



National Dialogue on Canada's Futures

Turning Hope into Action in a Turbulent Age

February 6, 2023

Synopsis

Over the course of three years, the National Dialogue on Canada's Futures (the Dialogue) will engage one million diverse Canadians in productive, community-directed conversations about our shared challenges, the positive futures we can imagine for Canada as we address these challenges, and the pathways we can follow to make those futures real.

What are our visions for a flourishing society in the coming turbulent decades? And how can we work together to fulfil these visions within the constraints of our rapidly shifting climate and economic realities?

We will not find comprehensive answers looking solely to our familiar social and political associations. Instead, we urgently need a new conversation that gives people the opportunity to speak from their experience—while also learning about the perspectives of others—so we can figure out how to face our challenges together. The Dialogue will invite Canadians of diverse identities to explore what we have in common and seek the underlying principles and commitments that will help us pursue broadly shared well-being in a time of environmental, social, economic, and technological turbulence.

Through structured in-person, arts-based, and online engagement, the Dialogue will bring together and amplify the voices of Canada's different communities—particularly groups that have had, to date, little chance to shape the conversation about how we can heal growing divisions and address our shared challenges.

We respectfully acknowledge the Xwsepsum, Lekwungen, xʷməθkʷəy̓əm, Skwxw.7mesh .xwumixw, səlie lʷətaɫ, q̓.cə y̓, kʷikʷəłəm, Qayqayt, Kwantlen, Semiahmoo and Tsawwassen peoples on whose unceded and continually occupied land our organizations reside.

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The challenge and opportunity

Lack of hope and continued polarization could undermine our capacity to find collective solutions to our complex challenges.

A convergence of powerful forces—including climate change and increasingly extreme weather to the COVID-19 pandemic, widening structural inequalities, and the decline of Canada’s forest and fishery resources—is upending livelihoods and communities across Canada and tearing at our social fabric. As a nation we are also struggling to navigate the rapidly unfolding energy transition the climate crisis is demanding of us.

Our casual conversations are flooded with growing awareness of historical wrongs, contemporary crises, and a future that looks to be filled with climate, economic, and social distress. Some groups are retreating towards perceived sources of safety to insulate themselves from these challenges, making it harder to learn together and to move collaboratively towards solutions.

Yet almost all government responses to these problems—whether federal, provincial, or municipal—are framed as narrow, technical matters of infrastructure investment, fiscal and tax policy, and regulatory changes.

While such responses can be vitally important, they do not directly engage with the wrenching “human” aspects of our converging crises—the fears and hopes they evoke, the inequitable impacts they produce, the declines in trust and quality of life they cause, and the challenges to our systems and identities they pose. Nor do they directly counter the worsening social and political polarization that is weakening our ability to address our linked challenges.

Purely technical responses will fall on fallow ground without broad conversations about how we can live together cooperatively in a radically changed world. If we don’t effectively and urgently address our problems, our country could fracture.

What is needed now is a new conversation that gives people the opportunity to better understand their own beliefs, find empathy with others, and explore how their core values direct us all towards particular futures. People need the opportunity to step outside of their echo chambers and work collectively to figure out how we will face our extraordinary challenges together. And they need the positive ideas that emerge from such a process to reach the ears of many other Canadians, including policy makers and power holders.

Human questions lie at the heart of our future:

What will it mean to be Canadian in 40 years?

What is the future we want, and how can we help make it happen?

What are our ambitions for our families, for our communities, and for Canada as a whole?

What are our visions for a just, equitable, resilient, and flourishing society in the coming turbulent decades?

An urgent conversation on Canada's futures

In response to our critical situation, the Dialogue will invite one million diverse voices into a Canada-wide conversation made up of structured in-person community conversations, catalytic contributions from thought leaders and artists, and well-moderated online participation. It will create space for us to boldly think through possible futures together and to sketch out pathways, policies, and concrete strategies for creating our most desired Canada. Participants will draw connections between their present choices and the futures those choices may create, while learning from others with diverse experiences and priorities.

These conversations will be enriched by polling data on the beliefs, values, and priorities of Canadians. They will be facilitated by trusted community leaders, engagement specialists, scenario experts, and artists and innovators; and they will be amplified across the country with the support of the project's media partners and a contributing network of academic institutions and community organizations.

