

Rethinking

Government

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

Wave 3 Executive Summary

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Satisfaction With Government

Results from this sounding of Rethinking Government suggest that satisfaction with federal government performance has declined in recent months. The proportion of Canadians who say they approve of Government of Canada performance is down six points since August 2006 (to 31 per cent), and the proportion who take a negative view of federal performance is up a corresponding six points over this timeframe (to 38 per cent).

Looking at public satisfaction with the Government of Canada's overall direction also reveals a decline in approval ratings. The proportion of Canadians who feel the Government of Canada is moving in the right direction is down eight points since August 2006 (and currently stands at 46 per cent). The proportion who feel the Government of Canada is moving in the wrong direction is up a full 12 points since August (to 48 per cent).

Canadians were also asked to rate the Government of Canada's performance across a range of specific areas (e.g., maintaining Canada's high standard of living, providing strong leadership, maintaining a clean and healthy environment). Results reveal that the federal government gets its highest grades in terms of maintaining Canada's high standard of living, with the plurality feeling the government is doing a good job in this area (45 per cent). Canadians express more mixed/negative views across the other issues tested. Only one in three or fewer feel the Government of Canada is doing a good job in terms of addressing their needs, providing leadership on key issues, providing a vision of the future, maintaining a clean and healthy environment, or solving the big problems of the day. Tracking this data reveals fairly consistent results with those found in October 2005, with the exception of maintaining a clean and healthy environment which is down nine points since October 2005 (and down 16 points since October 2004).

Trust and Ethics

Rethinking Government results also reveal that trust in the Government of Canada has declined since May 2006 (and is back to October 2005 levels). Currently, fewer than three in ten Canadians (29 per cent) say they trust the Government of Canada (down five points since May 2006), and one in three (32 per cent) express little trust in the Government of Canada (up a corresponding five points over the same timeframe).

On two other key indicators of trust and ethics, we also see rising levels of political cynicism expressed by the Canadian public. Currently two-thirds of Canadians (65 per cent – up two per cent since May 2006) agree that those elected to Parliament soon lose touch with people (and only 19 per cent disagree with this idea). Moreover, the majority of Canadians (53 per cent – up four points since May 2006), agree that they “don't think government cares much about what people like me think.” This not only

represents a noticeable increase in cynicism over the past six months, but also a departure from what began as a decline in cynicism earlier this year.

Canada Revenue Agency

This edition of Rethinking Government also contained a number of questions examining views on the Canada Revenue Agency (CRA).

Survey results reveal that Canadians are largely unaware of CRA efforts in dealing with tax cheating: only six per cent say they are very aware of what the CRA is doing to deal with tax cheating, and 30 per cent say they are somewhat aware of CRA efforts in this area. Despite limited awareness of CRA efforts to deal with tax cheating, more than seven in ten of those who are aware of these efforts believe they are either somewhat (63 per cent) or very (nine per cent) effective. Moreover, agreement that CRA's approach for dealing with tax cheating is effective is up nine points since 2005. Survey results also indicate that Canadians want more information about this issue: 83 per cent of Canadians say they would like more information about what the CRA is doing to address tax cheating.

Turning to the security of the personal taxpayer information that CRA collects, findings suggest that Canadians generally feel their taxpayer information is secure. Three in four Canadians (74 per cent) believe their personal taxpayer information is very (20 per cent) or moderately (54 per cent) secure, while fewer than one in four (24 per cent) feel it is not secure.

Respondents were also asked how important it is that the CRA notify them in the event that their personal taxpayer information was lost or stolen. Results reveal that the vast majority of Canadians (90 per cent) would want the CRA to immediately notify them of this situation, and a similarly large majority of Canadians (86 per cent) feel the CRA should notify them even if there is no evidence that the information would be used without their consent.

Health and Health Care

Improving the health care system continues to be a key issue for both the federal and provincial governments. Findings from this edition of Rethinking Government suggest there has been some significant improvement in public views on this issue in recent months. The proportion of Canadians who believe health care has deteriorated over the last two years is down seven points since May 2006, and now stands at 39 per cent. Moreover, while still fewer than one in five, the proportion of Canadians who feel the quality of health care in Canada has improved in recent years is up three per cent since May 2006 (to 19 per cent), and Canadians are now twice as likely as they were a few years ago to feel this way.

