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6.0 PSST! CANADA, CAN WE TALK?

[Ottawa – January 14, 2012] One of the limitations of current media polling is that the pollster and media client tend to select the topics it wants to talk about and frames the questions in a way that s/he thinks is appropriate. Pollsters typically do so in a fair and balanced manner but, even if that standard is met, the universe of discourse is set by the pollster, not the public. In this exercise, we reverse the usual process and have a statistically representative sample of the public pick the conversations they deem to be the most important. We will then build upon this by returning to engage a representative sample of Canadians in a series of conversations that they themselves selected. We also want to inject some information into those conversations so that these exercises are reflected, informed and representative of all society (kind of like the idea of democracy is supposed to work).

In our experience, the public enjoy these kind of deliberative engagements more so than the typical top-of-mind polling we conduct on horse races and such. It is also notable that the public have told us that their expectations in participating in such an exercise are very modest. Contrary to the fears of some senior decision makers, the public are not looking for nor do they expect the politicians to follow their wishes in some form of direct democracy or populism. Rather, citizens are merely looking for a “seat at the table” or, rather, assurances that someone in power will listen and take their views into account. Citizens recognize that governments are juggling a myriad of conflicting values and interests; financial exigencies, expert views, specific stakeholder and interest group needs, political priorities, etc. All they would like to know that is that their reflected views could be seen as one source of advice. In other words, citizens want a seat at the table more often than every four years and a regular form of citizen engagement could go a long way to repairing some of egregious problems of trust and legitimacy that we have seen documented in the first parts of this release. In fact, almost 90 percent of the public tell us that they would feel better about democracy if governments regularly sought these sorts of inputs. Finally, in the few instances where governments have actually tried these approaches, the advice offered by the public has invariably been reasoned, moderate, and humane.

Recognizing that governments aren't terribly persuaded by these arguments at this time, and noting the futility of charting a nonexistent horse race three years before it begins, we are volunteering this input as a public service with our friends at iPolitics. The readership of iPolitics contains exactly the kind of audience that citizens would like to share their advice with. It is genuinely intended to be as fair and non-partisan as possible with a focus on the now hidden dimension of government – public policy. We don't pretend that this is exhaustive or rigorous but it is a good start. It has been nearly 20 years since the (extremely expensive) Spicer Commission. Using modern information technology, we can offer a form of scientific public consultation with a speed, economy, and representativeness that could not have been dreamed of at that time.

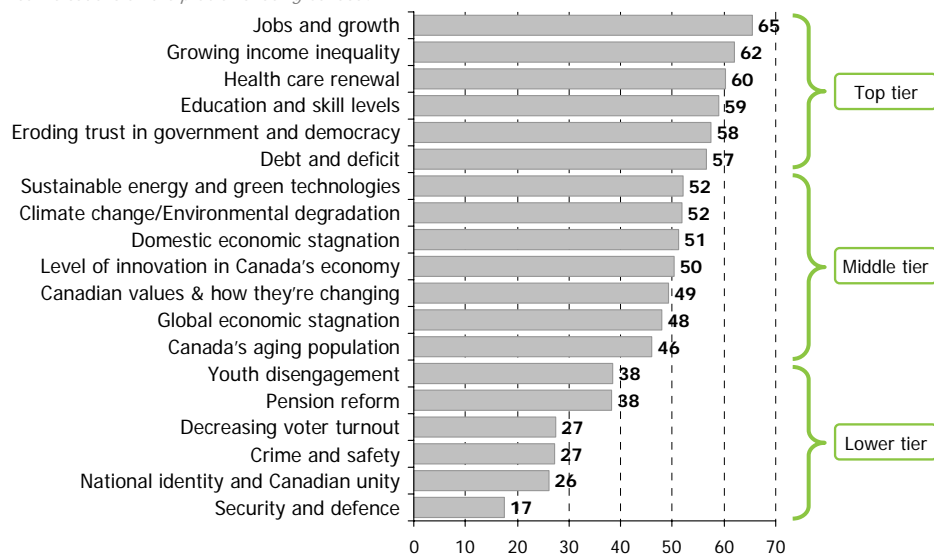
For purposes of this test, we came up with 20 areas of public concern/policy that we have looked at over the years. It isn't the definitive list, but it certainly captures many of the major issues which have been on the table over the past decade. It is tricky to pose such a long list as

