

# Conclusions

The following conclusions answer three important questions. First, what were the key findings and recommendations made by participants? Second, how did this first experiment in deliberative democracy play out at **Assembly '96**, particularly with respect to how participants changed their opinions? Third, where does the process go from here?

## FROM THE PARTICIPANTS

- 1) Quality of life and the diversity of Canada emerged as important things that young adults **value** about their country. Canadians' respect for differences was the most often mentioned value followed by freedom.
- 2) The **economy** emerged as the primary concern of participants, particularly the issues of jobs, government debt, cuts to social programs, and education and job training. Numerous options were put forward to address each of these issues.
- 3) On the **national unity** front, participants identified the inability of Canadians to communicate and understand each others' concerns

as a barrier to solving problems. A strong consensus emerged for a re-balancing of roles and responsibilities between the federal and provincial governments as a way to manage the diversity of Canada.

- 4) Participants were clear that they are frustrated with and often lament the lack of accountability in the **structures of government**. A number of fixes were recommended, including more referendums, more free votes in Parliament and the legislatures and a call that no real change will occur without Canadians themselves actually demanding more from their elected leaders.

## DELIBERATIVE DEMOCRACY

- 1) The level of discussion, the range of alternatives and the quality of solutions at **Assembly '96** were very similar to those arrived at by government hearings, seminars or policy conferences which invite just special interests, academics, etc. **Assembly '96** shows that a random selection of "ordinary" Canadians, given the opportunity, can come to grips with complex policy issues.
- 2) The results of the two surveys show that some of the opinions held by participants underwent **significant change** following the assembly. This was particularly true with respect to national unity issues.
- 3) **Assembly '96** served two important functions for participants. First, they said it was highly **educational**, providing the opportunity to learn about issues and the concerns of other Canadians. Secondly, participants said they appreciated the **forum** to voice their opinions.

## WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

Over the next few months, assembly organizers will widely distribute this report and continue research on deliberative democracy as a means to enhance public participation in decision-making. Another survey will be conducted among participants to assess the long term effects of the assembly. Plans are in the works for another assembly in 1997 which will deal with two or three specific policy issues.

**The idea for Assembly '96 originated with Canada West Foundation, a public policy research institute located in Calgary, Alberta. CWF partnered with the Council for Canadian Unity and the Atlantic Provinces Economic Council to sponsor the week long event. This document is a summary of a larger report developed by a committee of the sponsors of Assembly '96. CWF Research Assistant Casey Vander Ploeg acted as the draftsperson for this committee.**

**Because of the independence given the committee in producing this report, the opinions and recommendations expressed within are those of the committee only and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the Canada West Foundation, the Council for Canadian Unity or the Atlantic Provinces Economic Council and their governing bodies, members or contributors. Permission is hereby granted by the copyright owners for any and all reproduction of this document in its entirety for non-profit and educational purposes.**

Copies of the **Assembly '96** main report are available upon request from the Canada West Foundation:

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# Futures Canada Assembly

Young Adults on the Future of Canada

## Rencontre Perspectives Canada



### SUMMARY REPORT

## Introduction

From August 22-29 of 1996, ninety-seven young adults from all walks of life across Canada met at the Terry Fox Centre in Ottawa for **Assembly '96**. Never before had such a group of young Canadians met to consider the important economic, political and social issues facing their country.

More than a conference, **Assembly '96** was an experiment in *deliberative democracy* - a new method of public input into the decision-making process. The project sought to assess the ability of a random sample of Canadians to address fundamental questions of public policy. The purpose of **Assembly '96** was three-fold:

- 1) To bring together a group of young Canadians (18-29 years of age) reflecting as closely as possible the community of young adults in Canada to consider and voice their opinions on the important economic, social and political issues which confront their country;
- 2) To generate some fresh thoughts, perspectives and ideas for renewing Canada, and to give all Canadians an opportunity to consider those ideas; and

- 3) To initiate Canada's first experiment in *deliberative democracy* - an expanded opinion poll coupled with an enhanced policy conference. While polls use representative sampling to determine the sentiments of the broader community, they may not measure the true complexity of a community's reasoned opinions. Conferences only give a select group of people the opportunity to develop policy alternatives. Deliberative democracy avoids these pitfalls by bringing together a representative sample of people for a reasonable length of time to listen to experts and discuss the issues before reaching conclusions.

