

Liberal Renewal Commission

Task Force on Civic Engagement

Written and prepared by Peter MacLeod, task force chair
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You don't engage people by trying to engage them.

— *Michael Walzer*

Summary

As our eighteenth century political institutions struggle to maintain their legitimacy in the twenty-first century, representative government has reached an important juncture. Neither stronger leadership nor tighter, more sophisticated messaging will keep the system alive.

We need a new set of concepts and strategies that can help urge us forwards.

This report calls on the Liberal Party of Canada to renew its democratic commitment by opening new channels and building more people, more directly into the democratic process. Declining voter turn-out, growing public cynicism, falling party membership: each is an invitation to rethink what we know about contemporary politics and how the game gets played.

This report sketches out the basis for a new Engagement Imperative that puts citizens first and works to enhance the political agency and public involvement of all Canadians.

Seventeen recommendations follow, including:

- A new national agency to consolidate and improve the government's consultation processes
- National Citizens' Assemblies on issues like climate change and child care
- The creation of a government and partisan polling registry
- Royal Commissions on Canadian Democracy and Canada in 2067
- A dramatically expanded role for Service Canada
- New resources for federal constituency offices
- A world-first civic micro-grants program for citizens

Introduction

This report has provided a fine occasion to draw together twenty Canadians for an extended conversation about their experience as citizens and their relationship to political parties, politicians and the state. Is it representative? Not really. The members of this task force span a wide range of disciplines and live in different parts of the country. I also consider many of them friends – willing to be generous with their time and able to think deeply about why the relationship between citizens and politicians continues to erode. Some are members of the Liberal party, others, like myself, are not. All hope for a Liberal party that is a strong and progressive force in Canadian politics. And all believe that there's still much work to be done.

Ultimately, it falls to me as chair to make sense of our deliberations, to stitch together excerpts from our exchange and find a common thread that leads us forwards. I have in every way tried to be faithful to the spirit of our conversation and I hope that the result is both provocative and useful.

The basis for this report is a series of four exchanges conducted by email in May and June. Each exchange posed three questions and members took time to reflect and draft their replies. Once collected, a digest of those replies was returned to members, along with three more questions, prompted by their responses and interests.

Like any good conversation, we told stories and our different interests and perspectives carried us across varied ground. Because we were asked to focus on civic engagement rather than democratic reform, I was adamant that this conversation not begin with a lengthy review of our parliamentary institutions or the equity of our electoral system. Therefore, anyone hoping for guidance on Liberal attitudes towards the subjects of proportional representation or senate reform will be disappointed.

My own bias here should be stated. While many of these structural reforms may be necessary and are certainly worthy of debate, I do not believe that democratic reforms of this kind are in themselves sufficient to the task of enlivening and deepening the relationship between citizens and their government. We need only look to the many countries that have enacted these reforms to see that they are no panacea. More than this, I worry that the debate over electoral, senate and constitutional reform frequently trumps other important discussions about how citizens can enjoy greater political agency and responsiveness from government *between* elections and *beyond* Parliament Hill.

Definitions and implications

For the purposes of our discussion “civic engagement” has meant three things. We’ve wanted to think about how government can better engage citizens, how parties can better engage the public and how the Liberal party in particular can engage its members. Uniting these perspectives is a guiding principle that we hope will inform how the party understands this issue. In this respect we think the obvious deserves to be said: civic engagement is not something that can be simply bolted-on as a means to securing the status quo. This is not about extending citizens the courtesy of being consulted, but it is about finding new and better ways to conduct public business. As such, the implications of civic engagement as a political project are necessarily radical and far-reaching. They challenge us to rethink what we know and how we think about politics.

Of course, to some, the idea of a new politics of engagement will seem superfluous. They will point to the many avenues for participation that already exist and argue that our mode of representative government offers all the channels necessary to accommodate public interest. Rightly, they will point to the ease with which all political parties can be joined, and to the accessibility of our elected officials and political elites. Says today’s political insider: “The door is open, the game is there to be played. It’s only a person’s priorities or preferences that dissuades him or her from seeking a more active role in public life.”

This position is seductive because it reinforces the belief that what is is good and what is is sufficient, if only for an ambitious and well-meaning few. Conveniently, it puts the onus on the public to account for their disinterest.

