



Current Events Research 2013

Privy Council Office

Executive Summary

Contract Number: 35035-125105/001/CY

Contract Award Date: February 5, 2013

Contact Information: kmoorcroft@pco-bcp.gc.ca

Ce rapport est aussi disponible en Français sur demande

Proprietary Warning

Any material or information provided by the Privy Council Office and all data collected by Harris/Decima will be treated as confidential by Harris/Decima and will be stored securely while on Harris/Decima's premise (adhering to industry standards and applicable laws).

OTTAWA

1800-160 Elgin St.
Ottawa, Ontario, Canada
K2P 2P7

Tel: (613) 230-2200
Fax: (613) 230-3793

MONTREAL

400-1080 Beaver Hall Hill
Montréal, Québec, Canada
H2Z 1S8

Tel: (514) 288-0037
Fax: (514) 288-0138

TORONTO

405-2345 Yonge St.
Toronto, Ontario, Canada
M4P 2E5

Tel: (416) 962-2013
Fax: (416) 962-0505

Executive Summary

Harris/Decima is pleased to present this report of research findings to the Privy Council Office. This project involved an investigation of Canadian impressions of a number of current issues affecting Canada and Canadians, and efforts government might pursue to address those issues.

The research involved a combination of quantitative research (a national survey of 2,000 respondents) as well as qualitative research (focus groups in 6 locations across the country).

Harris/Decima organized the data collection work and conducted the focus groups. This report includes a detailed summary and analysis of findings from the focus group component of the research. Appended to this report are the discussion guides and screeners in both English and French. The quantitative methodology is presented under separate cover.

In total, twelve focus groups were conducted. Two groups were held in each of: Coquitlam, BC; Winnipeg, MB; Kitchener, ON; Toronto, ON; Saint John, NB; and, Trois-Rivières, QC. In each location, groups were conducted with members of the general population, divided into groups of lower and middle income, and higher income households.

The groups explored a variety of topics, including the employment, education, skills training, and personal debt and general economic sentiment, today and into the future.

The initial discussions explored Canadians' top priorities for government. Health care, the economy, jobs/unemployment, education, and the environment were most consistently identified as top priorities at this time.

Fiscal management, poverty and taxation were also raised, although somewhat less often.

Economy

The overall economic perceptions varied within each group. Among those with positive perceptions, there was a sense of cautious optimism, typically based upon a belief that circumstances in Canada were generally more encouraging than elsewhere in the world. However, others felt things were in an uncertain state, and thus they held more negative impressions of Canada's economy. For the most part, regardless of how favourably they viewed the Canadian economy, they tended to share the impression that things were not as strong and certain as they would prefer.

While some would point to the relative stability of Canada's economic situation compared to what they know of other countries, most shared a sense that Canada is dependent upon the success of foreign markets and those markets may not perform well in the near-term.

Participants offered a wide variety of words to describe their current perception of the Canadian economy. Descriptions ranged from "fair", "ok", and "stable", to "fragile," "precarious" and "shaky", to "frustrating," "weak," and "decline."

Employment

The issue of employment tended to be identified as a top-of-mind priority or acknowledged as an important issue facing Canada when raised by others. Assessments of the employment situation tended to be based largely upon the local context which was often cited as symptomatic of what must be happening elsewhere in Canada.

When considering the situation on a national basis, participants tended to be less certain of their opinions but could typically name certain other parts of the country they felt were experiencing more favourable job markets (i.e., Northern Alberta) and others that were assumed to be experiencing less favourable job markets (i.e., Southern Ontario).

There was little certainty over whether Canada was generally in a state of low unemployment or high unemployment at that moment, though a number noted that Canada may be in a heightened state of “underemployment,” based upon the impression that too many Canadians may be in positions that do not take full advantage of their capabilities.

Asked what kinds of actions they would like to see the government take to address the issue of employment, the most common suggestions involved providing incentives to employers, helping youth enter the workforce and assisting with skills upgrading/training.

Skills Training

With respect to skilled trades, there was a general consensus that skilled careers have an image problem – parents and society tend to feel a career in a skilled trade is less desirable or rewarding than other professional careers. Participants felt that it would be desirable for Canadians to have a clearer understanding of the actual breadth and benefits of a skilled career.

Some participants identified that skilled labour in general – or in some cases, a specifically-identified skill – as in demand. Examples were described of employers having difficulty finding new employees, of employers filling particular skilled positions with foreign workers, due to a lack of skilled Canadians, or of premiums being paid to recruit certain skilled positions.

Several participants felt there existed a skills mis-match; that is, too many people who were looking for work were neither seeking, nor qualified for, the skilled positions that employers were anxiously trying to fill.

Asked what approaches or solutions they would like to see from the federal government on the issue of skilled labour, a variety of suggestions emerged including educating Canadians (and in particular, youth) about the variety and benefits of skilled careers, incenting Canadians to identify and pursue training in skills that are in high demand, and incenting employers to bring on apprentices and/or expand their workforce.

Participants also raised the notion of steering Canadians towards the kinds of jobs that were actually in demand.

When presented with a concept in which specific skilled job demands are identified by employers and training for those specific jobs is co-funded by the employer and the federal government – and thus, at no cost and little risk to the prospective employee – the reactions were consistently positive. Many clearly wanted more detail on how it would work, but there was widespread optimism that such a program would be beneficial and effective.

Many appreciated that the concept implied a more predictable degree of success since it was driven by market demands and actual job opening being filled, rather than an individual's or third party's assessments on what skills would be needed.

Personal Debt

Participants generally concurred that on average, Canadians have increased their debt loads to worrisome levels – certainly worrisome for the individuals in debt, but also for the economy as a whole. For the latter, the typical explanation was that individuals who find themselves overextended may become unable to pay a creditor, which results in poorer financial performance of that business, which may result in the need for staff reductions and thus the impact may extend well beyond the individual's household. The sense was that this becomes particularly problematic for the economy as a whole if personal bankruptcy becomes widespread.

Participants tended to blame factors such as an unhealthy societal tendency to go into debt in order to enjoy a higher quality of life; low interest rates that make loans more affordable; and, a lack of understanding among many Canadian consumers about the ramifications of carrying significant credit card debt.

In most groups, at least a few participants recalled warnings from the federal government or the Bank of Canada about there being historically high personal debt levels.

There was fairly widespread consensus that the Government of Canada had a valuable communications role to play that could help Canadians better manage personal debt: continue to inform Canadians about the risks of high personal debt; and help educate Canadians on certain elements of managing personal finances, such as the cost of maintaining credit card debt and how to understand and compare issuer contracts. Some also called for increased and/or improved regulations such as limiting credit card interest rates, tightening credit eligibility criteria, and placing limits on fees charged by same-day loan companies, though others were not comfortable with this kind of increased federal role.

Research Firm: Harris/Decima Inc.

Contract Number: 35035-125105/001/CY

Contract award date: February 5, 2013

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

Doug Anderson, Senior Vice President

Harris/Decima Inc.