The Dialogue aspires to empower participants from diverse groups and backgrounds to build shared understandings, uncover new connections, and broaden the landscape of futures for Canada that are both positive and possible, while also refining approaches to community engagement that will strengthen our democracy and reduce polarization.

Project frameworks

Some aspects of the project are defined, while others are being left intentionally undefined to create space for collaborative co-design through the project’s consultation and involvement process. The steering committee and collaborators of the Dialogue will guide the details of the project and its emerging outcomes.

Research framework

The research framework for the Dialogue focuses on building and interpreting new evidence about the core beliefs and values of people in Canada. The project will use polling and other methods to better understand and identify high-leverage intervention points that can lead to better futures.

Core beliefs are fundamental “what is” and “what ought to be” beliefs and are relatively stable over time. Our beliefs about “what is” and “what ought to be” are interconnected. Usually, individuals within a social group hold many core beliefs in common and their core beliefs can be measured and compared using a method called Ideological State Space.¹ The Ideological State Space creates a map of where Canada is and where it could be going.

Maps of current beliefs and values are powerful tools for generating discussion, reflection, and inspiration for individual and community change.² Often, participants discover they share more common values than they assume and shift their opinions.³ Results from polling and shared sense-making can also lead participants to identify their common causes, brainstorm actions, and make different individual and societal commitments.

Foresight framework

Collaborative foresight work involves principle-based approaches for helping people “transform their capacities and actions very quickly.”⁴ The Dialogue’s activities are inspired by proven transformative scenario planning methods.⁵

These methods invite participants into workshops or online spaces to develop shared understandings of the past and current challenges. Current trends are analyzed to create potential scenarios and narratives of the future. Next, participants discuss these scenarios and collaboratively deliberate on positive

¹ Homer-Dixon, Thomas. 2020. *Commanding hope: The power we have to renew a world in peril*. Toronto: Knopf Canada

² Crompton, Tom. 2010. *Common cause: The case for working with our cultural values*. London: WWF-UK’s Strategies for Change Project

³ Common Cause Foundation. 2017. *Discover and share: Ways to promote positive values in arts and cultural settings*. Manchester, UK: <https://commoncausefoundation.org/resources/discover-and-share-ways-to-promote-positive-values-in-arts-and-cultural-settings/>

⁴ Weisbord, M. (2009) *Future search: an action guide to finding common ground in organizations and communities*. Oakland, CA: Barrett-Koehler.

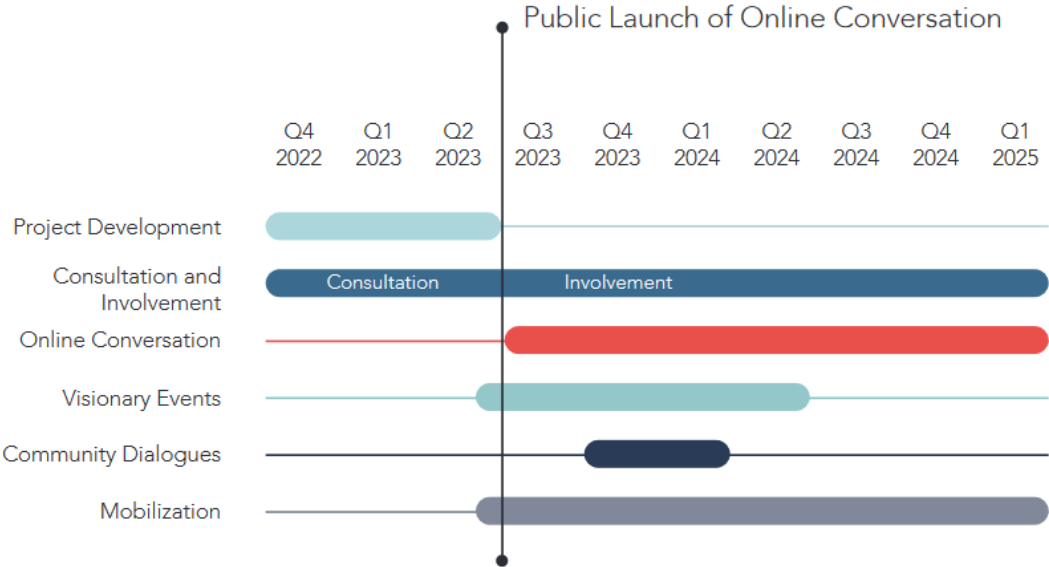
⁵ Kahane, A. (2012). *Transformative scenario planning: working together to change the future*. Oakland, CA: Barrett-Koehler

options for the future. Finally, participants identify what is needed immediately to create the future they want.

