



Public Interest Alberta

ENGAGING CITIZENS FOR A STRONGER DEMOCRACY

A Proposal from
Public Interest Alberta's Democracy Task Force

FEBRUARY 2017

Introduction

Public Interest Alberta's Democracy Task Force has focused its recent advocacy work on three main priorities as elements of a comprehensive and systematic approach to democratic reform in our province:

- *Campaign and party finance reform*
- *Electoral system reform*
- *Strengthening citizen engagement in governance and decision-making*

We have outlined and advocated for specific proposals in both campaign/party finance reform and electoral system reform and, with regard to recent changes in legislation governing the financing of elections and political parties in Alberta, we are encouraged by the government's willingness to enact positive reforms. Of course, further changes to the rules in these first two areas are required to eliminate or reduce troubling undemocratic features of our system, including the undue influence of wealth in elections and electoral practices that undermine political equality, majority rule, minority rights, and representation by population.

It is evident, however, that the time has come to focus renewed attention on our third priority, which is equally central to strong democracy: the need to ensure that citizens are actively engaged in matters of governance, decision making, and developing public policy.

Rather than seeing citizens merely as voters who do little more than cast a ballot once every few years and then leave the issues and decisions to government officials, strong democracy is based on the principles of *participation, deliberation, and political agency*, and is structured to ensure that citizens and civil society groups have an important role to play and are systematically engaged in democratic decision making on an ongoing basis between elections.

In marked contrast to these principles of strong democracy, Alberta provincial governments' approaches to citizen engagement in recent decades have generally been minimal and perfunctory at best, most often involving a form of "consultation" that is limited to the opportunity to respond to online surveys, occasionally supplemented by carefully managed group discussions.

This approach seems to have been designed to allow governments to "put a tick in the box" next to "public consultation." It reflects the view that engaging citizens is an unfortunate but necessary distraction that must be endured before moving ahead with a pre-determined agenda. Efforts to actively involve citizens in decision-making have been exceptionally rare. When the government wants to know what "the public" thinks, they tend to rely on their own private polling rather than engaging citizens in meaningful deliberative dialogues about political issues and policy options. These practices have also led to a growing cynicism about government consultation in general in Alberta.

Too often, as a result of the current approach, policy making fails to take into account the concerns of many ordinary Albertans, and policies are too often developed without the consideration of the diversity of perspectives and potential consequences.

Such an approach is at the opposite end of the spectrum from the systematic and robust citizen engagement that is central to strong democracy. In systems designed to strengthen democracy, citizens' active participation is encouraged and facilitated by elected representatives and government officials who respect and value the informed views of citizens and organizations. In strong democracies, a diversity of opinions and voices are actively solicited and fostered by government in a variety of structured ways, in order to make better decisions with regard to public policies and programs.

The key point is that genuine and systematic democratic engagement of citizens is not simply a matter of government discharging a perfunctory obligation – rather, it is a way to ensure that legislation and public policy are informed and strengthened by engaging and taking into account the views of citizens and civil society groups. Citizen engagement in governance and decision-making is more than a democratic right - it is an important element of sound policymaking and a key element of strong democracy.

Fortunately, there are excellent examples of jurisdictions which have provided models for how to design and implement policies and practices that systematically require and foster genuine democratic engagement of citizens and civil society groups. We have drawn extensively on those examples in making the recommendations that follow.

What is needed in Alberta?

- 1. The Government of Alberta needs to make a clear commitment to putting in place a comprehensive program of policies and practices to ensure systematic engagement of citizens and civil society groups in the development of public policy in our province.**

There is an opportunity for Alberta's government to make a major contribution to strengthening democracy in this way, and in doing so to provide an example of leadership for the rest of the country, without the need for daunting expenditures.

The government needs a clear program to require effective, meaningful and structured democratic engagement of citizens by all government departments as they develop public policy, and it needs to provide the models and resources to enable the departments to do so.

Citizen engagement must begin early in the process of policy development, be inclusive and be directly connected to real decision making. Adequate funding should be clearly allocated in the provincial annual budget.

2. The government should use the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development's (OECD) "Ten Principles for Open and Inclusive Policy-Making" as an example of an approach that could guide the development of policies and practices in Alberta.

