

Rethinking

Government

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

Executive Summary

March 2008



EKOS
Research Associates Inc.

Copyright 2008©
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

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 12 points since November 2007 (to 32 per cent), while the proportion who take a negative view of federal performance is up three points over this time period (to 33 per cent). Canadians are now much more likely to offer a neutral response when asked about federal performance (34 per cent, up from 26 per cent in November 2007).

Results also reveal a decline in satisfaction with Government of Canada direction. The proportion of Canadians who feel the Government of Canada is moving in the right direction is down four points since November 2007 (and currently stands at 52 per cent), while the proportion who feel the Government of Canada is moving in the wrong direction is up two points since November (to 39 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 almost half of Canadians feeling the government is doing a good job in this area (46 per cent). A clear plurality of Canadians also feels that the federal government does a good job in terms of keeping communities safe (43 per cent). However, Canadians express more mixed/negative views across the other issues tested. Only about one in three feel the Government of Canada is doing a good job in maintaining a clean and healthy environment (35 per cent), providing a vision for the future (34 per cent), addressing Canadians' needs (33 per cent), or providing leadership on key issues (33 per cent). And, at the bottom of the list of tested issues, only about one in four (27 per cent) feel the Government of Canada is doing a good job in terms of solving the big problems of the day. Tracking this data reveals fairly consistent results with those found over the past several years, with the exception of maintaining a clean and healthy environment which is up four points since October 2006, but down 12 points since October 2004.

Views on the Government of Canada

This edition of Rethinking Government also examined public views on federal government operations. Results reveal that a majority of Canadians (55 per cent) agree that federal programs and services make a difference in their lives, although agreement is down 11 points since January 2005. Results also reveal that almost half of Canadians (49 per cent – up nine points since November 2005) feel public servants demonstrate integrity in their work, and only one in four (23 per cent) disagree with this idea.

Canadians are more negative in their appraisal of Government of Canada efforts to improve the overall management of its operations. Fewer than one in three Canadians (30 per cent) agree with the idea that the Government of Canada is doing enough to improve its operations (although agreement is up eight points since November 2005).

Canadians were also asked whether they felt the federal public service is a better or worse run organization compared to five years ago (or whether there had been no change). Results reveal that the majority (53 per cent – down seven points since 2005) feel there has been no change in the way the public service is run compared to five years ago. Among those who take a position on this issue, there is a clear lean towards seeing the federal public service as being better run (26 per cent – up nine points since 2005), rather than worse run (17 per cent – down two points since 2005).

The survey also examined public views on the Government of Canada across three key criteria (service, accountability, and management of taxpayer dollars). Results reveal fairly mixed views on government performance across these issues. The majority of Canadians believe the quality of service provided by the Government of Canada has stayed the same over the past year (56 per cent). Among those who feel it has changed, there is a lean towards believing there has been an improvement (24 per cent) rather than a deterioration (19 per cent) in federal service quality. Looking at the issue of accountability, results reveal that the plurality of Canadians (46 per cent) believe that accountability in the Government of Canada has remained the same over the past year. Roughly the same proportion feel accountability in the federal government has deteriorated (27 per cent) as feel it has improved (26 per cent). Results also reveal that the plurality of Canadians believe the government's management of taxpayers' dollars has remained largely the same over the past year (45 per cent). Among those who feel it has changed, there is a lean towards believing there has been a deterioration (29 per cent) rather than an improvement (24 per cent) in this area.

Trust and Ethics

This edition of Rethinking Government continued to track Canadian views on trust and ethics in the federal government.

Findings suggest that Canadians have become somewhat less trusting of the Government of Canada in recent months. The proportion of Canadians who express a great deal of trust in the federal government is down three points since November 2007 (to 33 per cent), while three in ten (29 per cent – up six points since November 2007) now say they have little trust in the Government of Canada.

Survey results also suggest that Canadians continue to question the ethical standards of the federal government, although there has been some improvement in this area. More than half of Canadians (51 per cent) agree that the ethical standards of the federal government have slipped badly in the past decade, while only one in five (22 per cent) disagree. However, agreement is down four points since November 2007, and 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 (49 per cent) agree with the idea that the ethical standards of the federal public service have slipped badly in the past decade and only 24 per cent disagree. However, agreement with this idea is down three points since February 2007, and down a full 10 points since October 2005.

Looking at the more general question of government as a positive force, we see a decrease in Canadians' belief that government is a positive force in their lives. Currently, 36 per cent of Canadians feel government is a positive force (down five points since August 2007), and roughly the same proportion disagree with this idea (35 per cent – up two points since August 2007).

Economic Insecurity

This edition of Rethinking Government also continued to examine Canadians' economic fears and concerns. Results from these questions are discussed below.

Despite concerns about a possible recession in both the United States and Canada, Canadians express low levels of concern about their economic future (although concerns have increased somewhat over the past few months). Currently, just over one in four Canadians (27 per cent) feel they have “lost all control” over their economic future, while six in ten (57 per cent) disagree with this idea. Agreement with this idea is up three percentage points since May 2007, however still hovers at historically low levels.

Results also reveal that only one in five employed Canadians (21 per cent) believe there is a “good chance” they could lose their job over the next couple of years, while fully seven in ten (69 per cent) disagree with this idea. As with economic insecurity, fear of job loss has increased somewhat over the past year, but is down dramatically from the late 1990s when almost half of employed Canadians felt there was a good chance they could lose their jobs in the near future.