These practices have been proven across the globe. They achieve shifts in knowledge, feelings, and intentions amongst participants at national and local scales. The facilitated process helps participants embrace their responsibility in creating current problems and potential solutions. The last steps produce commitment and actions for change.

Project Timeline

Project consultation will start in fall 2022 with the aim of launching the online platform in mid-2023. Community conversations will be hosted in the winter of 2023/2024 and the project will conclude in early-2025.



Project components

The Dialogue’s success depends on the advice of individuals reflecting a broad and diverse range of geographies, cultures, and lived experiences. Their input will shape the role that communities play in project activities and the extent to which the project creates benefits that outlive the project.

We currently envision the Dialogue having four main components:

1. Consultation and involvement
2. Online engagement
3. Visionaries (arts-based and speaking events)
4. Community conversation

Consultation and involvement

The first phase of the project involves three forms of consultation. Feedback from these consultations will ensure the Dialogue effectively navigates and addresses socioeconomic divides, creates cross-sectoral appeal, foregrounds equity considerations, and reflects diverse lived experiences.

Consultations will mitigate project risks and ensure communities are represented, reflected, and respected by the Dialogue’s activities. Involvement with collaborating organizations will find ways for the project to be meaningful amongst diverse communities.

<p>Pre-launch Vice-regal and community consultation roundtables</p>	<p>Several of Canada’s Vice-regal representatives (Lieutenant Governors and Commissioners) will bring together 10-15 participants representing diverse sectors, lived experiences, and organizations in their jurisdictions. Additional roundtables will be hosted by respected non-political organizations dedicated to civic engagement and collaboration.</p> <p>Each consultation roundtable will be structured around the same guiding discussion questions, to ensure comparability across Canada. Analysis and results of the roundtables will be shared with the Dialogue’s advisory groups and used to inform the design of the project’s messaging and activities. The roundtables will also build relationships and collaborations across Canada.</p>
<p>Policy workshops</p>	<p>Workshops with federal government ministries will inform the project’s strategy for ensuring uptake by policymakers. The workshops will also identify key policy areas to highlight on the online platform and in community conversations (such as climate resilience, jobs, and natural resource management).</p>
<p>Advisory and steering committees (see <i>People and Organizations</i>)</p>	<p>The Dialogue will convene four groups who will regularly convene and confer to shape and advise the project:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - a <i>Project Steering Committee</i> made up from diverse representative stakeholder organizations from across Canada who will be actively involved in the project design process to ensure equity, respect and shared needs are considered and met; - a “big picture” <i>Advisory Council</i> with expertise in system change, complexity, conflict resolution, and applied research; - a <i>Research Advisory Board</i> to guide the development of the project’s research framework, polling questions, approaches to data analysis, and knowledge mobilization; and - an <i>Engagement Advisory Board</i> to shape the community conversation and experiential components of all project activities.

Online engagement

We will build an online national conversation and sense-making space as part of a multi-pronged strategy to engage one million Canadians in the overall Dialogue. The conversation will take place on a civic-engagement platform, on social media, and on a branded project website—strengthened by the engagement capacity of project collaborators.

The platform will provide participants with four kinds of experiences:

