

# Game Changer: Creating Canada's Democratic Action Fund

A plan to give Canadians a seat at the table and create better public policy







Since 2004, Canada has quietly been at the forefront of deliberative approaches to policy development that foster democratic inclusion and citizen participation. The use of Reference Panels and Citizens' Assemblies have been touted by both the **United Nations** and the **Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development** as vital mechanisms for engaging citizens and reviving democracy.

Canada has hosted more than 35 significant deliberative processes and is seen as an international leader. Now it's time to bring these important democratic innovations to scale and make public deliberation part of Canada's policy culture.







# Concept

Effective public consultation is essential to good government and to the country's democratic health. However, across Canada, opportunities for citizens to engage in meaningful dialogue are infrequent and too often disconnected from decision-makers. To strengthen the legitimacy of Canada's democratic institutions and the responsiveness of its public services, we propose a strategic investment in democratic innovation to make citizen deliberation a key feature of Canada's democratic culture.

Conceived as a response to growing polarization and based on more than a decade of innovation and demonstrated impact, Canada's Democratic Action Fund will invest \$10 million in up to 80 deliberative projects across the country each year.

Over its first five years, the Democratic Action Fund would generate more than 600,000 volunteer hours of citizen participation in policy making. In doing so, it would dramatically increase the opportunities for Canadians to participate meaningfully in the development of effective public policies and have their voices heard.



# How would it work?

Municipal and provincial governments, federal departments, and public agencies would apply to a federal Democratic Action Fund to support deliberative processes that provide citizens with an opportunity to serve on a citizen jury, assembly, or reference panel.

In this way, deliberative projects supported by the Democratic Action Fund would provide elected representatives and senior public servants with new and valuable sources of informed citizen perspectives. These projects would also provide thousands of Canadians every year with an opportunity to serve their communities by making a meaningful contribution to public life.







# Why is the Fund essential?

Freedom House's annual report on global freedom has recorded thirteen consecutive years of 'democratic retreat', indicating that the democratic gains made in the post-Cold War era are now under threat. And while there are exceptions, the overall global trend shows decreasing confidence in democratic institutions, including in established Western democracies.

Canada is not exempt. According to the 2019 Edelman Trust Barometer, there is a growing trust gap that separates this country's elites and its general population. In fact, Canada now stands close to France, Britain, and the United States – countries in which crises of democratic legitimacy have spurred populist revolts.

In response to the rising threat of populism to democratic institutions, many European countries including Spain, Germany, Belgium, France, Ireland, and the UK are piloting new initiatives to bridge this divide and engage citizens in new and substantive ways.





Welcome

8  
Hospital Transitions

Hospital Transitions



"There is a 16-point gap between the more trusting informed public and the far more skeptical mass population, marking a return to record highs of trust inequality, and the reemergence of a true “mass-class” divide" - **Edelman Trust Barometer 2019**



# Where is this working?

Major deliberative projects have been announced in cities and countries around the world. Here are some of the most notable and recent initiatives:

- In Madrid, City Council launched a 'Citizens Observatory', a body of 49 randomly selected residents who will make recommendations and proposals to Council on municipal issues
- In Belgium, a state legislature created an upper chamber of randomly selected citizens to advise elected legislators
- In Oxford, UK, the City Council created a Citizens' Assembly on Climate Change
- In Scotland, the First Minister has launched a Citizens' Assembly on Independence
- In Ireland, a Citizens' Assembly created by Parliament successfully tackled political reform, abortion laws, and climate change
- In Australia, Citizens' Assemblies have advised government on water treatment, the long-term storage of radioactive waste, and local governance models
- In France, the national government convened 150 randomly selected citizens every three weeks for six months to make recommendations on how to reduce greenhouse gas emissions
- And in Canada, more than 35 Citizens' Assemblies and Reference Panels have advised governments on a wide array of issues including infrastructure investment, Pharmacare, public transit, data privacy, and municipal amalgamation



# Why invest in deliberation?

- Deal with complex issues sensibly
- Promote a sense of political efficacy and responsiveness
- Find common ground
- Resolve intractable issues
- Share responsibility for solutions







# Program goals

The Democratic Action Fund would provide opportunities for more Canadians to shape the policies that shape their lives. Fully funded, the Democratic Action Fund would reach 800,000 Canadian households each year and provide deliberative programming for as many as 3,000 Canadians, contributing more than 120,000 hours of volunteer time to policy making. Within ten years, every Canadian would receive an invitation to participate in one or more deliberative processes.