For the most part, we reject his argument, not only because it ignores the lived experience of the many more citizens who have begun to question the legitimacy of the political institutions and officials meant to serve them, but because it also ignores the more interesting and paradoxical features of modern democratic governance.

Despite living at a time when our democratic franchise has never been more secure, and when the opportunities to ‘have a say’ have, formally speaking, never been so robust, it is especially striking that so few people feel heard. Having achieved responsible government in this country, the problem now is that no matter what it does, no matter how good its intentions or real its achievements, government just doesn’t feel very responsible any more.

Objectively, we know that it is. Probably moreso than ever. But again, this only points to the paradox of the situation. Public expectations have never been as high, the collective performance

of a society's elected officials has likely never been as good and yet public cynicism has rarely been so great.

In the long term, this affliction cannot be ministered to with stronger leadership or tighter and more sophisticated messaging. Instead, it signals something more profound and offers us the occasion to think deeply about our democratic future.

The Engagement Imperative

It would help if we had better language with which to describe the importance of civic engagement. Popular, public engagement in government is, after all, the animating spirit behind our democratic evolution as a country and it remains the preeminent force for achieving popular sovereignty throughout the world. But we tend to forget this when we talk only about 'civic engagement' – which has a way of sounding both anodyne and boy scout. It's difficult to shake the idea that civic engagement is somehow an add-on — a bonus or courtesy paid but not required — to our system of government.

Yet, an engaged citizenry is the bedrock of democratic government and we need to remind ourselves that the public's engagement in public affairs is the enduring cause of Liberals and democrats alike. Ultimately, it is an emancipatory cause because it calls for nothing less than the abolition of whatever fetters prevent the personal assumption of both private and public responsibility. This is the big Liberal idea.

Liberals, rightly confident in their legacy and belief in the power of reform, should remember that democracy takes as its objective not merely the consent of citizens to be governed, but the active participation of citizens in government.

Representative democracies with their elected councils, legislatures and parliaments have clearly and historically served this objective, but their reach and penetration is necessarily constrained by their size. This is a longstanding limitation. Routine ratios of 1 speaking for 10,000 and 1 for 100,000 limit popular participation to such an extent that elected officials automatically become part of a privileged elite – no matter how populist or humble their habits of mind or action.

Not surprisingly, now, in an age of mass literacy that makes virtues of both access and choice, there is growing distrust and disinterest in a system that provides very little of either and is structured, by habit, to exclude such a significant majority from its day to day affairs.

In this way, though our formal, representative institutions continue the business of the making and passing of laws, they do so increasingly at a remove, enjoying neither the benefit nor legitimacy that greater public participation helps to ensure.

The media tells us — and perhaps we suspect it as well — that this disinterest signals decay. Two arguments get well rehearsed: first, that either disengagement is a consequence of the erosion of both civic duty and public regard for our political institutions, or second, that it is a relatively benign consequence of our success and prosperity. If you believe the first scenario, then you want to stiffen everyone's spine. Ideas like beefing up the history and civics curriculum, lowering the voting age and initiating a national mandatory service scheme are attractive. If you believe the second, then you are willing to accept that the injustices that persist are either relatively minor — hardly meriting mass public involvement — or else are too technical and abstract and are best left to the care of managerial governments that can do the mopping up while we all get on with our private lives.

Again, respectfully, we disagree. We believe — mindful of the research conducted by public commissions recently in the UK under the auspices of the Power Inquiry and in both Denmark and Norway — that both explanations, though popular, are woefully inadequate. If anything, dereliction and ennui may be comforting because they are familiar, but accepting these arguments only works to ensure that we consistently fail to look beyond our existing institutions to new arenas where public imagination is demanded and can be exercised.

Liberals need to renew their democratic commitment and recall that vigorous democracies must always be engaged in a bid to build more people, more directly into the democratic process. This is the Engagement Imperative. At its fullest measure, it requires a profound reorientation that can challenge the exclusive conventions of political leadership, legitimacy and mandate. It requires a new approach to the provision of public services and it calls for a new ethos that seeks to affirm each citizen's necessary and constructive role in respect of the state and their community.