“Visionary” content	Contributions from a diverse group of storytellers, poets, visual artists, musicians, and innovative thinkers will drive attention towards the Dialogue, while capturing and reflecting upon the conversations of participants. Users will engage with Visionaries and share their own creative content through the online platform, website, and social media channels.
Forum conversations	Professionally moderated forums will give participants opportunities to share stories, reflect on the stories of other participants, discuss regional and cultural similarities and differences, challenge and endorse recommendations and research findings, and learn more about the hopes and concerns of other participants.
Polling and analysis	<p>Globally recognized data scientists and experts in modeling complex social and cultural systems will develop research tools with input from participants—particularly those representing groups whose interests and concerns are rarely reflected in the design of largescale research projects. Research tools will be accessible, use inclusive and comprehensible language, and protect participant privacy. All research findings will be available to participants on the online platform and in the community conversations.</p> <p>Polling will precede (and overlap with) the national online engagement, providing a detailed and evolving “snapshot” of current beliefs, values, hopes, and fears—and where Canada might go in the future. Participants will be encouraged to engage with polling data and share stories about how the findings resonate with their own experiences and communities. Results will be communicated through blog posts, short videos, and compelling data visualizations.</p>
Feedback loops	Participants will receive real-time updates of conversation outcomes and polling results. This feedback will increase participant awareness of emerging themes, similarities and differences between different parts of the country, pressure points, and potential areas of convergence.

These four experiences will be used to shape the development of several macro-scenarios for Canada's future produced by scenario experts. These scenarios will be fed back into the online engagement, as well as the community conversations.

Visionaries: Arts-based and speaking events

A series of online and in-person events combining the arts, thought innovation, and community participation will promote creativity and play alongside the project's other components. These Visionary events will raise the project's profile and create moments that captivate participants' imaginations and draw them into the broader conversation.

A group of thought innovators with expertise and experience related to the topics of values, system transformation, decolonization, justice and equity, economics, futurism, sustainable futures, and civic participation will deliver TED-style presentations and participate in moderated conversations across Canada and online. Speakers will be selected based on their ability to deliver novel, compelling, and urgent messages about Canada's possible futures. The Dialogue will spotlight individuals whose perspectives and ideas are not currently amplified.

Storytellers, poets, visual artists, musicians and other creatives will draw attention to, reflect, and share the evolving conversation around our visions for the future. The Dialogue will seek out existing compositions and projects that are relevant to the project, while also sponsoring new compositions and projects created in real-time over the Dialogue's three-year timeline. The latter category will include contributions from artists that use the Dialogue itself as a source of inspiration and potentially shape some aspects of the engagement experience.

Important milestones of the project will be marked by Visionary events across the country to draw attention to the project, spark celebration and create opportunities for cross-cultural expressions of joy and hope. Through broadcasts on various platforms, including television, radio, streaming services, and social media, Visionaries will also engage with and contribute to the evolving conversation around the Dialogue's scenarios and outcomes. Visionaries will have the opportunity to interact with each other and with the public through interviews, podcasts, roundtable discussions and participation in some community conversations.

Community conversations

Over the course of three months, a group of engagement experts, in partnership with post-secondary institutions and community organizations, will conduct approximately 30 to 50 structured conversations across Canada with groups representing a broad cross-section of society.

Together, participants will better understand how their values and beliefs create and constrain the menu of desirable futures. Each conversation will involve 20 to 25 participants and will be hosted at respected sites of community inclusion (e.g., Friendship Centres, community hubs, and universities).

These conversations will expand and explore the collectively developed scenarios of Canada's future (prepared by scenario development experts and informed by national polling data and the online engagement). Through in-person conversations, participants will aspire to find areas of convergence in their visions for the future of Canada. They will reflect on the relationship between various future scenarios, their values and priorities, as well as the constraints of our rapidly shifting climate and economic realities. Then, participants will identify concrete strategies, policies, and other solutions for moving Canada toward positive futures.

Project deliverables and outcomes

Deliverables

Throughout the Dialogue, we will engage with one million Canadians, including individuals from a diverse range of socioeconomic, geographical, educational, ethnic, religious, and ideological backgrounds. The process and activities will also invite collaboration with community leaders working towards justice, equity, reconciliation, and the improved well-being of their constituents.

The four components of the Dialogue will produce:

- innovative data and analysis on beliefs, and attitudes across a wide range of topics about Canada's futures (e.g., polarization, Canada-US relations, economic transition, and climate change);
- creative content (storytelling, poetry, music, visual and multimedia art, etc.), videos and blog posts to iteratively engage participants in data analysis and data visualizations;
- detailed narratives of Canada's potential future scenarios based on current trends;
- arts-based events and activities, keynote speeches, interviews, op-eds, moderated conversations, or TED-style presentations across Canada;
- 30 to 60 community conversations held across Canada with 750-1,500 participants using scenario planning workshop methods;
- an interactive digital report summarizing all project deliverables (including testimonials, artist interpretations of project outcomes, interviews with participants, expert analysis, and commentary);
- publicly available repository of tools, methods, and other resources for future engagement projects; and
- co-designed specific pathways, strategies, policies, and other solutions to steer Canada towards desirable and away from undesirable futures.