Health Care

This edition of Rethinking Government continued to examine support for individuals paying extra to get quicker access to health care services. Survey results suggest that Canadians have become somewhat less receptive to two-tiered health care than they were a few months ago. More than half of Canadians (51 per cent) disagree with the idea of paying extra for quicker access to health care (up five points since August 2007), while fewer than four in ten (37 per cent, down four points since August) supports this idea.

Turning to Canadians' views on whether the quality of health care has improved, deteriorated, or stayed the same over the past two years, results reveal an improvement in perceptions on this issue over the past year or so. Four in ten Canadians (40 per cent) feel the quality of health care has deteriorated over the past two years (down from 42 per cent in May 2007), while those who believe health care is improving is up two percentage points (to 19 per cent) over this same time period (a further 40 per cent feel health care quality has remained the same over the past two years). Looking at this issue over a longer time frame

reveals that Canadian confidence in the quality of health care is significantly higher than in the late 1990s, when seven in ten Canadians felt health care quality was deteriorating.

Despite an increase in belief that the quality of health care has improved in recent years, Canadians remain fairly pessimistic about the future of the health care system. 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, while fewer than three in ten (29 per cent) express confidence that the system can be improved in the near future. These results have remained largely stable over the past several years.

Transportation Safety

This edition of Rethinking Government also continued to ask Canadians how confident they are in the safety and security of various modes of Canada's transportation system (i.e., rail, air, marine and road travel). Results reveal that Canadians continue to assign the highest level of confidence to air travel (55 per cent) and rail travel (49 per cent). Canadians express somewhat less confidence in the safety of the other modes of travel (although few Canadians assign low safety ratings to any of the modes of transportation examined). Just over four in ten Canadians (42 per cent) assign high safety and security ratings to marine travel, and three in ten Canadians (29 per cent) assign high safety ratings to road travel. These results have remained largely stable over the past year for air, rail and marine travel, however, perhaps due to a much more severe winter season (compared to last year), we find a four point drop in the perceived safety of road travel since 2007.

Canadians were also asked specifically about their confidence in the safety of air travel. Similar to the previous question about the safety and security of air travel, the majority of Canadians (61 per cent) express confidence in the safety of air travel, and very few express little confidence (two per cent). These results have remained largely stable since 2006.

Those who expressed little confidence in the safety of air travel were asked a number of follow-up questions. They were first asked the main reason their confidence in air travel was not higher. Results reveal that no one reason dominates: about one in ten cited a perceived lack of safety/security measures (11 per cent), hearing about recent incidents/accidents (11 per cent), or a lack of experience with air travel (10 per cent). These respondents were also asked if there was anything airlines could do to increase their confidence in air travel. Better security/screening was mentioned most often (15 per cent), followed by better maintenance/inspections of planes (seven per cent). Finally, these respondents were asked if there was anything the Government of Canada could do to increase their confidence in air travel. Ensuring stricter regulations (16 per cent), improved security inspections (12 per cent), and general policy improvements (10 per cent) were mentioned most often.

Energy and the Environment

This edition of Rethinking Government also examined Canadians' views on energy and the environment.

Results suggest that Canadians believe that energy efficiency and regulation on energy use should be a significantly higher priority for the country than expanding energy production. Four out of five Canadians (79 per cent) believe that becoming more energy efficient and regulating energy use is a greater priority for Canada than expanding energy exploration and the construction of new power plants (15 per cent), although support for energy efficiency is down three points since 2006, while support for expanding exploration and the construction of new power plants is up two points over this same time frame.

Canadians also express a strong preference for protection of the environment and public health over an uninterrupted supply of energy or low energy prices. When forced to choose amongst these three issues, about seven in ten (72 per cent) believe protection of the environment and public health should be the top energy priority for governments in Canada. Fewer than one in seven selected uninterrupted supplies of oil, gas, and electricity (14 per cent) or low prices for consumers (13 per cent).

We asked a similar question regarding energy priorities, however the focus of the question was changed from “protection of the environment and public health” to “protection of the environment”. Findings reveal that Canadians still endorse protection of the environment as the top energy priority for government, however they are somewhat less likely to choose this option when not connected with public health (61 per cent). One in five feel uninterrupted energy supplies should be the top priority (20 per cent), and one in six would prefer to see governments focus on low prices for consumers (18 per cent).

Canadians were also asked to rate the extent to which they agreed with potential government initiatives to help protect the environment. Survey results reveal strong support for the ideas tested. Nine in ten Canadians (88 per cent – up four points since 2006) agree the Government of Canada should give tax credits to people who improve the energy efficiency of their homes, and 81 per cent (up two points since 2006) feel tax credits should be given to those who purchase energy efficient homes, appliances and vehicles.

Views on Quebec Separation

As in past years, Quebec residents were asked which of four options they would prefer for Quebec (complete independence, sovereignty association, decentralized federalism, or the status quo). Results reveal no clear consensus on this issue, with none of these options garnering more than 27 per cent support. Tracking this data reveals somewhat inconsistent views expressed about Quebec’s political status. Support for complete independence is up four points since August 2007 to 21 per cent, however, support for sovereignty association is down five points (to 23 per cent). At the same time, Quebecers’ support for decentralized federalism is down four points since August 2007, while support for the status quo is up four points over this time period.

When forced to choose between complete independence from Canada or maintenance of the status quo, findings suggest that Quebecers’ support for the status quo is down five points since August 2007, while support for complete independence is up two points since August (although the status quo is still the preferred option). Four in ten (40 per cent) currently prefer complete independence under this forced choice scenario, while a majority of Quebec residents (52 per cent) say they would choose the status quo.