Moreover, these projects would:

- Support the creation of an active and engaged citizenship
- Work to close the gap between elites and the general public
- Increase trust in government
- Create more responsive public policies that enjoy broad, popular support
- Bolster our existing system of representative democracy against the trends of rising populism, pessimism, and polarization







## How would the Fund work?

The Fund would be administered by a Treasury Board, which would also house a program support and evaluation unit.

The Fund would underwrite two-thirds of a project's budget. Applicants would need to demonstrate that they have secured matching funds equal to one-third of the value of their grant.

Funds would be allocated twice a year to successful applicants that meet the program's criteria.

## How could the Fund be allocated?

Funding would be allocated on the basis of specific program criteria, while taking into account regional and linguistic balance.

- \$7,500,000 to fund 75 mid size deliberative projects (\$100,000 per project)
- \$1,250,000 to fund 5 large-scale deliberative projects (\$250,000 per project)
- \$500,000 for academic research grants related to evaluating and strengthening deliberative programs
- \$250,000 to develop a knowledge network, awards program, and annual conference



# Proposed program criteria

Successful proposals to the Democratic Action Fund would:

- Be commissioned by a public sector entity in Canada
- Make a constructive contribution to a pressing policy decision on which government intends to act in the short- to medium-term
- Use a civic lottery to randomly select participants
- Employ a deliberative process that works toward group consensus
- Ensure that the Panel meets for no fewer than three days
- Ensure sufficient oversight and impartiality
- Include a communications plan
- Include a strategy for informing and engaging the wider public on the topic
- Follow best practice process guidelines as described by the Fund
- Participate in an evaluation exercise



# International Case Studies

## **United Kingdom: the Innovation in Democracy Programme**

In partnership with the Royal Society for the Encouragement of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce (RSA), the UK Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport announced in summer 2018 the launch of the Innovation in Democracy Programme as part of its broader Civil Society Strategy. Between January 2019 and March 2020, the initiative will help between 8 and 10 local authorities work with citizens' assemblies to tackle pressing policy matters. RSA CEO Matthew Taylor has also issued a public call to action across the UK in support of deliberative democracy. Arguing that democracy is at risk from the rise of populism and elitism, Taylor is encouraging his members to call on local political leaders to embrace deliberative democracy and hold a minimum of three citizens' assemblies each year on issues of national concern.

## **Spain: Decide Madrid**

Spain's capital city has taken the significant step of creating a Department for Citizen Participation, Transparency, and Open Government in the hopes of letting citizens in the city of three million people play a greater role in how Madrid is run. Since 2015, Madrid's City Council has utilized a customizable, open source software known as Decide Madrid that allows residents to learn more about city policies and proposed development. In concert with the website, Madrid also announced that a standing panel of 49 randomly appointed citizens from across the city will deliberate on civic proposals put forward online and recommend the strongest initiatives to proceed to Council.

## **France: the 'Great National Debate'**

In response to months of anti-government protests sparked by the Gilet Jaunes movement, in January 2019, French President Emmanuel Macron issued an open letter to his country. In it, Macron asked every French citizen to answer 20 questions about the future of France, including the makeup of civic assemblies and the structure of French democracy itself. In response, his government

initiated the "Great National Debate," two months of public forums, town halls, and citizen conferences on issues of national contention. It's aimed, as Macron wrote, at "transforming anger into solutions," and includes a proposal to have 100 randomly selected citizens from each region of France provide their input on what ails French democracy in Regional Citizens' Conferences.