In the abstract, the Engagement Imperative seeks to augment a formal idea about political representation with the fuller ability to recognize and respond to the potential of all citizens. Its purpose is to realize a citizen-centred society — one that goes further than any other to prize and privilege the special value and contribution each member of Canadian society can make.

In this regard, the Engagement Imperative adds special resonance to the progressive agenda. Because it is fundamentally concerned with the capacity of citizens to be full and creative actors able to manifest successful lives and fulfill various public roles, it necessarily speaks to the importance of education, prosperity and opportunity, of health and well-being, of the provision of

public services, the citizen's experience of the state and their prospects for meaningful political action.

The idea of an Engagement Imperative is meant to focus our minds and move our feet. But it is also meant to raise our awareness of the times in which we live and the powerful sociological and demographic forces that make politics-as-usual increasingly unsustainable. In this new, emerging political environment, the Liberal Party must be the party most able to speak candidly and confidently with the public, as members of the public. In a country as richly diverse as Canada, it must re-imagine leadership as the capacity to convene, co-learn, and find consensus — not simply to campaign.

And while greater engagement is imperative, let's never make the error of starting a campaign to engage Canadians. Let's instead start by removing the obstacles, opening the doors and — if we dare — *letting go*.

Three goals

The Engagement Imperative has three goals. First, it seeks to highlight the importance of **political recognition** as a complimentary virtue wholly compatible with political representation. In Canada, we recognize the special status of different communities and affirm the diverse cultures and ethnicities that make up our fabled mosaic. Canada's success as a multicultural country can largely be attributed to its success at recognizing the diverse needs of its many groups and entrenching a commitment to pluralism in our multicultural policies and in the Charter. Where we often come up short is in recognizing individuals in everyday situations. Though formally represented by parliamentarians, many Canadians often feel unrecognized — either unseen or unheard — by government departments, public servants and political parties. Representing an abstraction, rather than recognizing an individual is often times an easier task for systems designed to work in fixed categories. Real people, however, rarely fit such categories. Instead, they have their own priorities, interests and histories. As society becomes evermore individuated, the inability of political systems to recognize these distinctions inevitably leads to greater frustration, alienation and, at times, real pain. Politically, it manifests cynicism, apathy and the pervasive sense of illegitimacy.

Politicians see this in their constituency offices. Every day, citizens call and visit their MP's local office to resolve disputes and misunderstandings with public officials and departments. Their frustration is often palpable. "No one listens...I couldn't get through...They didn't understand my situation...The system isn't designed for me...I tried, but I just don't understand...It seems so impractical...Why does it need to work this way?" As constituency staffs quickly learn, listening

carefully without minding the clock is the greatest service they can offer to citizens who feel mistreated or unheard. When a citizen arrives to voice their concern about a government decision or new legislation, again they are most often satisfied not when there is agreement but when they begin to feel heard and engaged in a meaningful conversation about their perspective.

This ability to recognize need and each person's measure is the true practice of democratic politics. It should be the driver of widespread reform within the party and across the public sector.

Second, the Engagement Imperative seeks to enhance what we've chosen to call '**democratic fitness**'. We believe that successful citizenship requires more than a passing familiarity with our political institutions and history. Civic literacy is important, but it's not enough. Democratically fit citizens understand the political system and its players. They see a role for themselves. They understand the bigger picture, what's at stake and are motivated to participate. They have the skills, tools and confidence to work with other citizens and with government. Their fitness allows them to articulate and connect their concerns to the interests of others. They are interested in raising awareness and solving problems.

Democratically fit citizens may or may not be members of a political party. Members of a political party may or may not be democratically fit. What democratically fit citizens have in common is a willingness to listen, learn and respond to one another honestly and without pretense.

Democratic societies including Canada have always profited from the instincts and initiatives of their most able democrats. Whether on the national stage, within organizations or locally, they are the ones best able to stir political imagination, forge durable coalitions and exercise collective leadership.

There's no convenient index to measure and track our democratic fitness. Perhaps there should be. Until then, both in government and as a party, Liberals should focus their efforts on creating opportunities for citizens to exercise their democratic powers and cultivate greater agency and entrepreneurial skills for engaging in the public domain.

