

The absence of comment and criticism, therefore, should not be mistaken for indifference or dissatisfaction. Rather it is an indication that the policies on which we did not receive comment are widely supported or, at a minimum, do not arouse substantial concern among any segment of the population. Similarly, frequent comment and criticism directed at some areas of policy show that a considerable number of Canadians want a change of policy, but they do not demonstrate that the majority of Canadians want that policy to be changed. Such concern should, however, be interpreted by the government as cause for reflection.

In the age of participatory democracy, a government must know what the people are thinking. On some issues it is our impression that the public has become a major source of information and even policy guidance. In areas of external policy where we detected little public concern, the government may have to proceed without the benefit of much public input. But ultimately a foreign policy concocted in isolation in Ottawa poses inherent political risks.

Major Concerns of Canadians

The oral testimony and written briefs we received were as varied in outlook as Canadians themselves. Some were highly focused and pointed in their concerns, while others adopted a broad and reflective posture. We received some briefs that obviously represented a group consensus, carefully and slowly formulated after extensive discussions and compromise. Others just as clearly were spontaneous and highly personal reactions written and mailed within hours of seeing our advertisement. Some organizations with branches across the country seemed to have encouraged those branches to respond separately and even guided them on how to do so, while other groups co-ordinated their reply in a single national brief. Committee members were the object of one national postcard campaign on Central America. Written submissions varied in length from half-page handwritten letters to 40-page essays from the Interchurch Committee on Corporate Responsibility on South Africa or the Canadian Institute of Strategic Studies. Oral testimony encompassed everything from passionate five-minute statements to two-hour panel discussions. Rarely did all interventions reflect consensus; points of view were often in sharp contradiction with each other.

Our experience of travelling twice across Canada and holding hearings in all provinces and territories made us particularly aware of the extent to which issues of concern to Canadians have a regional or even a local dimension. During our hearings in Newfoundland we received complaints about low-level, high-speed training flights by military aircraft based at Goose Bay. The witnesses objected to the possibility that the base might become a NATO training facility, a development that others in the community supported strongly. Witnesses in Quebec expressed concern about plans by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency to ban future imports of asbestos. Manitobans were alarmed about U.S. plans to build the Garrison Dam. Residents of Quebec and Manitoba shared a worry that the United States might decide to bury nuclear waste in areas close to the provinces' southern borders. Western Canadians were preoccupied with the collapse of world oil prices. In the Atlantic provinces a major concern during our hearings was whether the U.S. countervail duty on groundfish exports would be maintained. Residents of Yukon were paying considerable attention to their unsettled maritime boundary with Alaska, an interest they shared with British Columbians who have similar problems over their maritime boundaries with the states of Alaska and Washington. In the Northwest Territories a matter of widespread concern was the trend, especially strong in Europe, to embargo the importation of