
Mini Citizens' Assemblies on the Future of Canadian Federalism

by Min Reuchamps

Canadian federalism and its future are undeniably a frequent and important topic of debate. Many people have their own opinions on the topic but they rarely have the opportunity to discuss it with fellow Canadians, experts and politicians in a setting conducive to learning and debate. With this in mind, three small citizens' assemblies on the future of federalism in Canada were held in the spring of 2008, two in Montreal and one in Kingston. For over four hours, participants had the opportunity to learn about and discuss topics relating to federalism with experts, politicians and other Canadians. The qualitative and quantitative data collected throughout these meetings provide a clearer picture of Canadians' perceptions and preferences regarding the future of their country and their province. The initial results show a wide range of knowledge, attitudes and opinions among participants at a single meeting and from one meeting to the next. There is no clear profile of a "federal citizen" but rather a multitude of profiles, sometimes very diverse. For comparison purposes, two more citizens' assemblies will be held in Belgium to compare French-speaking and Flemish-speaking Belgians' perceptions and preferences regarding federalism.

Three small citizens' assemblies on the future of federalism in Canada were held on March 15, June 14 and June 19, 2008, in Montreal and Kingston. At each of these half-day meetings, the participants discussed Canadian federalism and its future with experts, politicians and fellow Canadians. The purpose of these meetings was first to allow participants to express their perceptions on this important topic and secondly to better understand the relationships between their perceptions and preferences regarding federalism.¹ For

comparison purposes, two further citizens' assemblies will be held in Belgium to examine French-speaking and Flemish-speaking Belgians' perceptions and preferences regarding federalism.

For each meeting, fifteen or so individuals gathered for a morning of discussion. Participants were recruited in various ways: invitations placed in mailboxes in several neighbourhoods, emails sent to associations or groups, whether involved in politics or not (political parties and other political movements, student associations, local social and cultural associations etc.), notices in the print and electronic media, mailing lists and word of mouth. An invitation would have reached between 2,000 and 4,000 individuals for each assembly, in one form or another. Participation was voluntary and each participant received a nominal sum of \$10. The sample was therefore neither statistically random nor representative. There was however great diversity in each sample. Participants

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included both young and old, some were interested in politics and others not, some were university graduates, the individuals held dramatically different political beliefs. A total of 16 participants met in Kingston and 24 at two meetings in Montreal.

Each meeting began with participants completing a questionnaire of 50 or so questions. Some of them covered political knowledge, perception of the legitimacy of the federal political system and governments, identities and sense of belonging, perception of “others” and finally preferences regarding federalism and questions to determine political leanings and sociodemographic characteristics.

Four series of indicators were used to measure participants' perceptions. First, the political knowledge questions did not serve merely to test their knowledge but rather to determine how the participants understand the political system. Secondly, the perceived legitimacy of the federal system was evaluated through questions such as “Does the federal system work well?” and “What is the greatest asset of the federal system in Canada today?” Thirdly, apart from the classic self-identification question with various choices, the questionnaire included questions to determine participants' sense of belonging, including their attachment to Canada and their province. Fourth were questions about their perception of “others,” which could mean the other provinces and their residents or the rest of Canada for Quebecers.

Preferences were measured by participants' response to various statements: preserve the current federal system, strengthen the powers of the federal government or strengthen provincial powers. Three further statements were added to the preferences listed in Quebec: change to constitutionally recognize Quebec as a nation, become a sovereign nation with a partnership with Canada or become a sovereign nation with no partnership with Canada. Finally, the classic political (interest in politics, party allegiance) and socio-demographic questions (age, gender, place of residence, level of education and occupation) rounded out the questionnaire.

Once the questionnaire was completed, the meeting comprised small-group discussions and plenary sessions with experts and politicians. Like focus groups, each group had between five and eight participants led by a facilitator who directed the discussion by leading or moderating, and an observer noting all comments by participants for the purposes of data analysis. Right after they completed the questionnaire, the participants were divided into groups and began a one-hour discussion of their perceptions on Canadian federalism (knowledge, legitimacy, sense of belonging and perception of “others”). The facilitator directed the discussion according to

a common protocol used for all meetings to provide some consistency in data gathering. This first discussion session served to capture participants' perceptions on the spot, before any kind of learning.

