

PLATFORM OUTREACH 2007 REPORT



***We asked.
People answered.
We listened—
And we acted.***

At the beginning of 2007, the Hon. Stéphane Dion appointed me as Platform Outreach Chair. My task: to build on the grassroots renewal we began during the leadership campaign, and to ask Canadians about the main issues facing us today. The goal: to help build a Liberal policy platform that truly reflects our needs.

During the first half of 2007, we held Outreach sessions across Canada: over 175 sessions in over 35 different communities across the country. We met with Canadians from all walks of life, and all political parties. We met with representatives from chambers of commerce; boards of trade; social service agencies; aboriginal groups. We met with educators; day care workers; university, polytechnic and community college representatives; regional development groups; specific business organizations; health care workers; construction company representatives and construction workers; economists; homeworkers; youth social workers...We collected and read volumes of material, and have binders of notes.

It was both fascinating and illuminating.

There is nothing to replace back and forth discussions. Polling companies will, with a few fixed questions, call a thousand people across the country, and spend a few minutes on the phone. Then, based on those few questions and brief answers, they will tell us what, apparently, Canadians think. We, however, spent months engaged in real discussions, with real back and forth debate, and real substance.

And we listened. Most importantly, we acted; adding what we heard to the Party's policy platform discussions. Many of the points made in this process have been incorporated into the Liberal Party of Canada policy direction; some directly into what will be our campaign platform in the next election.

This report is summary only, incorporating the general themes of what we heard. One cannot include all points and all detail, both because of space and election strategy. There are many issues and concerns which we learned about, but which are not readily visible in this summary report, in current speeches and pronouncements, nor will be highlighted in a campaign platform. Rest assured that these issues and ideas will still inform the direction of the Liberal Party of Canada.

On a final note: the process of reaching out for input from Canadians is not, by any means, over. In my continuing role as Outreach Chair, I encourage anyone and everyone to continue providing input and feedback to outreach@liberal.ca .

Martha Hall Findlay, Outreach Chair, Liberal Party of Canada

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The strongest message we heard, repeated across the country, was the following:

Economic prosperity is critically important;
The environment is critically important;
Look after those--*but don't forget social justice.*

I came away from the process extremely proud, as a Liberal and as a Canadian, reassured in the knowledge that Canadians really do care about others—about poverty, about literacy, about child care and early learning. About, most importantly, doing what we can to ensure that ALL Canadians have equal opportunity to participate in Canada's future success.

Part of this concern is for new Canadians. Business across the country stresses the need for more skilled workers; we simply don't have enough here. We need more people to come to Canada. However, we repeatedly see big hurdles for newcomers with respect to language and skills accreditation. This prevents new immigrants from participating in our economy and society as they should; it prevents the country from benefitting fully from their skills. As a society, particularly one that prides itself on embracing diversity and openness, we are not doing enough for newcomers.

Canadians want "Prosperity with a Purpose". Virtually everyone recognizes the need for a vibrant, globally competitive and prosperous economy in order to provide for the best possible way of life, for ALL Canadians. Without a strong and vibrant economy, we can't afford some of the things we need to achieve greater social justice. Canadians expect us to continue the responsible success of balanced or better budgets and the economic strength that Liberals under Jean Chretien and Paul Martin fought so hard for, and achieved, over 13 years in government.

Canadians are also, of course, very concerned about the environment, and worried about the lack of any action by the Harper government—his apparent refusal to grasp the seriousness of the issue. Instead of going backward, people want us to rise to the challenge. This is arguably the greatest issue facing the world today--- and Canadians want Canada to **lead**.

Finally, there is widespread concern that Canada is losing its reputation as a positive influence internationally. We need a coherent, consistent and clear foreign policy, one which focuses on encouraging and making peace; encourages trade and engagement as levers to discourage conflict and enhance human rights; provides effective aid where most needed; enhances our Canadian reputation on the international stage through our example and export of respect for the rule of law, democratic principles and institutions, and respect for all human beings.

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The following report summarizes the key points and the key issues that came up again and again in our discussions, all across Canada.

