

Rethinking

Government

**Exploring Changing Relationships Among
Individuals, Governments and Business**

Wave 1 Executive Summary

June 2006



EKOS
Research Associates Inc.

Copyright 2006©
EKOS Research Associates Inc.

No part of this report may be reproduced
or transmitted in any form or by any means,
electronic or mechanical, including photocopying,
recording, or by any information storage and
retrieval system, without permission in
writing from EKOS Research Associates Inc.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Priorities for Government

One of the key areas that the Rethinking Government project has explored over the past decade is public preferences in terms of priority areas for the federal and provincial governments. As a new session of Parliament gets underway, this first wave of Rethinking Government 2006 continues this examination.

Canadians were asked to rate the priority of 18 policy areas for the federal and their provincial government. Health care and education register as the highest priority areas, with more than nine in ten Canadians assigning high priority to these issues for both the federal and provincial government. Child poverty, managing the economy, post-secondary education, the environment, and crime and justice are important second tier priorities for both levels of government. At the bottom of the list of tested priorities are Aboriginal issues, supporting cultural heritage, and immigration.

Tracking these priority areas over the past year reveals a decline in federal priority ratings across virtually every area tested. Declines in priority are particularly pronounced in the areas of dealing with inequality (down 10 per cent), Aboriginal issues (down eight per cent), and food safety (down eight per cent). Unemployment, transportation safety, immigration, child poverty, and managing the economy are also down considerably as federal priorities over the past year.

Satisfaction With Government

Turning to satisfaction with government, this sounding of Rethinking Government suggests a significant improvement in views on the Government of Canada. Those who approve of Government of Canada performance is up eight points since February 2006 (to 34 per cent), while the proportion of those who take a negative view of federal performance continues to decline (28 per cent – down five points since February 2006). Moreover, the proportion of Canadians who feel the Government of Canada is moving in the right direction is up seven per cent since February 2006 (and currently stands at 57 per cent).

Despite an improvement in overall approval ratings for the Government of Canada, performance ratings on many specific priority areas are down over the past year. Declines are particularly steep in terms of federal performance on the environment (down 15 per cent), dealing with inequality (down 10 per cent), and immigration (down 10 per cent). Significant declines are also seen in terms of developing cultural heritage, transportation safety, Aboriginal issues, and post-secondary education. It should also be noted, however, that federal performance ratings are up in the areas of managing the economy, taxation, and education.

Trust and Ethics

As its first order of business, the new Government of Canada introduced the Federal Accountability Act to help improve Canadians' trust in the federal government. As this new legislation takes effect, Rethinking Government continued to track a range of trust, ethics, and accountability indicators.

Rethinking Government results reveal that while trust in the Government of Canada is still relatively low, it continues to improve. Currently, one in three Canadians (34 per cent) say they trust the Government of Canada (up three per cent since February 2006, and up five per cent since October 2005), and just over one in four (27 per cent) do not trust the Government of Canada (down eight per cent since October 2005).

Other indicators also suggest an improvement in Canadian views on the trust and ethics of government. The majority of Canadians (63 per cent) continue to agree that those elected to Parliament soon lose touch with people, however, this is down four points over the past year. Results also reveal that about half of Canadians (49 per cent) agree that they "don't think government cares much about what people like me think" – but this is down six per cent over the past year, and is at its lowest level of agreement since 2003.

Rethinking Government results also reveal a significant improvement in Canadians' assessment of the adequacy of safeguards to ensure ethical behaviour from federal officials (although the plurality continue to feel safeguards are inadequate). Currently, 36 per cent of Canadians agree that the government has sufficient safeguards to ensure that federal public servants conduct themselves in an ethical manner (up five per cent since May 2005), while a slightly higher proportion (38 per cent) disagree with this idea (although this is down 10 points since May 2005). Turning to elected federal officials, results reveal that about one in three Canadians (32 per cent) agree that there are sufficient safeguards to ensure the ethical conduct of politicians (up seven points since May 2005), while over four in ten disagree (44 per cent – although this is down 12 points over the past year).

