive information flows. Honest engagement of citizens is much more than giving individuals the right to review information, assuming they know it exists. Governments need to assess the quality and relevance of the information currently provided and the means used to deliver it. They need to engage citizens in determining what information is important for them to have in order to be able to effectively hold government to account.

This does not mean that citizens expect nor want to be engaged on every single issue. Engaging them in a dialogue about renewed democracy and improved accountability could also explore the types of issues and decisions that warrant broad and/or deep engagement. Decisions that require public behaviour to change in order to be successful will be more sustainable if the public is involved in understanding the consequences of their action and the decisions reflect the values and tradeoffs they are willing to make. Decisions that are “big in terms of potential costs and benefits for society and in their long-term consequences for the health and well-being of the human race for many generations to come,” need to engage the public in a deliberative process that defines the policy parameters acceptable to society (Watling et al, 2004: 41).
In his paper for the Panel on the Role of Government, David Cameron writes about “deliberation and dialogue, in which governments engage with citizens to shape broad policy choices. This requires that processes be accessible to interested parties, that key decisions are not pre-cooked by political elites and that discussions are open, transparent and conducted in a public language that is understandable” (Cameron, 2004:46). Citizens have expressed their support for this view in their characterizations of past public involvement experiences (in local health decision making) being used to “mask hidden agendas, specifically those of decision-makers looking for public support for pre-determined agendas and outcomes” (Abelson et al., 2004b, forthcoming). To overcome the problems that have plagued past public consultation efforts, citizen engagement is designed to provide citizens with the opportunity to use information to learn and improve. It requires building into our institutions meaningful mechanisms that engage citizens in using this information for a purpose (Cameron, 2004; Abelson and Gauvin, 2004).

“...it is not the duty of citizens to bend themselves to the needs of political institutions, but the responsibility of institutions and political leaders to adapt themselves to what their people require. What is more, that is good democratic practice; in a democracy, popular will is the foundation stone upon which good government is constructed.” (Cameron, 2004: 47)

Accountability in Perspective

There is no disputing that a clarion call for accountability across the public and private sectors has been sounded, although there is lack of precision and agreement about the meaning of accountability and how it should be strengthened. Within the health sector, health system accountability emerged as a more dominantly held value among Canadians than ever before. However, it still trails behind other more strongly held values such as quality of care given high priority by 96% of dialogue participants, followed by accessibility and equity of access (given high importance by 90% of participants), prevention (rated as highly important by 83%). Accountability was rated of high importance by 81% of dialogue participants.

In public polling, accountability and ethics still fall behind other priorities among the public, including social issues such as health and education. According to a February 2004 EKOS poll, 51% of Canadians think social issues like health and education will be the most important issue in the next federal election, followed by the economy (19%), then issues like ethics and accountability (18%). As well, polls show that views about accountability and ethics
are not shared equally across the country. They are more salient west of Ontario, whereas social issues are more dominant to the east (EKOS, 2004). However, when citizens are given the opportunity to think more deeply about important public policy issues, as they were in the four dialogues, accountability and governance emerge as key themes that are embedded in all issues and dominate much of the discussion.

Just as accountability in and of itself may not be at the top of citizens’ priorities for government, the notion of pursuing accountability at all costs must also be considered carefully given the following limitations of our review. First, as stated earlier, the dialogues were not constructed to examine the theme of accountability in an explicit manner. As such, our summary of what Canadians’ are saying about accountability (primarily through the CPRN dialogues) is only a starting point for further exploration to determine how Canadians’ define accountability, to what extent they are using the same word to mean different things, what forms it should take and where the focal point of activity in this area should be. Second, Canadians’ views on this subject should be considered as one source of input, among many others, to this discussion.

As we have discussed throughout this paper, citizens’ calls for accountability appear to be a symptom of their mistrust of public institutions. While these symptoms require attention, it is important to think carefully about how we pursue accountability so that we don’t, through simplistic efforts to correct accountability weaknesses, contribute to more rather than less mistrustful relationships between citizens and governors. O’Neill refers to the need for “intelligent accountability” which requires “more attention to good governance and fewer fantasies about total control” (O’Neill, 2003:58). Transparency as a key dimension of accountability should not be pursued recklessly but with careful consideration of what types of information are needed, for what purposes, by whom and for whom. Information that is not perceived as credible can further damage citizens’ trust in government.
5 ACTING ON THE MESSAGE

The public’s faith, trust and confidence in the traditional government-citizen accountability mechanisms have been weakened and are, according to some, beyond repair. The current situation has not developed overnight but has been shaped by a variety of circumstances that include: i) fundamental changes to the accountability relationships between public servants and politicians in Canada which have been fuelled and exposed by government scandals (Savoie, 2003); ii) corporate and government scandals that have left citizens concerned about who is protecting the public interest and have contributed to an increasing mistrust of both public and private institutions; and iii) an erosion of the public’s deference to government and private sector elites, accompanied by a growing desire for opportunities to engage in and contribute to public policy making outside of the election process.

Remediation of this problem will require substantial effort and should proceed on multiple fronts. First, governments need to respond to citizens’ calls for more transparency about how and why decisions are made, particularly around sound management of public resources. This is a tall order but the level of cynicism among the public and the vehemence of the calls for government spending accountability cannot be ignored. Provision of information through a public accounting process that covers all aspects of the budgeting process may be part of the response. But care must be taken to ensure that efforts to improve transparency are pursued honestly, providing credible information that reflects reality. Transparency in and of itself will not re-kindle the public’s trust and has been shown, in our information age, to contribute to diminishing levels of trust. Efforts, therefore, need to be made to provide opportunities for citizens as information consumers and active contributors to democratic processes to be able to check the credibility of the multiple and competing information sources (O’Neill, 2003).

Second, greater involvement of citizens, on a routine basis, in the public policy process is of paramount importance. Although citizens recognize the costs associated with their increased involvement and are not always aware of how they have contributed in the past, they recognize that their involvement is a critical step toward the re-establishment of a trusting relationship with government that has eroded over the past decades. While face-to-face deliberative dialogues are useful approaches for increasing citizen engagement, and dialogue participants speak favourably of their experiences, effort is needed to build more routine mechanisms for giving citizens a space and a voice in our existing institutions. Democratic renewal initiatives currently underway at the federal level and in a number of provinces are providing opportunities for
citizens to engage in discussions on how to reform our institutions, to improve accountability and increase their confidence and trust in governments.

Taken together, these recommendations point to the need for public officials to pursue “intelligent accountability” through good governance practices. This approach gives less emphasis to the pursuit of complete transparency and micro-management through performance indicators and more emphasis to ensuring that the public interest is served. (O’Neill, 2003).

The material we have reviewed for this synthesis reveals a citizenry with a clear message about the need for strengthened accountability and supporting mechanisms but at a crossroads with respect to how it should be achieved. It is not clear whether citizens will be patient and tolerant of government attempts to re-establish trust through improved transparency and citizen engagement efforts or whether they will prefer to go the “accountability without trust” route and put more control into the hands of independent, third-party officials. While the former approach emphasizes the relationship-building element of accountability, the latter emphasizes the exertion of accountability through sanction and corrective measures. These two approaches need not be mutually exclusive, but the course taken needs to be chosen with the participation of all the players involved in the accountability equation and with consideration of the implications for democracy over the longer term. Whether one approach is favoured over another or both are pursued in parallel, Canadians will be watching governments closely and expect to be actively involved in the accountability discourse as it unfolds.
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ELECTIONS CANADA, Past Election Results [http://www.elections.ca/intro.asp?section=pass&document=index&lang=e&textonly=false]


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