SOCIAL JUSTICE

- Literacy—there is grave concern over Conservative cuts to literacy programs, and a recognition that the ability to communicate is a critical element for success for new immigrants as well as those left behind in our existing systems.
- Child care and early learning—there is tremendous support for the Dryden program, which we Liberals started but which was cancelled by the Harper government. There is also strong support for, in some way, recognizing the contribution of stay-at-home parents.
- Poverty—there is grave concern that there are still so many people, including children, living in poverty while Canada's economy is as strong as ever. The plight of the working poor and the height of the welfare wall are big issues for everyone, rich as well as poor—there is genuine concern across the country.
- Education—there was significant discussion about student loan/debt burdens. A number of different ideas were raised for us to consider, such as, for example, alleviating some or all debt for students entering into certain areas where young people are needed, and other different approaches to helping with student debt.
- Seniors—many seniors, particularly women, are in desperate financial straights. Our poverty agenda must address their needs. On the other hand, there are many other seniors who want to be treated not as burdens, but as *assets*; many people who would like to work more, longer, and to contribute to the community.
- Crime—although crime has gone down in Canada, there are still concerns about how best to deal with the problem. Many Canadians remain very leery of moving toward a US-style system focussed on punishment and jails—most know it doesn't work well. Many want to be tough on the *causes* of crime, not just on reacting after the fact. We cannot underestimate the importance of prevention. A recurring comment was, "*I would rather not be a victim in the first place.*"

ECONOMIC PROSPERITY

- "Prosperity with a Purpose"—virtually everyone recognizes the need for a vibrant, globally competitive and prosperous economy in order to provide for the best possible way of life, for ALL Canadians. Without a strong economy, we can't afford some of the things we need to achieve greater social justice.
- We must be positive and confident—after all, we're Canadian! The best way to compete is to do the best we can—not to hide behind walls and protect unproductive or inefficient enterprise. There are real opportunities for economic success, both domestically and internationally, including for example encouraging the development of new and innovative environmental technologies.
- Productivity—it is not just economists who agree; most people understand how critical productivity and global competitiveness are to Canada's success.
- Education—it is recognized as key, not only as part of social justice, but also to economic prosperity. Not just university and college training, but also through polytechnic institutions, apprenticeships and other training for skilled trades.

- Taxes—again, it’s not just the economists who agree; most people recognize that reducing the GST further makes no sense, and that it is much better to reduce income taxes—as the Liberals had done significantly and successfully when in government. More and more people recognize that a strong economy, particularly one that is to be globally competitive, must also be competitive for the corporate sector—which, after all, employs people. The benefits of significant reductions in corporate taxes (as is, for example, the case in the Scandinavian countries) are understood.
- Infrastructure—virtually everyone living in a town or city in Canada, or who has a business that relies on transportation, recognizes that much of the infrastructure we have is old and in need of repair or replacement, and that new infrastructure is needed to accommodate our population and economic growth. The connection between infrastructure investment and economic activity and prosperity is clear—and significant increases in investment are needed.
- Economic challenges—where industries or activities are suffering due to global competition, the answer should not be subsidies, which may support (or even encourage) low productivity and limited competitiveness; there is a clear preference for government help with reorientation—to help suffering businesses move to greater specialization, and competitive new processes, products and services. There is clear enthusiasm for avoiding protectionism and focussing on opportunity.
- Jobs—Canadians recognize that the best social program is a good job. This comes through loud and clear with regard to immigration challenges, regional challenges, aboriginal challenges, and more. There is enthusiasm for investment and support for technologies and new products that enable greater environmental sustainability, new energy conservation technologies, renewable energy technologies; all of which, done well, will create new opportunities and more jobs—jobs of the future, not the past.

THE ENVIRONMENT

- ***We must take more action!*** Virtually everyone we spoke with acknowledged the need to be tough on the environment—very tough. And that we need to do it now. The issue is more pressing, and understood far more widely, than anyone considered only a short while ago. Indeed, many people asked what they themselves could do to help, to ‘do their part’.
- Climate change—as the world community solidifies its understanding of the challenge of greenhouse gases, and the need for action, Canadians are increasingly upset at the lack of any action; indeed, the backtracking, by the Harper government.
- Clean water, air and land—we need to step up, significantly. Efforts to clean what is already polluted as well as efforts to prevent further pollution are critically important. People understand the need to take very tough and immediate action.
- Toxic substances—there is increasing awareness, and concern, about potentially dangerous substances that we may be eating, drinking or otherwise absorbing

from our environment and products around us. There is a strong call for greater control over what we import as well as what we produce for ourselves.