Two plenary sessions followed. During the first, the participants had the opportunity to listen to two experts and to ask them questions. The experts each gave a 20-minute presentation. For example, at the citizens' assembly in Montreal, Alain Noël, a political science professor at the Université de Montréal, spoke about Quebec's position in the Canadian federation, while Paul-André Comeau, a former journalist and guest lecturer at the École d'administration publique, presented a different perspective on the future of Canada and Quebec. In Kingston, Peter Leslie and Kathy Brock, both political science professors at Queen's University, made up the expert panel and spoke about the Canadian federation and the challenges facing the federation and the federal government respectively. After these two presentations, there was a question and answer session with both experts. The first plenary session was intended primarily to inform participants, more or less objectively, in order to help them better understand Canadian federalism and the issues relating to its future.

The structure of the second plenary session was different. This time, the participants met politicians. The two politicians spoke in turn about their preferences regarding federalism before fielding questions from the audience. This session was not a political debate strictly speaking but instead gave participants the opportunity to hear two different points of view on the future of Canadian federalism. In Montreal, Marlene Jennings (Liberal Party of Canada) and Réal Ménard (Bloc Québécois) presented their vision of federalism and responded to participants' many comments and questions. Topics such as corruption, immigration, foreign policy, Canada-US relations, and Prime Minister Stephen Harper's political choices were discussed as regards the Canadian federal system in general and the role of the federal and provincial governments in particular.

After listening to the experts and politicians, the participants returned to their discussion groups to discuss their respective federal preferences. Once again, this was not a debate where one participant tried to influence others. They discussed their hopes for the future of Canadian federalism and the reasons for them. Each participant had the opportunity to state his or her preferences and to listen to others do the same. These discussions were informed by ideas that might have emerged from the discussions with the experts, politicians or fellow citizens.

The participants discussed and pondered topics relating to federalism for a total of over four hours. The dynamics of these small citizens' assemblies depended on alternating between discussion in small groups and meetings with experts and politicians. Finally, a questionnaire nearly identical to the initial one was distributed at the end of the meeting.

The purpose of these meetings was to allow participants to learn about and reflect on Canadian federalism and specifically its future. The intent was not to influence participants to change their opinions—although it would certainly be interesting to study potential changes in perceptions and preferences—nor to reach a consensus among participants. It was an individual experience although it occurred in a group setting to stimulate discussion. The data gathered during the meeting is both quantitative, based on the replies to the two questionnaires, and qualitative, based on the group discussions which were recorded and coded. These two types of data are complementary since each participant is given a code (V1 or Z7, for example), making it possible to track each participant's comments throughout the morning and their replies to the two questionnaires. The combination of qualitative and quantitative data provides a better understanding of participants' perceptions and preferences regarding federalism.

Initial Results

The participants' political knowledge was the first topic of discussion at the citizens' assemblies. One aspect was especially striking from the outset: nearly half of participants at the meetings in Montreal regarded Canada's political system as a confederation. Some of them added that the system became federal under Pierre Trudeau but that Canada is officially a confederation. This perception that the political system is essentially a confederation is based on the two founding nations concept shared by many Quebecers. After discussions with experts and in groups however the vast majority of participants answered this question correctly. In Kingston, the confederation/federation debate was hardly an issue at all. Only a few people who regarded Canada as a confederation at the beginning of the meeting changed their opinion following the discussions.

In both Kingston and Montreal, all participants agreed that the Prime Minister had been more often a Quebecer since 1980, which was an important factor in the country's federal political dynamics. Finally, participants knew little about the representation of their province in the House of Commons: less than half the participants in Kingston and Montreal respectively knew that Ontario has 107 seats in the House and that Quebec has 75 seats.

Above all, a wide range in participants' level of political knowledge was noted, as some could correctly answer all the questions while others could only answer a few.

The topic of knowledge of the political system was a roundabout way of identifying participants' perceptions of it. When participants were asked more directly about the legitimacy of the federal political system, not surprisingly Kingstonians differed from Montrealers. While Kingstonians were generally satisfied or very satisfied with the way Canada's federal system works, the Montrealers regarded it either as relatively satisfactory or were somewhat or very dissatisfied with it. Exploring this further through discussion with the participants, opposing perceptions among the different groups quickly become apparent.