respondents tend to forget the long list and favour the most recent or first items they saw. Even randomizing the order (which we did) doesn't solve the problem and the response burden would be prohibitive. We therefore used a form of trade-off analysis where respondents receive five randomly generated pairs from the list of 20 possible topics. Each "trial" provides a winner and loser and the cumulative results can provide an overall hierarchy. We can also show how the rankings vary by key demographic segments and these variations are quite pertinent.

Chart 6.1 – Preferred national conversations



Q. Which of the following issues do you think should be given the most attention when it comes to national conversations on the problems facing Canada?



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BASE: Canadians; December 14-21, 2011 (n=2,005)

Chart 6.1 shows the results which are grouped into three broad tiers: urgent, moderate and lower. We note that there are many important topics which don't make the top tier and some topics appear in the top tier for some groups (e.g., Climate change for younger respondents) but fail to make top tier because they are not universally embraced. The humble positions of some of the lower ranked conversations also deserve some comment and tell us something about the current national outlook.

The economy tops the list as the most important conversation and it seems to be even more so given the current climate of anxiety. The issue of jobs and growth is the salient concern of a nervous public and we will be interested to see if we can find out more about how they see this issue is evolving and what they expect governments, the private sector, individuals, and families to do. There is growing economic fluency that many of these problems emanate outside of our borders and hence limit our ability to control. We have found that Canadians are highly receptive to a conversation on productivity (they aren't afraid of the P word) to the degree that it sustains quality of life. We also see unusual gloom about the longer term future and what we need to do ensure our long-term economic health.

The constituency for the jobs and growth conversation is broad but focussed among the more economically vulnerable, as well as older Canada and Ontario. The Government has clearly understood the dominance of this issue. Somewhat surprisingly, NDP supporters put topic considerably lower than Conservative supporters, and Green supporters tend to rate it much lower, perhaps seeing it stand in tension with environmental goals. Despite these variations, jobs and growth is the clear winner but its margin is quite scant over the second most important conversation that Canadians selected – growing inequality.

The near chart topping placement of growing inequality is as surprising, as the economy's top rating is obvious. In many years of polling on inequality, Canadians have expressed only tepid interest in the topic. While strongly endorsing equality of opportunity and access, the public have been more mixed. It is also the case that through the nineties, attitudes to the role of the state as a leveller of inequality morphed (just as tax rates plummeted). There was a growing conviction that the social safety net had become a hammock perpetuating the very problems it was supposed to solve. All of this may be on the cusp of a sea change as public demands for a national conversation on growing inequality have vaulted from nowhere to a top concern. For those who have discounted the Occupy movement as a failure, this is vivid evidence to the contrary. The issue would not have exploded in the Canadian public consciousness if it weren't supported by true objective changes. This topic cannot be enjoined in separation of the jobs and growth topic and it will inevitably lead Canadians to a renewed discussion of taxes and the role of the state.

While everybody is at least somewhat concerned with this new issue du jour, there are some striking variations in levels of concern. Conservative supporters have much lower levels of concern regarding income inequality than all other portions of the political spectrum. Regional patterns are also interesting: BC and Atlantic are extremely concerned while Alberta is not. Ontario is interesting by virtue of sharing very high levels of concern with both the economy and inequality (which they may see as twinned problems). The economically vulnerable – particularly the unemployed, also attach a great deal of importance to this issue. In departure from this pattern, however, the most educated are more concerned than the least educated and young people are more concerned than all. The most striking finding here is the explosion of inequality and long dormant notions of social justice back onto the public agenda.

