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Executive Summary

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Executive Summary

Between January 9 and 16, 2012, Harris/Decima conducted twelve focus groups with Canadians in Vancouver, Winnipeg, Mississauga, London, Montreal and Truro (two groups per city). The general population groups were segmented based on household income: one group in each city comprised participants with lower to middle household incomes (based on household size) and the other group was held with participants in higher income groups (based on household size).

The groups explored a variety of topics, including health care, education, crime, trade and economic diversification, energy, the deficit, and general economic sentiment, today and into the future.

The initial discussions explored Canadians' top priorities for government. The economy, unemployment, health care, trade diversification and education were most consistently identified as top priorities at this time. Environment, taxation, and the aging population were also raised, although somewhat less often.

Economy

The overall economic mood varied, depending on the region of the country. In the west, there was a sense of cautious optimism, buoyed by a belief that circumstances in Canada were generally more promising than in many other countries around the world. In central Canada, there was more trepidation in evidence, a sense that there are a wide range of internal challenges facing the country (in terms of employment, underemployment, and in terms of issues like the aging population) in addition to external ones, that are the source of continuing anxiety about the future. In rural Canada (Truro) local considerations dominated, and by and large those local conditions (at least economic conditions) were not helping the overall mood.

Participants were asked to select words from a list, or insert their own, that reflect what their ideal version of the economy looks like. A number of words

were chosen, including “strong” and “growing” and to a lesser extent “sustainable” and “balanced”. When selecting these words specifically, the context was ensuring that Canadian governments and Canadian people live within their means, while achieving economic stability and most importantly, creating an employment environment which has less volatility and more stability, in terms of the amount and type of work available.

Health Care

Health care was touched upon as a key issue from a number of perspectives. For some, the discussion revolved around general issues like funding. More often, the discussion touched on very specific issues like the number of long-term care beds available in their community. Typically, participants’ key demand revolved around how health care needs to be sustainable as the population ages, and fear that the system will not be able to manage this transition and achieve this goal.

In some groups, there was vague recollection of the government’s recent announcement of changes to health care transfers to the provinces. A handful recalled that an announcement had been made, but few had clear knowledge of what specifically was announced. When the specifics did emerge organically in discussion, impressions varied somewhat. Many felt that the system needed to get onto a more sustainable path, and the step the government had taken was a step toward greater sustainability. Some held a more negative impression, expressing disappointment at the federal approach, given the importance of health care. From their perspective, the changes to health care transfers were seen as a funding cap or cut.

Trade Diversification

The importance of trade diversification came up unprompted in many groups as an important driver of the future of Canada’s economy. There is a prevalent belief that Canada must work harder to diversify its economic base away from the current very high dependence on the American market.

Participants appeared to be taking notice of many of the efforts the federal government is pursuing in regard to trade diversification. Collectively, these efforts to diversify trade were believed to be important for government to pursue and keep pursuing.

One major trade diversification issue that emerged organically in the groups regarded building the necessary infrastructure to export the products. Recent issues along these lines appear to have helped to catapult recognition of Canada's oil sector as a huge economic driver of Canadian economy, and a revenue generator for the Canadian government.

These types of Infrastructure projects were perceived by many as an opportunity to diversify markets for Canadian natural resources to other markets, such as Asia, but one that carries environmental risks that need to be considered and addressed. For many, in principle, building infrastructure to the coast is a palatable outcome and prudent to diversify its markets. Others were indifferent to where resources are sold, because they are seen as commodities (e.g. oil prices the same everywhere), and they are not personally invested in it in that they don't see themselves benefitting.

Crime and Criminal Justice

Participants were invited to discuss a few issues associated with crime and criminal justice. Key findings:

- Across the country, many believed that the incidence of crimes like break and enter, property damage, robbery and white collar crimes like fraud are on the rise. Only a few believe the incidence of these crimes is falling.
- At the same time, many also believed that violent crimes like murder and sexual assaults are remaining about the same or are on the decline. Typically people cite data they have read or heard in the media as proof that this is likely the case.

- There was a widespread belief that the criminal justice system is inadequately resourced in terms of how it deals with crime, particularly crime among youth in the robbery/property category, and white collar crime as well.
- There was a prevailing belief that the justice system is overwhelmed with cases, police enforcement is inadequately resourced for all but the most severe crimes, and these conditions allow for more people “getting away” with crime.
- In spite of the fact that many people want to see many types of crime more stringently dealt with, the jail system in Canada was seen as contributing to the problems of crime as much as being a remedy for it. Many believed that jails are places where petty criminals learn how to become more sophisticated criminals and that for many, going to jail is not a worse place than they live when they are on the outside.
- Ideas like restorative justice, and compensation for victims were seen as important elements of an ideal effort by government to deal with crime.
- Thoughts like community programs to help ensure that at-risk youth in certain communities are active in other activities were seen as very beneficial as well.

Economic Management and Deficit

Focus group discussions on priorities often naturally touched on perceptions of the federal government’s economic management role. Key findings in this area:

- There was no appetite for further stimulus spending. Most felt that the first round of stimulus was a necessary step for the very specific moment in time three years ago, but virtually none of the participants anywhere were prepared to incur the increased expenditure and the

deficit implications that a new round of stimulus spending would create.

- There was appetite for tax incentives, such as the home renovation tax credit or similar types of credits that might not only give consumers incentives to spend but also to help contribute to the small business community.
- As discussed in other parts of this report, there was support for increasing efforts to diversify trade.
- There was support for increasing efforts to facilitate skills training and apprenticeship. However, as mentioned above, there was unease found in some regions about the true opportunities available even for those who pursue post-secondary education (university or college programs). In addition, there was a sense that there are significant weaknesses in terms of market signals and their connection to educational institutions and those seeking education – many fear that young people go down career paths that may look promising and which educational institutions encourage, but may not necessarily yield results in the employment market after that training is complete.
- Continued diligence in managing Canada's deficit was seen as an important priority. Events occurring in the US and Europe influenced perceptions, with participants advocating that the size of government not get too large, for fear of similar issues transpiring here. Participants said that it is imperative that Canada ensure that it keep its "overhead" at an appropriate level so the government's books can be in a sustainable position.

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Harris/Decima Inc. certifies that the final deliverables comply with the political neutrality requirement in section 6.2.4 of the revised Procedures for Planning and Contracting Public Opinion Research in the Government of Canada.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Doug Anderson", with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Doug Anderson, Senior Vice President, Harris/Decima