CANADA IN THE WORLD

- Canada in the world—there is widespread disappointment that Canada is losing its reputation as a positive influence internationally. Our commitment to aid; our support for the fight against AIDS; our support for UN measures against capital punishment; our encouragement of trade and engagement as strong ways to limit conflict and improve human rights; our historical role in achieving the land mines treaty and the development of the concept of responsibility to protect; our focus on encouraging peace rather than warfare. There is also, of course, real concern about our mission in Afghanistan. We must take some positive stands—we must do much more than just say we'll pull back from combat positions in Afghanistan by 2009. But "positive" does not mean "aggressive". There is concern that Canada is, under the Harper government, "nowhere" on Darfur, and that we have not pursued the 'right to protect' concept.
- The military—all Canadians are extremely proud of what our armed forces have done in the past and what they are doing now. We do, however, want them to engage in activities that are both effective and reflect Canada's international role. To do this, there is much desire to shift the focus of our military from 'aggressive', or even 'defensive', and move the focus to much more positive, active roles elsewhere. We have an opportunity to highlight war *prevention* and peace *promotion* as new roles for Canada in the 21st century.
- Arctic sovereignty—we need to be careful about knee-jerk reaction and support for the word "sovereignty". We need to fully understand what or who does Canada really need to "protect" itself from? And how? At the same time, we do need to effectively assert our rights. There is opportunity to focus on using naval resources to do double duty, for example by using patrol ships to conduct environmental research.
- International trade—many Canadians, including of course so many new Canadians, understand the benefits—economic, political and cultural—of trade and engagement with the rest of the world. There is real dismay at the closing of consulates and the pulling back of trade activities by the Harper government. We can and should show much greater focus and leadership on trade, particularly with China, India and Brazil. We must reinforce the positives, and how we're going to make the most of them, including significantly ramping up efforts to sign bilateral trade deals. Canada must be, and be seen to be, open for trade. A sentiment we often heard was "*We compete by being good at what we do, not by putting up walls.*"

IMMIGRATION

- This is an issue that was raised in almost every session. It is not, as one might expect, an issue reserved for the big cities, and it crosses both the social justice and economic prosperity areas. We have several challenges. Our growing economy needs significant numbers of new immigrants, but we need people with

specific skills. The current point system requires re-balancing to reflect those needs. We must also improve the information we provide and our communications to prospective immigrants about what to expect on arrival. Newcomers to Canada run into difficulties right away, both in terms of language but also with regard to having their skills and experience properly accredited. Not only does this prevent new immigrants from making the living they hoped to, and are capable of; it prevents our own economy from properly benefitting from their much-needed skills and experience.

AGRICULTURAL / RURAL

- Farmers do NOT want handouts—they want fair prices for their products and fair prices for their inputs. They want a level playing field vis a vis big agri-business.
- Wayne Easter and the Easter Report are very highly regarded, all across the country. Action, however, is needed to implement some of the recommendations.
- Broadband, “connecting Canadians”, is a significant issue all across the country in what are still underserved rural areas. The benefits of communication, access to education, knowledge and interaction with others are undisputed.

FEDERAL – PROVINCIAL - MUNICIPAL

- Relationships—respect and cooperation among all levels of government is key. This basic principle seems not only to be ignored by, but is actively deteriorating under the Harper government.
- Despite the Conservative rhetoric, there is understanding that real fiscal imbalance is not between federal and provincial governments—it is between the federal and provincial governments, on the one hand, and municipalities on the other. The Liberal New Deal for Communities, and Stéphane Dion’s subsequent commitment to make the gas tax transfer permanent, are both extremely positive. Infrastructure, particularly transportation, communication and energy transmission, is critical. And more than monetary investment is needed; we also need intelligence, innovation, creativity and *cooperation*.

ARTS, CULTURE AND HERITAGE

- Heritage, culture, the arts—these are very heavily valued across the country, and there is a real sense that they have been neglected.
- The ability to speak more than one languages is seen as a real asset, particularly when making international comparisons. There is strong cross-country support for bilingualism—and real concern that it is dying out. There is also strong support for encouraging Canadians to learn other languages in addition to English and French—there is a greater recognition of this as an international comparative advantage.

HEALTH CARE

- Medicare—single tier, universal access, publicly-funded health care is still regarded as sacrosanct, and people are very concerned that we're losing it. More and more people understand that within that system, some publicly-funded services can be privately delivered—the far larger concern is wanting to avoid a two-tier system. This creates an opportunity to have a more open discussion—even if we don't have the answers, we should be looking for them.
- Home care—this issue resonates more than “wait times guarantees”, particularly with our acknowledged aging demographic. Most people recognize that the logistics fall within provincial jurisdiction, but it was raised very often in the discussions.
- There is also real enthusiasm for greater health *promotion*—a focus on *health*, not just health care.

ABORIGINAL ISSUES

- More financial support, although needed, is recognized as not being the only answer. Respect and dignity are key, as are efforts toward collaboration and partnership. Finishing high school is seen as critical, and the communities need help in this—both on and off reserve.
- Job training is also critical, and it must address both on and off reserve needs of the community. There are strong opportunities to connect with various industries across the country; the construction industry being only one example. Many industries in Canada face a growing shortage of young, skilled tradespeople. There is a logical connection here to be explored and built on, given a young, underemployed aboriginal population.