What we know is that people engage when there's something at stake. Most of the time we get it wrong. Opinion polls, focus groups, town halls and public consultations only exacerbate the problem of disengagement because they fail to offer citizens the chance to learn, refine their own opinions, receive attentive feedback and have impact.

A professor of political science recently challenged the legitimacy of Ontario's Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform, calling the idea of inviting randomly selected citizens to steer a policy process "ridiculous". Regrettably, this is exactly the attitude that frustrates efforts to create more opportunities for citizens to exercise responsible stewardship for public policy and participate more fully in the public domain. Liberals should build on the precedent set by the Citizens' Assemblies in both British Columbia and Ontario and look to appoint new Assemblies to deliberate on long-term issues that merit public attention.

It is interesting to speculate whether a national Citizens' Assembly on Kyoto, Public Housing or Childcare might help to raise public awareness and establish the basis for a more progressive political consensus.

Importantly, the Engagement Imperative may also suggest a fresh conceptual path that rejects the analysis made by those that advocate for the devolution of powers or a more "open" federation. Instead, distributed deliberation — **devolving out, not down** — should be the goal where the ability of the federal government to ensure policy coherence is maintained through its capacity to construct and open new channels that create legitimacy for political action and the federal function.

Third, the Engagement Imperative wants public systems and public experiences that help maximize our sense of **democratic fulfillment**. We all know this feeling – when we feel heard and acknowledged and when we ourselves feel the confidence and space to speak up and have the patience to listen. More than this, when we have the opportunity to contribute, to make and see a difference, our sense of agency and potential is enlivened.

We regret that too many public systems, be they political or programmatic, work in ways that are contrary to this ambition and in ways which deaden whatever sense of agency or fulfillment might reasonably be derived. This isn't necessarily so, but it will require no less than the most fundamental rethink of the ways in which we design our public systems and conceptualize our aspirations for the citizen's experience of the state. We need to shift our view and recognize that citizens, whether in regards to their personal health or as actors within their communities, are not passive consumers of public goods, but rather active co-creators of public value, both for themselves and for others. Maximizing the co-creative potential of citizens is, again, a big Liberal idea.

Efficacy alongside efficiency, **ease** alongside transparency, **personability** alongside accountability and **agency** should be the new watchwords that help inform the priorities of our public services.

Conclusion:

In the recommendations that follow we have attempted to propose a series of original reforms that speak directly to the aims of the Engagement Imperative.

We believe that the challenge of modern politics is to frame collective problems in ways that can be effectively addressed through personal action and choice. Democracy, as it now stands, is at the very real risk of being reduced to a numbers game, where majorities rule with impunity and minorities scramble after every positional advantage. Real democrats who are committed to the long game of engagement understand that these are false categories. Much as we are coming to recognize the fallacy of externalizing costs to the environment in economics, we must equally recognize that our habit of externalizing or discounting political difference is ultimately unsustainable.

We need to raise our game and pursue an idea of active citizenship that goes well above the deferential conventions of the quadrennial vote and party membership and begin to imagine what a fuller kind of engagement might entail. This is the challenge: to imagine a future for responsible government that has attained not only universal suffrage but the deeper kind of public commitment that real engagement and participation makes possible.

It has been our goal to offer new language and a fresh perspective that can help frame the engagement opportunity for Liberals. This is only the briefest sketch, but we do hope that in the words we have chosen and in some of the recommendations that follow, the contours for a new political program – and future – might begin to be perceived.

Task force Recommendations:

1. Service Canada

Created by a Liberal government, Service Canada is an innovative new agency that is streamlining public access to government services and benefits. But the full promise of Service Canada remains to be realized and the Liberal Party should commit to thinking inventively about its future. Service Canada's mandate should be expanded and its presence in Canadian communities should be enhanced. All Canadians should know, trust and use Service Canada as their local and preferred access point to federal government services. Ultimately, public service excellence is a defining mark of good government.

Service Canada should become the lead federal service agency boasting the greatest expertise in interacting with Canadians. This expertise should, in turn, set new benchmarks for the provision of all government services. Service Canada should have a prominent role in designing service pathways and systems to better serve Canadians and it should champion and help drive public service innovation across government.