## **Ireland: the Irish Citizens' Assembly**

In 2016, Ireland convened 99 people for a national Citizens' Assembly to tackle several major issues of the day, which had previously deadlocked politicians: abortion, climate change, aging population, and parliamentary reform. Against popular expectations and a skeptical media, the Assembly reached broad consensus and issued a series of sweeping recommendations that made change possible. For example, the Assembly's recommendations on abortion were followed by a national referendum on reproductive choice, which resulted in Ireland's ban on abortion being overturned. The vote results mirrored the proportion of Citizens' Assembly members who felt abortion should be legalized. The Assembly was later credited as having contributed to the successful resolution of the debate by acting as a trusted, representative, and legitimate source of information and guidance to citizens.

## **International: the United Nations Democracy Fund**

With two-year grants of up to \$300,000, the UN Democracy Fund aims to work with civil society groups in Africa, Asia, Eastern Europe, and Latin America to bolster civic institutions, protect civil rights, and promote far-reaching participation in the democratic process. In late 2018, UNDEF partnered with Australia's new Democracy Foundation to create and distribute a handbook on how nations can work between elections to engage their citizens through deliberative processes.



# Canadian Case Studies

Canada is a pioneer in the use of deliberative citizen assemblies and reference panels. BC and Ontario's Citizens' Assemblies on electoral reform in the mid-2000s are the two most well-known examples, but organizations, cities, and provinces around Canada have also been using smaller-scale versions of these processes for the last fifteen years to grapple with difficult public policy issues as diverse as data privacy, municipal governance, and supervised injection sites.

## **Developing data privacy policies in British Columbia**

Thirty-five British Columbia residents served on a Resident Panel to consider the newly proposed Services Card, a chip identification card created by the BC government and the Insurance Corporation of British Columbia to serve as a combination health card and driver's license. This consultation considered how to balance the need to safeguard privacy and ensure responsible use of data with the opportunity for better service provision through new technologies.

## **Setting councillor pay in Lethbridge, Alberta**

The Lethbridge Citizens' Assembly on Councillor Employment and Compensation was created by Lethbridge City Council in 2016 to deliberate on whether to increase the role of city councillors from part time to full time, and to make recommendations on appropriate compensation. The Assembly learned about the work of municipal government and the evolving role and duties of Councillors, and compared employment and compensation practices for councillors in similar jurisdictions. In the end, the Panel recommended that Councillors' hours and

compensation remain the same, but made specific suggestions as to how Lethbridge could ensure Councillors are able to perform their duties efficiently and effectively as part time representatives.

## **Developing community protocols for supervised injection services in Toronto, Ontario**

The Residents' Reference Panel on Supervised Injection Services in Toronto met for four Saturdays in 2014 to learn about the impact of injection drug use in Toronto, understand the perspectives of different residents, and propose recommendations to address those concerns. Panelists heard from many experts, impacted communities, researchers, police, and current and former drug users. They also participated in a roundtable with the general public. Using a deliberative process, the Panel produced a 78-page document of recommendations for West Neighbourhood House and the Toronto Central LHIN.

## **Advising on rail expansion in Toronto, Ontario**

In 2015, 36 residents living in the Davenport neighbourhood of Toronto served on a Reference Panel convened by the provincial transit agency Metrolinx. Over four Saturdays in May and June, Panelists heard from experts, visited the proposed work site, and added community input to the transformation of a busy railway bottleneck into a Community Rail Overpass. The panel issued a 68-page report in June 2015 that detailed 30 recommendations, ranging from ways the Overpass could enhance community connections and improve safety near active rail lines to culturally appropriate design options that would create a lasting asset for the people of Davenport.



# Next steps

The Democratic Action Fund will only be established if Canada's parliament endorses this proposal and commits to establishing the Fund. You can help to make the case by asking federal MPs to endorse the Democratic Action Fund.

To learn more about how citizen deliberation is being used internationally, visit: [democracyrd.org](https://democracyrd.org)

To learn more about how citizen deliberation is being used in Canada, visit [masslbp.com](https://masslbp.com)

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