Despite continued concerns about the trust and ethics of government, half of Canadians (50 per cent) think that Canada has the world's best system of government (and only 26 per cent disagree with this idea). Tracking this data, however, reveals that pride in our system of government has declined in recent years (down two per cent since May 2005, and down seven per cent since December 2003).

Economic Insecurity

Rethinking Government results indicate that Canadians continue to express low levels of concern about their economic future. In fact, the proportion of Canadians reporting they have "lost all control" over their economic future is down six percentage points since February 2006 (to 23 per cent), and has reached its lowest level of agreement since the question was first posed by EKOS more than a decade ago.

The collective confidence many Canadians feel about their economic future is running in parallel with perceptions of confidence in the security of current employment. In a virtual tie with previous lows, fewer than one in four employed Canadians (23 per cent) believe there is a “good chance” they could lose their job over the next two years.

Confidence and optimism also characterize Canadians’ response to the prospect of having to find replacement employment. Fully two thirds of employed Canadians (67 per cent) believe that if they lost their job they would find an equivalent one within six months – up four points over the past year, and the highest level of agreement since we began asking this question in 1998 (when fewer than half of Canadians felt they could find replacement employment within a six month timeframe).

Interestingly, today’s environment of economic confidence and security has had little impact on the perceived adequacy of personal income. Those who describe their income as “very adequate” in meeting their family’s basic needs has continued to hover at about one in two over the past several years (and currently stands at 48 per cent). Somewhat surprisingly, tracking this data over the longer term reveals that perceived adequacy of income is down since 1998 (when economic confidence was significantly weaker than it is today).

Health Care

Rethinking Government has tracked Canadians’ views on the quality of health care for almost a decade. Current findings suggest that public views on the quality of health care have declined over the past few months. Currently, nearly one in two Canadians (46 per cent) believe the quality of health care is deteriorating (up from 40 per cent in February 2006). Those who believe health care is improving fell three percentage points (to 16 per cent) over this same time period. Despite this fairly substantial increase in pessimism about the quality of health care, Canadian confidence is significantly higher than in the late 1990s when seven in ten Canadians felt health care quality was deteriorating.

A key element in improving the health care system is reducing wait times for medical procedures. Consequently, the new Government of Canada has identified a Patient Wait Times Guarantee as one of its top five priorities. This edition of Rethinking Government continued its examination of Canadians’ awareness and support for this initiative.

Survey results indicate that over half of Canadians (57 per cent) say they have heard about the Patient Wait Times Guarantee (29 per cent clearly and 28 per cent vaguely), and four in ten (43 per cent) say they have heard nothing about this initiative. Tracking this data reveals that “clear” recall is up five per cent since February 2006, and those who indicate they have not heard of this initiative is down four per cent.

Results also reveal that the concept of a Patient Wait Times Guarantee continues to receive high levels of support from the Canadian public, with fewer than one in five reporting opposition to this idea (17 per cent). However, support has softened somewhat in recent months: 79 per cent of Canadians now say they support this idea, down six per cent since February 2006 (and the proportion who “strongly” support this idea is down 10 per cent).

Despite general support for the idea, more than half of Canadians (52 per cent) believe it is not very or not at all likely that the Patient Wait Times Guarantee will actually be established. When asked, unprompted, why they felt it is unlikely the program will be established, the most popular response is that the Wait Times Guarantee is merely government rhetoric and will not actually be implemented (mentioned by 25 per cent of these respondents). A further 15 per cent feel the proposed program will be too difficult to administer, and 14 per cent believe there is an insufficient number of medical professionals to make the idea work.

Canadians were also asked how quickly they thought the Patient Wait Times Guarantee could be established. Results reveal that most Canadians appear to understand that it will take time to set up the program and complete the necessary series of negotiations with the provinces (28 per cent believe the program will be implemented in one to two years, 32 per cent believe it will require more than two years). However, patience is in short supply for close to one in five Canadians (19 per cent) who believe it is reasonable to expect that the program will be fully established within the next six months. A further 17 per cent expect the federal government to get the job done in six months to a year from now.