Despite an increase in optimism about the quality of health care, Canadians' confidence in their ability to access necessary health care services has remained largely stable over the past year. Six in ten (62 per cent) express confidence that if they or a family member became seriously ill, they would be able to access the necessary health care services, and about one in four (27 per cent) disagrees with this idea (these results are virtually identical to those found in October 2005).

This edition of Rethinking Government also continued to examine support for individuals paying extra to get quicker access to health care services. Survey results suggest that support for two-tiered health care has plateaued: currently 39 per cent of Canadians agree with this idea (up two points since August 2006), while 50 per cent (identical with August 2006 results) support the continuation of the single-payer public system. These results have remained largely stable over the past several years, characterized by only intermittent upward or downward movement.

Canadians were also asked about their satisfaction with government efforts to help ensure that environmental factors do not adversely affect the health of Canadians. Results reveal a desire on the part of Canadians to see the government take more action in this area, with half (50 per cent) indicating that the Government of Canada could do more in this area. Three in 10 feel the government has done little to ensure that environmental factors do not adversely affect Canadians' health, and 14 per cent feel it has done nothing. Interestingly, virtually no one felt the Government of Canada had done a great deal in this area (two per cent).

The survey went on to examine awareness and perceptions of the new Clean Air Act, introduced in October of this year. Results reveal that despite the relative infancy of this initiative, six in 10 Canadians say they have at least some knowledge of the Act: 25 per cent say they clearly recall seeing or hearing about it, and 36 per cent say they vaguely recall seeing or hearing something about it.

Respondents were then asked to rate the extent to which they thought the Clean Air Act would improve air quality, benefit the health of Canadians, and reduce the contribution of air pollution and greenhouse gases to climate change. Results reveal that a slight majority of Canadians agree that the Act will have a positive impact in all three of these areas, while one in three feel the Clean Air Act will have a limited impact on these issues (one in ten are unsure). Interestingly, those who express clear awareness of the Clean Air Act are *less* likely to feel the Act will have a positive impact on all the issues tested.

Views on Immigration

This edition of Rethinking Government also continued to examine public perceptions regarding immigration to Canada. Results reveal that most Canadians (50 per cent) continue to feel the number of immigrants coming to Canada is about right, and only one in four (27 per cent) believe there are too many immigrants coming to the country. The proportion of Canadians who feel there are too many immigrants is up two points since May 2006, but still hovers at historically low levels.

Given that the lion's share of immigrants to Canada come from the Asia Pacific region, Africa and the Middle East, it is not surprising that views on whether or not there are too few or too many visible minorities immigrating to Canada largely mirror views on immigration in general. The majority of Canadians (55 per cent) believe the number of visible minorities coming to Canada is about right, and fewer than one in five (18 per cent) say there are too many visible minority immigrants entering the country. The proportion of Canadians reporting there are too many visible minorities immigrating to Canada has declined somewhat since May 2006 (down three per cent).

Views on Foreign Ownership and the Impact of S&T Investment

The issue of foreign ownership of Canadian firms has garnered much media attention recently. This edition of Rethinking Government tracked a number of questions examining the public's views on foreign ownership of Canadian businesses. Results suggest that Canadians continue to express concern about this issue. More than seven in ten (73 per cent – up three points since 2004) believe that the rate of U.S. and foreign ownership of Canadian companies is higher today than it was 20 years ago, and only four per cent think it is lower. Moreover, three-quarters of Canadians (75 per cent) say they are very (32 per cent) or somewhat (43 per cent) concerned about the rate of foreign ownership of Canadian firms (up from 72 per cent in 2004), and only one in four are not concerned about this issue.

Canadians were also asked, unaided, which sector of the economy they felt is currently experiencing the strongest growth. Not surprisingly, given rising oil prices and the potential of the Alberta oil sands to become a significant source of oil production, the petroleum sector is seen as experiencing the strongest growth (mentioned by 19 per cent of the respondents), followed distantly by construction and housing (eight per cent), technology (eight per cent), natural resources (seven per cent) and energy/hydroelectricity (six per cent).