- A Liberal Government should endorse the creation of a new centre of excellence for public service innovation and design within Service Canada.
- It should see that Service Canada aggressively research and pursue international best practices for service innovation and excellence.
- It should radically expand the purview of 1-800-O-Canada and learn from exciting precedents like New York's 311 city information system which is driving new reforms and efficiencies.
- It should encourage Service Canada to look at whole people, rather than specific cases or service requests and extend Service Canada's ability to engage with citizens, offering more tailored services and advice. Service Canada should conduct routine public clinics on specific services or life phases, for instance, retirement or child birth.
- Drawing on the model established by Britain's Citizens Advice Bureau, a Liberal government should encourage Service Canada to pioneer the idea of "public service GPs", knowledgeable and impartial counselors who can assist citizens through difficult or transitional periods as well as offer personalized advice on how to navigate government programs and procedures.

- It should encourage Service Canada to cooperate wherever possible with provincial and municipal counterparts to co-locate services centre and create more seamless delivery across jurisdictions.

2. Citizen-Centred Public Management

Transparency, accountability and efficiency have become watchwords in the Canadian public service. Since their popularization in the late eighties and early nineties, they have become core and transformational values that have had a profound impact on the priorities of government and the conduct of public business.

Citizen-centred public management requires a new approach that puts similar weight on a complementary set of priorities. Public services should also be designed for their ease of use, the efficacy of their results, the personability of the interaction between citizen and state as well as the agency they extend to citizens. “*Ease, efficacy, personability and agency*” are a set of values that deserve to be promulgated across government.

3. Secretary of State for Civic Engagement

A Liberal government should appoint a Secretary of State for Civic Engagement with responsibility for improving all government consultation processes. The Secretary of State would be responsible for Engagement Canada and would initiate new programs that enhance the ability of citizens to participate in policy-making and policy learning. The Secretary of State would be responsible for tabling a report to parliament each year on the government’s success at developing and integrating new engagement strategies.

4. Engagement Canada

A Liberal government should create a new national agency, Engagement Canada, that would work to consolidate and improve the government’s consultation processes. Engagement Canada would house a research centre on civic engagement that would develop new methodologies and help champion better engagement practices across government. With the assistance of Statistics Canada and Service Canada, it would publish regularly on the emerging values and policy priorities of Canadians. It would also work with the Library of Parliament to support the consultation and engagement capacity of federal constituency offices, developing public programming and curriculum on legislation before the House and on long-range policy issues of interest to Canadians.

Engagement Canada would be a world-first initiative designed to support the government's efforts to engage Canadians in public affairs and offer much needed assistance to parliamentarians keen to develop lively and informed local discussions on pending legislation and public priorities.

5. National Citizens' Assemblies

Citizens' Assemblies have recently been created in both Ontario and British Columbia for the purpose of evaluating each province's electoral system. Their advent and popularity, independent of the issue of electoral reform, represents a significant democratic innovation for Canada. Contrary to their use so far, a Citizens' Assembly does not need to culminate in a referendum. Instead, it is a surprisingly flexible and effective mechanism for exercising public judgement and could be used as a prominent alternative to Royal Commissions, issuing reports of similar sophistication and political impact. It's interesting to imagine what might have happened had the previous Liberal government convened a Citizens' Assembly on National Childcare. It's likely that the recommendations of such an Assembly would have helped to establish a national consensus, improve public understanding of the issue and harmonize each party's policy platform.

The Liberal Party should recognize and promote the use of Citizens' Assemblies as a credible and inventive mechanism for engaging citizens on long-range and substantive policy issues. Canada is ready for the kind of public discussion that a Citizens' Assembly on Global Warming, Homelessness or International Aid, for instance, could produce.

6. Government / Partisan polling

There is growing concern that government spends more time listening to pollsters than people. We should disabuse ourselves of the idea that the former is somehow a valid proxy for the latter. Government by numbers is the poorest kind of democratic practice, doing little to improve the public's understanding of an issue or engage the respondent in a meaningful discussion that could both inform and potentially alter his or her views.

To paraphrase Daniel Yankelovich, a leading American pollster, public opinion is cheap (if only polling wasn't so expensive) It's public judgment that's precious.

To bring greater transparency to the practice, a Liberal government should introduce a public polling registry that would cite the cost, sample size, exact wording and results of all government-directed and publicly-funded polls.