Aside from the general satisfaction with Canada's political system expressed in discussions in Kingston, the participants were divided on a number of issues. Some thought that federalism protects Ontario's interests, does not give too much power to the federal government and is economically advantageous to the province. Others had a much less positive or even a negative view, saying not only that Canadian federalism is not favourable to the interests of their province but also that the federal government also has too much power. Others advocated a more limited role for government, whether federal or provincial, and also considered both of these levels of government ineffective.

In Montreal, a wide range of perceptions also emerged in discussions in the small groups, with experts and with politicians. First of all, the classic division between federalists and sovereigntists was soon evident. These two groups disagreed about whether Canadian federalism protects Quebec's interests or whether the federal government has too much power. Yet even those participants who were more or less critical of the Canadian federal system acknowledged the economic benefits to their province. Conversely, some participants who viewed Canadian federalism favourably did not consider it advantageous to Quebec's economy. Participants can therefore not be divided into two groups with opposing views on Canadian federalism.

Moreover, a number of participants made a clear distinction between their perception of Canadian federalism and that of the federal government. Some viewed Canadian federalism negatively but felt that the federal government should have more power or vice versa. In this regard, the fact that the federal government is currently headed up by a Prime Minister from Alberta led some avowed separatist participants to be more forgiving of political life in Ottawa and the decisions made there. Some participants thought that the poor showing

of the sovereigntist movement at present can also explain this more favourable opinion of the federal government headed up by a Conservative. Finally, the intensity of positive or negative opinions regarding the Canadian federal system and the federal government varied widely among participants.

A third indicator of perceptions was participants' sense of belonging and identity or identities. Here too there were great differences between and within the meetings. In Montreal, three identity profiles emerged from the qualitative and quantitative data. One group of participants defined themselves first and foremost as Quebecers. A second group identified themselves first as Quebecers and then as Canadian. Being a Quebecer was an important and sometimes the only aspect of belonging for some participants. Yet a number of participants indicated a more or less strong attachment to Canada while still being attached to Quebec. This was the case for one Anglophone Quebecer who had always lived in Montreal.

In Kingston, there was less variation in the identity profiles since most participants identified themselves first and foremost as Canadian. None felt exclusively Ontarian but some were attached or strongly attached to their province, while also being attached to Canada. The strength of participants' sense of belonging in these two very different identity settings sheds light on their complementary or exclusive identities, as the case may be, and the varying intensity of identities. Not surprisingly, tension regarding identity was strongest in Quebec, as was the greatest range of identity profiles, with some participants having various allegiances of equal or different intensity or a single predominant identity.

The fourth aspect of perceptions was participants' perception of "others." With regard to the future of federalism, "others" meant primarily Anglophones to participants in Montreal and Quebecers to participants in Kingston.² The issue of whether the media of one community propagates clichés about the other community was indirectly related to political relationships. The discussions revealed three different attitudes. The first is characterized by mistrust of the media, whether English-language or French-language, and the belief that the media propagates all kinds of clichés. The second attitude points instead to a lack of knowledge about what the English-language and French-language media, as the case may be, say about their community. Those participants preferred not to answer this question. Finally the third attitude was especially evident in Montreal, where the English-language media propagates clichés about Francophones and Quebecers in particular while the French-language media are not inclined or less inclined

to engage in this. These participants referred to "Quebec bashing."

One specific aspect of the Canadian federal system is Quebec's place in the federation and in particular the potential recognition of Quebec as a separate nation. While many Quebecers, both sovereigntists and federalists, regard Quebec as a separate nation from Canada, the participants in Kingston disagreed on this. Some agreed that Quebec is a distinct nation, some disagreed and some were strongly opposed, such as one woman who said, "We are all Canadians, period." The discussions at the meetings did however change the perception of some participants since for instance three of the five people in Kingston who initially refused to recognize Quebec as a separate nation from the rest of Canada did later accept this, although they did not feel that Quebec deserved any special privileges as a result.