When asked which sector of the economy would experience the most growth over the next few years, responses are largely similar to those provided above. Petroleum is once again mentioned most often (18 per cent), followed by technology (14 per cent) natural resources (11 per cent), energy/hydro electricity (nine per cent), and construction/housing (eight per cent).

This edition of Rethinking Government also asked Canadians to rate the extent to which they thought government investment in science and technology contributes to a number of areas (e.g., Canadians' quality of life, the strength of Canada's economy). Results reveal that Canadians believe government investment in science and technology contributes to all of the areas tested. Two-thirds believe science and technology investment significantly contributes to Canadians' quality of life, and a strengthened economy, while six in ten believe that investment in science and technology contributes significantly to Canada's economic position in the world, and the number of jobs in Canada.

People with Disabilities

According to Statistics Canada, in 2001 approximately 3.6 million people (12.4 per cent of the population) reported having a disability.¹ While there is no authoritative definition of the word "disability" in Canada (indeed, both the Canadian Human Rights Act and the Employment Equity Act have differing views on what constitutes a disability), the term is generally understood to refer to a physical, emotional or mental impairment. In recent years there has been much demand for increased advocacy for the disabled, who are seen as valuable members of Canadian society. This iteration of Rethinking Government examined Canadians' broad views on issues related to people with disabilities.

¹ <http://www.statcan.ca/english/freepub/89-577-XIE/canada.htm>

Respondents were first asked, unaided, what comes to mind when they think of the word disability. “Physically challenged” and “handicapped” were mentioned most often (18 per cent and 16 per cent, respectively), followed by wheelchair/mobility issues (12 per cent) and the need for daily assistance (nine per cent). All other responses were mentioned by five per cent or fewer respondents.

The survey went on to examine Canadians’ familiarity with the issues faced by people with disabilities. Results reveal that Canadians express strong self-rated familiarity with disability issues. Fully two-thirds of Canadians say they are very (24 per cent) or somewhat (44 per cent) familiar with the issues faced by people with disabilities, and fewer than one-third say they are not very (24 per cent) or not at all (eight per cent) familiar with these issues. Results also reveal that a strong majority of Canadians (73 per cent) believe that people with disabilities face significant barriers in their daily lives.

Given the belief that disabled Canadians face significant barriers in their day-to-day lives, it is not surprising that strong support exists for the creation of a Federal Commissioner of Disability and Inclusion whose role would be to promote the social well-being of people with disabilities. Fully three in four Canadians strongly (41 per cent) or somewhat (35 per cent) support the creation of such a position, and only one in five say they oppose this idea.

Views on Confederation and Quebec Separation

This edition of Rethinking Government also asked Canadians for their preference in terms of the balance of power between federal and provincial governments. Results reveal that the plurality of Canadians feel the federal government should devolve more powers to the provinces (47 per cent), while about one in three (36 per cent) prefer that the current arrangement between the federal and provincial governments be maintained. Few Canadians feel the federal government should assume more power than it currently does (14 per cent). Tracking this data reveals an increase in preference for federal devolution of powers since 2005, and a corresponding decline in preference for the status quo, or for the federal government to assume more power than it currently does.

Turning to views on the likelihood of Quebec separation, results reveal that the perceived likelihood of Quebec separation has risen in Quebec over the past few months. While only 13 per cent of Quebec residents feel that sovereignty is likely to occur within the next two years, this is up three per cent since May 2006 (and belief that Quebec separation is unlikely to occur over the next two years is down nine points since May 2006). Similarly, belief that Quebec separation is unlikely to occur in the next five years is down three points since May 2006. And, more than one in four Quebeckers now feel it is likely that their province will separate from Canada in the next 10 years (27 per cent, up from 22 per cent in May 2006).

Interestingly, while Quebec residents are now more likely to feel Quebec separation is a possibility within the next decade, residents from the rest of Canada are now *less* inclined to think Quebec separation will occur. Across all three of the timeframes tested, belief that Quebec separation is unlikely to occur is up since May 2006.

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. Belief in the likelihood of Quebec separation diminished dramatically throughout the late 1990s and earlier this decade, 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 2006 federal election, belief in the likelihood of Quebec separation receded dramatically in Quebec, however, the perceived likelihood of separation is again on the rise among residents of Quebec.

