

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## ***Priorities and Satisfaction with Government***

Over the past several years, Rethinking Government has asked Canadians how they would prefer to use any future budgetary surpluses: to reduce debt, lower taxes, or invest in social programs. Results reveal that Canadians continue to prefer investment in social programs over tax cuts or debt reduction. Nearly six in 10 (57 per cent) indicate that they would like to see any surplus invested in social programs, although this is down two points since 2006. Twenty per cent would like to see the surplus used to lower taxes, and roughly the same proportion (21 per cent) prefer debt reduction.

Rethinking Government findings also suggest that recent tax cuts implemented by the federal government have begun to register with many Canadians. Belief that the federal government has been reducing taxes in the last couple of years is up seven points since 2006, and up 13 points since 2005 (although it should be noted that only 20 per cent of Canadians feel the Government of Canada has been reducing taxes in recent years). Results also reveal a significant decline in the proportion of Canadians who feel the Government has been increasing taxes in the last couple of years – down 4 points over the past year, and down 16 points since 2005. However, as in past years, most Canadians (53 per cent) believe the federal government has been leaving taxes about the same.

Turning to satisfaction with government, Rethinking Government findings suggest a slight improvement in views on the direction of the Government of Canada. The proportion of Canadians who feel the Government of Canada is moving in the right direction has increased three points since May 2007 (and currently stands at 52 per cent), while the number who feel the federal government is moving in the wrong direction has remained stable at 40 per cent.

Results also suggest that Canadians express more favourable views on overall federal performance than they did a few months ago. Positive appraisal of Government of Canada performance is up four points since May 2007 (to 37 per cent), while negative views on federal performance have decreased slightly over this same timeframe (down one point to 31 per cent).

## ***Job Skills***

Rethinking Government results reveal that Canadians continue to feel confident about their knowledge and skills. Close to seven in ten Canadians (69 per cent) say they are confident that they have the knowledge and skills to move easily in today's labour market, and only one in ten (12 per cent) disagree with this idea. These results have remained largely stable over the past year.

In a related question, Canadians were asked if they thought their job skills would become obsolete over the next five and ten years. Results reveal that the majority of Canadians disagree that their job skills will become obsolete over both these timeframes. Only one in four (26 per cent) express concern that their job skills will become obsolete over the next ten years, and even fewer (21 per cent) express concern about the obsolescence of their job skills in the next five years. Findings further reveal that Canadians' concern about the relevance of their skills in the future has decreased over the past year: down three points for the five year timeframe, and down one point for the ten year timeframe.

## ***Trust and Ethics***

This edition of Rethinking Government also continued to track Canadian views on trust, ethics, and accountability in the federal government. Results reveal that Canadians continue to express cynicism about trust and ethics in the federal government, although there has been some improvement in this area. More than half of Canadians (55 per cent) agree that the ethical standards of the federal government have slipped badly in the past decade, and only one in five (20 per cent) disagree. These results have remained largely stable over the past few months, but are down significantly from February 2006 when 65 per cent of Canadians agreed the ethical standards of the federal government had declined in the past decade. Similarly, half of Canadians (50 per cent) agree that the ethical standards of the federal public service have slipped badly in the past decade, and only 23 per cent disagree. However, agreement is down two points since February 2007, and down a full nine points since October 2005.

Looking at the more general question of government as a positive force, we see a significant increase in Canadians' agreement with the idea that government is a positive force in their lives. Currently, four out of ten Canadians (41 per cent) feel government is a positive force (up seven points since February 2007), and only one in three disagree with this idea (33 per cent – down three points since February 2007).

The issue of trust was also explored through an examination of perceived influences on public policy in Canada. Respondents were asked (through a paired choice exercise) to indicate which groups currently have, and which groups should have, the most influence in defining public policies in Canada. As in past years, the media topped the list of those who are perceived to *have* the most influence (chosen over other groups 59 per cent of the time), while average citizens topped the list of those groups who *should* have the most influence (chosen over other groups 80 per cent of the time).

We also conducted a gap analysis between those who *should have* influence and those who are perceived to *actually have* influence over public policy. The findings suggest that the group which is seen as exerting the least amount of influence relative to what it should in defining public policy consists of Canadians themselves (a whopping 54 per cent deficit). Senior public servants and parliamentarians are also seen as exerting less influence than they should (11 point deficits for both these groups). At the other end of the spectrum, the media (38 point surplus), senior business leaders (18 point surplus), political advisors (nine point surplus) and lobbyists/special interest groups (14 point surplus) are seen as currently exerting more influence over public policies than they should.

In order to get a sense of what could be done to restore confidence in government, Rethinking Government asked Canadians which of a range of options would be most effective in improving the level of honesty and reducing corruption in the federal government. Requiring full, immediate disclosure of all contracts and subcontracts on a central website, requiring all donations be disclosed and posted on a single website, increasing the resources and authority of the Auditor General, and having a truly independent ethics czar who reports to Parliament are seen as the most effective measures to improve the level of honesty in government among the ideas tested. Doubling the resources and efforts of the RCMP in investigating these issues was seen as the least effective action to improve honesty in the federal government. Tracking this data reveals that support for increasing the resources of the Auditor General is up seven points since August 2006, and support for having a truly independent ethics czar is up four points over the past year. Interestingly, doubling the resources of the RCMP shows a significant drop in support (down 12 percentage points over the past year), possibly due to the recent investigations and allegations of corruption in the RCMP.