The OECD has developed a three-stage model of information provision, two way consultation and engagement in policy development and implementation *Focus on Citizens: Public Engagement for Better Policy and Services*), which includes ten guiding principles for open and inclusive policy making (See Appendix 1.)

[Provide updated link to OECD paper (at end?) and add copy of 10 principles as App 1]

Many European democracies have developed and invested in more systematic and comprehensive approaches to fostering citizen engagement. These typically reflect aspects of the ten OECD principles mentioned above, and include the issuing of "white papers" to inform public discussion during the development of new legislative initiatives, reducing barriers to full participation through outreach and providing supports to citizens and civil society groups that wish to engage in public consultations and related engagement exercises, ensuring that improved public engagement is understood to be a part of government's "core business," and demanding consistent evaluation processes in order to improve the effectiveness of public consultation and participation.

In building on the foundation of such principles, the Alberta government should also consider the specific examples of countries that have worked to do so in ways that reflect their own varying contexts and experiences. The OECD provides 14 case studies in this regard, ranging from Switzerland with its long tradition of direct democracy and referenda, to Finland whose established representative system has long reflected a "consultation culture," to South Korea, whose more recent experience in democracy has involved numerous experiments in citizen engagement. While none of the systems in these countries reflects all of the ten OECD principles, their collective experiences offer a wide range of insights on what to consider in moving ahead.

These diverse case studies fall into four thematic groups that explore key aspects of engagement efforts: regional and urban development (Australia, Canada, Germany, Norway, UK); local participatory budgeting (Turkey, Korea); national level participatory programs (Austria, Finland, France, Switzerland); and building capacity and tools for engagement (The Netherlands, New Zealand, UK.)

The provincial government should use these principles and examples to develop a comprehensive approach which reflects the circumstances of Alberta, and should seize the opportunity to be a leader in strengthening democracy across Canada in this regard.

3. The government should establish an Office of Democratic Engagement to support and monitor the efforts of government departments in meeting the requirements for engagement of citizens and groups in policy development.

The countries that have been successful in these efforts have recognized that it is not enough to simply enact policies that encourage departments to attempt to meet these goals. Rather, public engagement in policy development needs to be a clear requirement and a priority, supported by the provision of effective models of engagement and the resources needed to fulfil the responsibilities in ways that reflect the varying needs of different departments and different policy areas.

Departments already have important mandates to meet the needs of citizens in a considerable variety of ways, and the need for democratic engagement could easily fall by the wayside if it were not seen as important in each case. The establishment of the equivalent of an “Office of Democratic Engagement” at the centre of government would send a clear message to that effect, and would also provide consistent models for implementation that reflect the differing circumstances of departments as well as monitoring to ensure that it was being done effectively.

In developing an Office of Democratic Engagement, the government should draw on the work of scholars and public engagement practitioners such as Tyler D. Knowlton. In his work, “Public Engagement: Building Institutional Capacity,” he states that consistency, transparency and an authentic desire to bestow authority on the public through collaboration begins with building the institutional structures and processes necessary to support the inevitable culture change that faces all institutions and their decision makers engaged in this important work. He also focuses on the importance of deciding what to centralize and what to decentralize in doing so.

Knowlton strongly recommends an approach that involves creating a central public engagement office with the function of building institutional capacity to engage the public, as opposed to creating an office that develops and implements plans and projects. This approach helps to maintain standards and consistency, while keeping specific subject matter and related expertise within ministries and branches of government. He argues that the centralized engagement office should exist to support, coordinate and advise ministries in their engagement efforts, rather than to plan, implement and analyse on their behalf.

4. The Legislative Assembly should provide new supports for legislative committees and MLAs in their efforts to facilitate ongoing democratic engagement by their constituents.

Changes in communications and information technology have created both increased expectations and opportunities for MLAs to engage with individual citizens and groups. It is important to use these opportunities to maximize citizen engagement with their elected representatives. In order to do so, MLAs will need additional support in a number of ways.

In addition to technical support for expanded communications through technology, it will be vital to provide MLAs with other tools for engagement, in the form of models for conducting ongoing face-to-face opportunities for citizens to give input on issues and policies that concern them. This support will require both training for the MLAs, and resources to conduct engagement opportunities that facilitate and foster participation by individuals and groups representing a broad range of views, including those from members of minorities and marginalized groups.

