

People power: Canadians willing to shell out for clean energy

By Robin Prest

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Energy issues can be a polarizing force in Canadian politics, all too often pitting region against region, or opening up divisions between rural and urban.

So when we kicked off the Citizen Dialogues on Canada's Energy Future this September, we didn't know where these discussions would take us.

The idea was to bring together randomly selected citizens from different regions and walks of life to sit down at the same table. Over two days, participants learned about energy issues, listened deeply to each other's hopes and fears, and imagined the future they wanted the next generation to inherit.

With every province and territory represented, these citizen-driven conversations moved across the country from Vancouver, to Calgary, Toronto, Montreal and Halifax. A final group of citizens then met in Winnipeg to review emerging themes and present a final set of pan-Canadian recommendations to Natural Resources Canada as part of Generation Energy public consultation.

The detailed results, to be released in the coming week by Simon Fraser University's Morris J. Wosk Centre for Dialogue, provide a compelling reference point for decision-makers and energy stakeholders.

In their consensus statement, citizens outlined the need to transition to an energy future that achieves a more sustainable and clean environment, while continuing to provide employment and affordable energy.

To achieve this vision, participants called for the federal government to play a leadership role in partnership with provinces, territories, Indigenous peoples and local governments to create a national energy plan.

Indeed, governance emerged as an unexpected theme at almost every dialogue across Canada. Citizens told us they were frustrated with partisan politics and called for more continuity between election cycles. They also expressed uncertainty about whether the information they receive is trustworthy and felt that they lacked tools they require to hold decision-makers accountable.

To better address these issues and inspire public confidence, citizens called for a strong, independent oversight body with the teeth required to regulate, enforce and report on the effectiveness of energy policies and spending in Canada.

Participants agreed upon a range of tangible actions to advance their vision, including investments in energy infrastructure, incentives for clean technology innovation and stricter regulations for polluters.

In conjunction, they identified the need to maintain jobs, affordable energy and opportunities for those groups that will be most impacted by the transition to a new energy economy. These goals would be advanced through creating a transition plan in consultation with fossil fuel-dependent communities, rural and northern regions, vulnerable populations and trade-exposed industries.

To pay for the clean energy economy, participants identified a range of funding sources, from government revenues, to private capital to industry. But when push came to shove, the majority of participants also told us that they were willing to pay their fair share of these costs, with 75 per cent of participants willing to contribute between 1.5 and 3 per cent of their annual income. This willingness to pay came with conditions in many cases, such as following a “polluter pays” principle, protecting vulnerable groups from unfair costs and accounting for how money has been spent.

In outlining these recommendations, citizens called for Canada to lead by example on the global stage and take measured actions to reduce its greenhouse gas emissions.

Given the tensions that exist around energy, there is remarkable agreement about the energy future that citizens want the next generation to inherit. What is clear is that realizing this future requires not just a technically robust plan, but also robust measures to increase public confidence and help vulnerable communities transition to the new energy economy.

Robin Prest is the Program Director at Simon Fraser University’s Morris J. Wosk Centre for Dialogue. The Citizen Dialogues on Canada’s Energy Future were independently designed and facilitated by SFU as part of the Generation Energy public consultation. Find out more at canadaenergyfuture.ca.