The Liberal Party should set a clear example by establishing its own partisan polling registry to list similar data on the polls it commissions.

Valid data obtained clearly in the public interest would be shared. Overdependence and cynical usage would be quickly dampened.

7. Federal Constituency Offices

The funding of federal constituency offices in the early 1970s – a decision taken without debate in the House – has irrefutably changed the way parliament does business and the public’s expectations of MPs. It created a root system for parliament that many at the time hoped would help MPs to keep in touch with their constituents. Steadily, constituency offices have become an indispensable part of Canada’s political infrastructure – but they have also become the front door to many government services, most notably immigration. MPs consistently report that their constituency assistants spend a very high proportion of their time on casework – acting as interlocutors to government departments and helping to explain arcane procedures to frustrated citizens.

The current system is working – but only just. There is widespread public satisfaction with the assistance most citizens receive from these offices. The problem-solving, citizen-centred approach adopted by most constituency offices deserves to be studied and emulated throughout the public service. But these offices are also struggling to keep up with demand. Constituency assistants receive little training and are frequently overwhelmed by the needs of constituents not being served effectively by government departments. Their stance is largely reactive and they are often unable to make time for the kinds of proactive local engagement activities that would help MPs to connect with their constituents.

Additionally, there is often little expertise available for creating successful public discussions. Townhall meetings are largely seen as ineffective, and are either ignored or, when faced with a deeply divisive issue, menacing.

Local engagement -- not service provision -- should be the core business of federal constituency offices. A Liberal government should recognize the unrealized potential of constituency offices to act as local centres for civic engagement. Funding should be increased

to allow constituency offices to occupy suitably prominent local quarters. Training should be made available and special funding should be provided to hire and designate one additional staffer in each office an “Engagement Assistant”. This assistant would be responsible for outreach, conducting local conversations and making use of public learning materials created by the Library of Parliament and Engagement Canada.

The government should promote collocation with provincial and municipal counterparts and experiment with specially designated offices that could include meeting rooms and offer additional services to support civic entrepreneurship. These offices might be leased by the government, located in public facilities like local libraries and be used by successive MPs.

A Liberal government is also encouraged to do more to protect the privacy of constituent data and create more effective firewalls between the information collected in the course of running a constituency office and its use during elections. It is also advised to do more to secure the transfer of local case files, with the permission of constituents, when constituencies change party and MP. This would greatly improve the continuity of casework following elections.

8. Royal Commissions

Britain’s Joseph Rowntree Foundation marked its centenary this year with an extraordinary public report on the health of British democracy. Inspired by similar reports commissioned by both the Norwegian and Danish governments within the past ten years, the Power Inquiry has played an important role in recasting the debate on democratic reform in the UK. Canada would benefit from an equally comprehensive, high-profile examination of its democratic practices and institutions. A Liberal government is encouraged to initiate a Royal Commission on Canadian Democracy, with the purpose of reporting to parliament and the Canadian public on the health and equity of the country’s democratic traditions and institutions. This thorough-going evaluation would help focus public attention on the continuing project of democratic modernization in Canada.

Similarly, a Liberal government should look to the example set by Finland which created an expert-led Futures Commission. The Futures Commission was charged with examining the long-term trends expected to impact Finland and initiate a public discussion on the right course of action. Following the success of its first report, the Finnish government established a Parliamentary Futures Committee which has since taken up the work of the Commission. A Royal Commission on Canada in 2067 – Canada’s bicentenary – for example, could create meaningful opportunities for civic participation and discussion. Such a Royal Commission

would animate public imagination and help to build public consensus on the public's long-term priorities.

9. National Policy Capacity

Compared with most other G8 nations, Canada's extra-governmental policy capacity is weak. There are too few organizations and think tanks working to expand our political imagination, promote popular interest in public ideas, offer insightful analysis, connect to international debates and put forward innovative policy proposals.

The Liberal Party should commit itself to restoring public funding to the Law Commission of Canada and the Canadian Policy Research Network, as well as the Court Challenges Program. Moreover, it should work to expand Canada's policy capacity by endowing a new generation of think tanks across the political spectrum and the country.