## ***Health Care***

Improving the public health care system has been a key priority for both federal and provincial governments for some time now. Despite efforts to improve our health care system, survey findings suggest there has been little improvement in public views on this issue. More than half of Canadians (51 per cent) disagree with the idea that the federal government will be able to improve the health care system in the next two years (up one point since February 2007), while fewer than one in three (31 per cent) express confidence that the system can be improved in the near future (although this is up two points since February 2007).

This edition of Rethinking Government also continued to examine support for individuals paying extra to get quicker access to health care services. Survey results reveal that Canadians continue to be divided about this issue. A slight plurality of Canadians (46 per cent) disagree with the idea of a two-tiered health care system, however, a sizeable minority (41 per cent) supports the idea of paying extra for quicker access to health care. These results have remained largely stable since May 2007, however, agreement with the idea of individuals paying extra for quicker access to health care is up three points since February 2007.

## ***Views on Confederation and National Unity***

Despite the federal government's efforts to address the "fiscal imbalance" in Canada, Rethinking Government results suggest that Canadians continue to feel their province does not receive its fair share of federal funding (although there has been some improvement in this area over the past several years). Currently, just under half of Canadians (45 per cent) agree that their province puts more money into the Confederation than it gets out, while fewer than one in five (18 per cent) disagree with this idea. Tracking this data reveals that Canadians' agreement with the idea that their province puts more into Confederation than it gets out is up two points since February 2007, but has declined eight points since May 2005, when more than half of Canadians (53 per cent) felt their province contributed more money to Confederation than it received.

Rethinking Government findings also reveal that over half of Canadians (52 per cent) believe their province receives less than its fair share of federal spending – although this is down one point from May 2005, and down six points since 2002. One-third of Canadians (33 per cent) feel their province receives its fair share of spending, and only eight per cent feel their province receives more than its fair share of federal spending.

Canadians were asked which of three ideas related to recognizing the unique character of Quebec is closest to their own point of view (i.e., it is important that the Canadian constitution recognize the unique character of Quebec; we are wasting our time with this issue—there are other priorities that are more important; or recognizing the unique character of Quebec in the Canadian constitution would be wrong). Results reveal that the majority of Canadians (56 per cent) think there are other priorities that are more important than recognizing the unique character of Quebec, while fewer than one in three (30 per cent) feel that the Canadian constitution should recognize Quebec's unique character. Interestingly, only one in ten (10 per cent) believe that recognizing the unique character of Quebec would be wrong.

Not surprisingly, these results vary dramatically between Quebec and the rest of Canada. Quebecers are most likely to think it is important that the Canadian constitution recognize the unique character of Quebec (50 per cent), while fewer than three in ten from any of the other provinces agrees with this idea. Conversely, residents from outside Quebec are most likely to feel there are other priorities that are more important than recognizing Quebec's unique character (with roughly six in ten or more agreeing with this idea), while fewer than four in ten Quebecers (39 per cent) feel there are other, more important issues than recognizing Quebec's unique character.

The idea of Quebec "autonomy" gained prominence after the surprisingly strong showing of the Action Démocratique du Québec (ADQ) party in the March 2007 Quebec election. Although the notion of Quebec autonomy has not been clearly defined, the general implication is that Quebec can operate in a more decentralized Canadian federation without actually seceding from the country. This edition of Rethinking Government asked Quebecers if they thought the idea of Quebec autonomy is closer to federalism, closer to sovereignty, or something altogether different. Results suggest that Quebecers clearly see Quebec autonomy as being closer to sovereignty than federalism (33 per cent versus 18 per cent, respectively). However, the plurality of Quebecers (38 per cent) think Quebec autonomy is something altogether different.

Quebeckers were also asked if they consider themselves to be mainly a federalist, mainly a sovereigntist, mainly an autonomist, or someone who is none of the above. Results reveal very mixed views on this issue: one in four Quebecers (25 per cent) define themselves as being mainly sovereigntist, and roughly the same proportion (22 per cent) consider themselves to be mainly federalist. One in five (18 per cent) describe themselves as autonomists, while the plurality of Quebec residents (32 per cent) say they are none of these.

As in previous years, Quebec residents were asked which of four options they would prefer for Quebec (complete independence, sovereignty association, decentralized federalism, or the status quo). Findings reveal no clear consensus on this issue, with none of these options garnering more than 28 per cent support. Tracking this data reveals somewhat inconsistent views expressed about Quebec's political

status. Support for complete independence is down four points since February 2007 to 17 per cent, however, support for sovereignty association is up two points (to 28 per cent). Support for the “federalist” options of decentralized federalism and the status quo are also up two points over this time period.

When forced to choose between complete independence from Canada or maintenance of the status quo, results suggest that Quebeckers are becoming more polarized in their views on this issue: support for both complete independence and the status quo have increased since February 2007 (although the status quo is clearly the preferred option). Just over one in three (38 per cent) currently prefer complete independence under this forced choice scenario (up two points since February 2007), while the majority of Quebeckers (57 per cent) say they would choose the status quo (an increase of three points since February 2007).