Health care renewal, a perennial top concern, is once again a crucial area of conversation for an aging population (interestingly concern with health care renewal is higher in younger Canada). There really aren't that many variations across regions, demographics or party affiliations - this is a crucial conversation for all. In some respects, the conversation has been pre-empted by the federal offer to the provinces and also by a little recognized but dramatic decline in the sense that the system is in crisis¹. There is, however, lots of room for a discussion about areas of reform such as home care, electronic health, patient centered care and so on. It is also clear that

¹ See our report on attitudes towards doctors and health care titled "Shifting Public Perceptions of Doctors and Health Care", published February 2011 and accessible online at:
http://www.ekospolitics.com/wp-content/uploads/shifting_public_perceptions.pdf

the public hold the federal government accountable for health care along with the provinces and as in the area of education want to have National conversations (and policies) while recognising these are provincial areas of jurisdiction.

The other major area of human capital formation, education and skills ties Health as a winning national conversation. Once again the public discount the watertight theory of division of responsibilities across the senior levels of government and want a national conversation on knowledge and skills. Our past research has shown that Canadians now see knowledge and skills as a crucial determinant of both individual and national economic success. Ontario, Liberal supporters, and very strongly, younger Canada are the ones calling most strongly for a national debate on knowledge and skills. It has been a long time since we have had a serious national discussion on this topic.

Another top priority is a national conversation on eroding trust in democracy and government. The underpinnings of this debate are complex but it is notable that it has assumed such a high position. It is also notable that although Canadians want to discuss the issue of democracy, their enthusiasm for a discussion of related topics such as youth disengagement and declining voter turnout is much lower. It seems that only young people are concerned with the issue of youth disengagement, which may be part of the reason the problem is deepening. It may be worthwhile to consider a segmented conversation with young Canadians on this issue. As the earlier releases have shown, there are wide levels of alarm about the health of democracy and a series of key dimensions of the debate available for further discussion.

The final top topic is debt and deficit which reflects the inherent fiscal conservatism of Canadians (following the nineties) and the desire to approach national issues from a pragmatic and normative point of view. The blend of the top six issues provides a pretty broad framework for moving forward and blends both conservative and progressive values with a pretty hard nosed pragmatism and eclecticism, which Canadians have especially favoured. The spending within our means issue is a practical governor which disciplines the other investment priorities.

A few final comments are in order. Green technologies and climate change came very close to the top conversations and may well deserve inclusion. First of all, the two very similar choices may have diluted their overall position and they emerge at the top of the list for younger Canada and the Atlantic. Indeed, the blend of these two issues may well merit placement on the short list.

Finally, there are four things on this list that Canadians simply do not want to talk about – voter turnout (already discussed), crime and safety, national identity and unity, and defence and security. To be generous to the government, we can posit that their clear emphasis on crime and defence has removed this from the urgent “to do” list to “done that”. In any case, it is pretty clear that there is little appetite for further conversations on these topics at this time. National unity and identity, shibboleths for erstwhile Liberals and the focus of national debate twenty and thirty years ago, have also exhausted public patience and interest. This in itself is an interesting comment on how much Canada may have changed over that period.

METHODOLOGY

This study was conducted using EKOS' unique, hybrid online/telephone research panel, *Prob/t*. Our panel offers exhaustive coverage of the Canadian population (i.e., Internet, phone, cell phone), random recruitment (in other words, participants are recruited randomly, they do not opt themselves into our panel), and equal probability sampling. All respondents to our panel are recruited by telephone using random digit dialling and are confirmed by live interviewers. Unlike opt-in online panels, *Prob/t* supports margin of error estimates. We believe this to be the only probability-based online panel in Canada.

This particular study involved an ***online only*** survey of 2,005 Canadians. While panellists are randomly recruited, the survey itself excludes the roughly 1 in 5 Canadians without internet access. The results should therefore be considered generalizeable to Canada's online population. The field dates for this survey are December 14-21, 2011. The margin of error associated with the total sample is +/-2.2 percentage points, 19 times out of 20.

Please note that the margin of error increases when the results are sub-divided (i.e., error margins for sub-groups such as region, sex, age, education). All the data have been statistically weighted to ensure the samples composition reflects that of the actual population of Canada according to Census data.