Strengthening our democracy requires supporting the work of elected representatives in engaging with the full range of their constituents in more sophisticated and effective ways throughout the years between elections, and the reasonable additional expenditures required should be seen as a small but important investment in a more democratic Alberta.

5. The government should consider establishing a Public Centre for Democratic Engagement in order to further foster democratic engagement among Albertans.

In addition to having opportunities for systematic engagement, it is important to find ways to develop citizens' understanding of and commitment to using the tools and practices of stronger democracy.

There are publicly-supported institutions such as science centres and museums to foster public understanding of the importance of science and the arts, and similar institutions to promote understandings of important aspects of our history and cultures, including our bilingual and multicultural heritages.

Alberta's democratic system is a foundation of our society in much the same manner as these other elements, but outside of components in our K-12 social studies curricula, the province does very little to promote this vital aspect of our society in systematic ways. We should be promoting the understanding and importance of democratic engagement in the ways used to support efforts in these other areas, and for similar reasons.

Alberta's Legislative Assembly has made some steps in this direction, including working with elementary students on school visits to the Assembly as well as providing an impressive new interactive display in the Federal Building on the history and issues related to voting. But there is much more that can and should be done.

The establishment of a Public Centre for Democratic Engagement would provide an important ongoing opportunity for students, individuals and groups to learn much more about their democratic heritage, the operation of their political system, their role as active citizens, and their opportunities for engagement in governance, policy development and decision making.

The improvements in information, communication and interactive technologies are transforming museums and centres around the world and enhancing their roles in education and engagement in effective new ways. There is an opportunity for Alberta's government to make a significant and lasting

contribution to strengthening our democracy by creating this type of public centre for democratic engagement.

Although current levels of government tax revenue limit the capacity for new spending, there are ways to move forward now. For example, the government could consider using part of the former Royal Alberta Museum in Edmonton for this purpose; it would be an excellent use of an existing but currently unused public institution and asset, for an important public purpose – strengthening our democracy directly with the public, on an ongoing basis and in an appropriate existing public space.

The physical location of such a Centre would be only one issue to be considered; others would include what form its institutional affiliation with government and educational institutions might take, whether it would be an arms-length government agency, whether it would report to a minister, how and at what level it would be funded – all important questions for further examination. But the important first step would be for government to make a commitment to a detailed examination of the potential of such a Centre to make an important contribution to further strengthening our democracy.

Conclusion

The Government of Alberta and our Legislative Assembly are faced with an opportunity to make lasting improvements in the crucial area of democratic reform, without incurring prohibitive expenses in the process. And such strengthening of our democracy is badly needed.

There is enormous pressure for citizens to see themselves merely as *consumers*, who are simply receiving services from government; or as *taxpayers*, whose roles are limited to paying for government programs and activities; or at best as *voters*, who only cast a ballot to ‘give permission’ every few years and then retreat into a passive or observational role for the years that follow.

Instead of continuing to reinforce these minimalist and inadequate roles, the government has the opportunity to strengthen the role of these individuals as *citizens*, who are actively engaged in participating, deliberating and giving their insights on the decisions and policies of their government.

The result will also be better policy development, which will be consistently informed by the considered views of a wider range of citizens and civil society groups, and in turn will be more likely to gain citizen support since they will have been more engaged in the process of development.

This is not to say that deliberative processes will produce agreement or consensus; intractable conflicting interests may well remain after democratic engagement processes are completed. However, if these processes are implemented, supported and valued, citizens are much more likely to conclude that their views have been heard and considered, regardless of the decisions ultimately made by their government. In addition, they might well develop more of an appreciation for legitimate differences in approaches and views regarding public policies and interests.

This strengthening of democratic citizenship and practices will not come through encouraging statements and good intentions, but rather through a clear commitment to a set of principles that will guide concrete and comprehensive changes that need to be enacted, supported, and made to be an important priority.

We have outlined our view of those principles, practices and policies, and strongly encourage our government and legislators to put them in place. We would be most pleased to discuss any aspects of our proposals, and wish Alberta's elected representatives well in this important opportunity and work.