Given the fact that over half of Canadians doubt the program will ever be established, and that almost four in ten (36 per cent) believe the program should be in place in less than 12 months, it is perhaps not surprising that citizen response to how the federal government is doing in trying to establish a Patient Wait Times Guarantee is somewhat tepid. Overall, 39 per cent of Canadians describe the job the federal government is doing in attempting to establish a Patient Wait Times Guarantee as either poor or very poor, and only 15 per cent describe it as good or excellent (34 per cent feel the federal government has done a fair job in trying to establish a Patient Wait Times Guarantee).

Immigration

This edition of Rethinking Government also continued to examine public perceptions regarding immigration to Canada. Given the well-publicized need for skilled labour in some sectors, it is perhaps not surprising that the majority of Canadians (51 per cent) continue to feel the number of immigrants coming to Canada is about right, and only one in four (25 per cent) believe there are too many immigrants coming to the country. The proportion of Canadians who currently feel there are too many immigrants matches the previous low recorded last May.

Given that the lion's share of current immigrants to Canada come from the Asia Pacific region, Africa and the Middle East, it is also not surprising that current views on the number of visible minorities immigrating to Canada largely mirror views on immigration in general. The majority of Canadians (53 per cent) believe the number of visible minorities coming to Canada is about right, and 21 per cent feel there are too many. The number of Canadians reporting there are too many visible minorities immigrating to Canada has remained largely stable over the past several years.

Aboriginal Issues

The ongoing land dispute in Caledonia, as well as the water contamination crisis that befell the Kashechewan First Nation reserve last October, underscores some of the challenges faced by Canada's Aboriginal communities. This edition of *Rethinking Government* examines perceptions of Canada's treatment of Aboriginal issues relative to other countries, as well as public awareness and participation in National Aboriginal Day.

Survey results indicate that despite well-publicized incidents of social and economic distress in many of Canada's Aboriginal communities, nearly eight in 10 Canadians feel that Canada's treatment of Aboriginal issues is either better (44 per cent) or the same (34 per cent) as other countries, and only 12 per cent feel it is worse (10 per cent are unsure).

National Aboriginal Day, which is celebrated on June 21st every year, was established in 1996 by former Governor General Romeo LeBlanc as a means of recognizing the culture and history of Canada's Inuit, Métis and First Nations people. Despite the fact that National Aboriginal Day has been celebrated for a relatively short period of time, claimed awareness of this Day is quite high. More than one in three Canadians (34 per cent) say they are aware of National Aboriginal Day (although only eight per cent say they are "very" aware of this celebration).

Despite fairly high awareness of National Aboriginal Day, few Canadians say they participate in activities associated with this Day. Just over one in 10 Canadians (13 per cent) say they have participated in National Aboriginal Day activities, while the vast majority (86 per cent) have not (although tracking reveals that claimed participation in National Aboriginal Day activities is currently at its highest level since this question was first asked in 2003).

Views on Quebec Separation

This edition of *Rethinking Government* also continued to ask Canadians about their views on Quebec separation. Results reveal that the perceived likelihood of Quebec separation has declined significantly in Quebec. Currently, only one in 10 Quebec residents feel that sovereignty is likely to occur within the next two years (down 14 points since October 2005), while 74 per cent feel this is unlikely (up 23 points over the same time period). Similarly, when asked about the likelihood of Quebec separation in the next five years, Quebecers are decidedly more inclined than they were a few months ago to say this is unlikely to occur (65 per cent, up from 49 per cent in October 2005). Moreover, the majority of Quebecers now feel it is unlikely that their province will separate from Canada in the next 10 years (59 per cent, up from 35 per cent in October 2005).

Residents from outside Quebec are even less likely than their Quebec counterparts to think Quebec will secede sometime in the next decade. Fewer than one in ten residents from outside Quebec feel Quebec separation will occur in the next two or five years (six and nine per cent, respectively), and fewer than one in five (18 per cent) feel Quebec separation is likely in the next 10 years.

Tracking this data over the longer term reveals a fair degree of volatility over the past decade in views on the likelihood of Quebec separation. Throughout the late 1990s and earlier this decade, belief in the likelihood of Quebec separation diminished dramatically. However, revelations about the sponsorship program and the ensuing Gomery Commission fuelled support for separation in Quebec in recent years. In the wake of the recent federal election, the perceived likelihood of Quebec separation is back to levels seen earlier this decade.