Outcomes

At the Dialogue's conclusion, it will have created broad support for—and an ongoing distributed civic-institutional framework for—continued mass deliberation around complex issues that are difficult and contentious but need urgent attention. The large-scale project is an opportunity for a shared experience of national introspection and cross-difference learning.

Through their engagement with the research, community conversations and the online national conversation, one million people will:

- better understand the map of Canadian beliefs and core values as well as how they constrain the range of possible futures for Canada—both for themselves and others;
- consider the nature and extent of the sometimes-inescapable tradeoffs between key goals, and look for previously unseen win-win outcomes that can broadly benefit Canada; and
- feel a commitment to bridging divisions and building the social fabric of our communities.

Through a large-scale deployment of surveys and innovative methods for measuring public sentiment, values, and priorities, the Dialogue will:

- collect new data on values, value shifts, and positive and negative futures; and
- leverage analysis of current beliefs and values to identify high-leverage interventions for Canada's future
- identify new strategies for decreasing polarization and increasing people's commitment to cooperate with and care for one another.

Collectively, the four project components will:

- create a shared experience of national introspection and cross-difference learning;
- contribute new methodologies that can be used in other contexts to reinforce Canada's civic infrastructure; and
- provide communities with a healing experience and an opportunity to build capacity and empathy at a large scale.

Strategy

The Dialogue's organizers will develop a detailed communication strategy to ensure the project's activities, materials, events, and findings reach national and international audiences. The plan will include a schedule of conventional and social media engagements, strategies for collaborating with popular content creators, media partnerships with outlets across the country and a publication pipeline for op-eds and community-friendly reports.

Organizers will also develop a strategy for ensuring that policymakers, elected officials, and leaders of Canada's influential sectors, including business, non-governmental, and academic, are aware of, learn from, and (whenever possible) engage with the project.

People and organizations

Simon Fraser University Public Square (SFUPS) supports faculty, students, staff, alumni and diverse communities to convene accessible, innovative and inclusive programming that brings people together to find ways to meaningfully contribute to the issues that affect our lives. Every year, we collaboratively program dozens of workshops, debates, public conversations, discussion panels and other gatherings. The experience is transformative, inspiring deeper conversations, igniting networks, building capacity and catalyzing curiosity and concern into advocacy and action.

Cascade Institute at Royal Roads University (CI, RRU) uses advanced methods to map and model complex global systems. We identify and help implement high-leverage interventions in social systems. Our goal is to trigger a fundamental, quick, and positive shift in humanity's trajectory towards fair and sustainable prosperity. Our work is conducted by outstanding complex-systems scientists, including experts in non-linear change in social and cultural systems.

Partner organization

The **Honourable Janet Austin, OBC Lieutenant Governor of British Columbia** leverages her position to encourage the cross-fertilization of opinions and bring together British Columbians with differing perspectives who share the desire to make their communities a better place to live.

Collaborating Organizations

Institute du Nouveau Monde

Environics Research

Project Team (alphabetical)

Amanda Campbell (OLGBC)

Thomas Homer-Dixon* (CI, RRU project co-lead)

Scott Janzwood (CI, RRU)

Janet Webber* (SFUPS, Executive Director, project co-lead)

Sherry Stevenson (SFU, Associate Director)

Fundraising contacts

Sofia Janmohamed, MBA, CFRE

Executive Director,

Advancement and Alumni Engagement

Simon Fraser University

E: ssj@sfu.ca

T: 604.767.2127

Rebecca Sharma, MA

Advancement Director,

Royal Roads University

E: Rebecca.9sharma@royalroads.ca

T: 250.480.8410

Advisory groups

Steering Committee

(To be determined)

Advisory Council (alphabetical)

Amanda Gibbs (Vancouver Park Board)

Dave Jamieson (Environics)

Peter McLeod (MASS LBP)

Ruth Mojeed Ramirez (The Inclusion Project)

Marilyn Taylor (Royal Road University)

Frances Westley (University of Waterloo)