10. Public internships and Exchanges

Youth internship and exchange programs are a valuable way for young citizens to encounter different parts of their country and become familiar with its peoples and institutions. A Liberal government should invest in existing internship and exchange programs and look to dramatically expand the range of opportunities available to Canadian youth.

11. Civic Micro-grants

A Liberal government is encouraged to develop a civic micro-grants policy that would award grants of between \$100 and \$500 to individuals and organizations able to file both a short one page plan for a small civic project or improvement and a brief one page report or documentary evidence of its completion. A registered charitable number would not be required. Any Canadian with a social insurance number could apply and compliance would be monitored with random audits. Administered by Engagement Canada, civic micro grants would offer niche funding to assist individuals and community organizations take public initiative at a scale that is impossible to access through current funding schemes.

Clear funding criteria would be created and all grant applications, awards and reports would be freely available online. If funding was set at \$5 million each year, approximately 10,000 – 15,000 grants could be made.

12. Civic infrastructure and programming

While this report clearly focuses on civic engagement in government-related affairs, engagement in the public realm often begins much closer to home and away from formal politics. It is beyond the purview of this task force, but it is nevertheless important to recommend that a Liberal government should enhance its support for the kinds of civic infrastructure and programming, including museums, galleries, exhibitions, music, parks and community sport, that enliven the public sphere and give citizens a sense of community and public possibility.

13. Architecture and the Public Realm

Equally, we see it fit to recommend that a Liberal Government adopt a much more aggressive policy towards urban planning, architecture and design. As Jane Jacobs famously observed, “the look of things and the way they work is inextricably bound together.” Too much of Canada’s public realm, including the vast store of federal real estate, fails to inspire or pay sufficient care to the shape and sensibilities of an alert and engaged society. A Liberal government should work to improve the quality and character of its public buildings, following the example set by the British Government which benefits from the work of the Design Council and the recently created Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment.

14. National Centres for Dialogue

The Morris J. Wosk Centre for Dialogue at Simon Fraser University is a remarkable facility that has been home to British Columbia’s Citizens’ Assembly on Electoral Reform as well as hundreds of high-level corporate, government and public meetings since its opening in 2001. Supported by an SFU academic programming group, the Centre for Dialogue has quickly come to be well regarded as an inventive and essential piece of Vancouver’s civic infrastructure, facilitating original public conversations and creating new expertise.

With the prospect of Canada’s 150th birthday in 2017, we recommend that a Liberal government collaborate with its provincial counterparts to help celebrate this occasion by making preparations to open a Centre for Dialogue in each provincial capital and in Ottawa. This would be an ambitious and poignant investment in Canada’s democratic infrastructure that would speak to the values of plurality and recognition that Canadians uphold.

15. Volunteerism

A Liberal government should redouble its commitment to the Canada Volunteerism Initiative with the purpose of dramatically expanding public participation in volunteer activities. We ask that the government place special emphasis on civic innovation and public events and that the government work with relevant partners to aggressively promote volunteerism to Canadians.

16. Research Chairs in Civic Engagement and Democratic Innovation

A Liberal government should direct the Canada Research Chairs program to create a series of new research chairs in civic engagement and democratic innovation. These chairs would help direct academic interest and support those researchers already engaged in relevant work.

17. Mobile Parliament

Most Canadians never visit Ottawa, nor do they visit Parliament. Given that MPs return to their constituencies each week, we ask whether, in the spirit of creating a new democratic tradition that would help promote public knowledge of its work, it would be feasible to convene Parliament at a public location for four days in two different Canadian cities each year. Under the proposal, Parliament could visit eight of the twelve provinces and territories during each four year term. The idea here – and an admittedly whimsical note on which to end – is to bring Parliament closer to Canadians and Canadians closer to Parliament. Much as the introduction of television cameras to the House irrevocably changed its tone and tenor, we're confident that the presence of a local audience curious to see their parliamentarians at work would be a powerful incentive to improve the quality and sincerity of parliamentary debate.

The Liberal Renewal Commission Task Force on Civic Engagement

The views and recommendations suggested in this report have been informed by the many discussions that have taken place over the course of the past six months. The ideas contained do not necessarily reflect the views and recommendations of each specific member and participation on this task force should not be read as an endorsement of the full contents of this report.

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