Having examined the perceptions of meeting participants, we can now turn to their preferences for the future of federalism. The results of the meeting in Kingston and the meetings in Montreal differ considerably as might be expected given the different political context in Ontario and Quebec. In Kingston, the main dichotomy was between advocates of greater federal powers and those in favour of the current federal system. By contrast, beyond the classic division between federalists and sovereigntists, the participants in Montreal can be divided into a number of groups based on their preferences for the future of Quebec. There are two main groups: those who wanted Quebec to remain a province in the Canadian federation with greater powers for provincial governments and those who wanted it to become a separate country with a partnership with Canada. Other participants would like Quebec to become a sovereign country with no partnership with Canada, while others still wanted the Canadian federation to stay as it is.

More striking however are each participant's individual preferences. This more detailed analysis rounds out the division of participants into the four groups mentioned above. First of all, few of the participants indicated a single preference – although this was the profile of hardline sovereigntists who seek one sole outcome: Quebec sovereignty with no partnership of any kind with Canada. A number of participants indicated that they had several preferences without necessarily being able to rank them. Among the participants in Kingston, a large majority said they were in favour of the current federal system and increasing the federal government's powers. Moreover, while some could rank their preferences, others did not wish to. Finally, strengthening the powers of provincial governments was not discussed and was not advocated by a single participant. Many

participants regarded the federal government as the "real" government.

The status and future of the provinces was by contrast at the centre of discussion at the assemblies in Montreal. None of the participants advocated stronger powers for the federal government and few wanted to preserve the federal system as it is, even among avowed federalists. The focal point was therefore the future of Quebec rather than the future of Canadian federalism itself. Participants were not exclusive in their views on the issue of remaining a Canadian province or becoming a sovereign country, as the initial results of the citizens' assemblies in Montreal showed. Those in favour of strengthening provincial powers in general categorically opposed Quebec sovereignty without partnership with Canada but might also be interested in constitutional recognition of Quebec as a nation; some even agreed, often hesitantly, to Quebec sovereignty as long as there is a partnership with Canada. Conversely and more logically, participants in favour of Quebec sovereignty, with a partnership, were in favour of any solution that strengthens provincial powers even though these "intermediate" options did not satisfy them entirely. One participant recalled, as the saying goes, that a bird in the hand is better than two in the bush. Moreover, the conditions of Quebec sovereignty influenced participants' preferences, especially those of sovereigntists. On the one hand, a number of participants were in favour of sovereignty as long as there was some partnership with Canada, while others, hardline sovereigntists, rejected all options other than full sovereignty without any partnership, although they admitted that this scenario is unlikely.

In addition to shedding light on perceptions and political preferences, the citizens' assemblies provided a snapshot of the general political mood of a group of people. In Montreal, the debate about the future of Quebec was not as heated as it might have been in the past although participants did state their position, albeit less rigidly in some cases. A number of participants sought to liven up the discussion by referring to the open federal-

ism advocated by Stephen Harper and the growing power of the Western provinces. At the assembly in Kingston, the future of federalism was not a key issue and was less important than defending Canada's sovereignty, especially its economic sovereignty, US relations and Canada's place in the world.

Conclusion

Federalism and its future are important issues for Canada. At the three mini citizens' assemblies held on the subject, participants in Kingston and Montreal discussed the topic with experts, politicians and fellow citizens. The discussions revealed a wide range of opinions and attitudes not immediately apparent at first glance, highlighting the importance and benefit of giving people the opportunity to express their perceptions after allowing them to learn about the topic. Moreover, the generally positive feedback from the 40 participants suggests that these meetings served a need for members of the public to learn about and discuss important political topics, even those who said they had little interest in politics. Without trying to create a microcosm of an ideal debate that would be completely inconsistent with the participants' real lives, citizens' assemblies, whether large or small, can be useful opportunities for learning and debate for members of the public and for democratic life in general.

Notes

1. Preferences regarding federalism pertain to the future evolution of Canada's federal system, potentially moving toward different political structures. The desire to preserve the current federal system, to give more power to the federal government or to see Quebec become a separate country are examples of preferences regarding federalism.
2. Some participants thought that greater importance should be given to Aboriginal peoples in the federal system. Others also cited the importance of having ethnic and visible minorities represented in political circles.