Young adults would put in almost 40 hours of work during **Assembly '96**.

Great pains were taken to ensure that **Assembly '96** would mirror the larger community of young adults. In fact, each of the five and a half million Canadians aged 18-29 had an equal chance of being invited to the assembly. All participants (except those from the NWT and the Yukon) responded to a Canada-wide opinion poll conducted in March and April of 1996. Since polls seek a totally random sample of respondents, organizers of the assembly secured a list of those who had participated and then proceeded to randomly invite 100 of them. A profile of the participants is included in the main report available from Canada West Foundation.

The Council for Canadian Unity



Le Conseil pour l'unité canadienne



CANADA WEST FOUNDATION

**APEC**<sup>TM</sup>  
atlantic provinces  
economic council

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Participants were asked to consider four topics:

- 1) *Canadian Values*;
- 2) *The Economy*;
- 3) *National Unity*; and
- 4) *Representation and Participation*.

Before the discussions began, participants completed a survey. A workbook was then made available, and as the assembly moved along, participants would prepare for each topic using the workbook and listening to testimony from various “experts.” The group was divided into workshops for discussion purposes. Each workshop was guided by a facilitator to ensure the discussion was open to all the ideas that participants wished to discuss. Every workshop reported their findings on each topic to the entire assembly. Following the assembly, participants completed a second survey.

David Kilgour

Agnes Gruda

David Kilgour, MP and Deputy Speaker of the House of Commons, and Agnes Gruda, an editorialist with *La Presse*, co-chaired **Assembly ‘96**. Under their guidance, the seven-day assembly proceeded smoothly. During this period, each participant put in almost 40 hours of work. About half of this time was spent in the smaller workshop sessions where participants could openly discuss the issues. Another third was spent listening to and questioning some 18 speakers. The remainder was spent giving workshop reports and discussing the issues in plenary sessions. All plenaries and two of the seven workshops were simultaneously translated in French and English. This summary focuses on three outcomes of the **Assembly ‘96** experience: 1) *The ideas and conclusions as presented by the participants*; 2) *The impact of the assembly on participants’ opinions*; and 3) *How participants view their future participation in public affairs*.

## Canadian Values

The first topic addressed by **Assembly ‘96** was that of Canadian values. Participants explored the ideas, beliefs, principles and core commitments they felt were important to being Canadian. Many workshops spent significant time developing a list of such values and assessing the extent to which they are shared among themselves and other Canadians.

Topping the list of values considered important by participants were those things that broadly reflect the *quality of life* experienced in Canada. Specific examples mentioned include the fact that Canada is a *safe, secure* and *peaceful* country and that it values *justice*. *Family* was also offered as an important value by several work groups.

Values reflecting the *diversity* of Canada were also deemed important. *Respect and tolerance* for others and other points of view was the most frequently mentioned value. Five of the seven workshops reported that this value had made it onto their lists. Some groups expanded on their discussion about diversity by exploring the means by which Canada has accommodated differences. *Bilingualism* was one specific example mentioned by at least two groups.

Many of the workshop groups made specific mention of several *political values*. The workshop reports indicate that the notion of *freedom* was discussed extensively. It was also mentioned as an important value by four groups. The fact that Canada is a *democracy* with certain rights and freedoms and that all Canadians are treated *equally* also emerged as an important value.

Opportunities for *education* and the *pursuit of knowledge* was mentioned as a very important value by at least four workshop groups, but other *social programs* were mentioned less often.

A number of *basic values* such as *honesty, integrity* and *charity* were also mentioned, but none of these assumed a primary importance on their own. Values related to the *natural beauty* of Canada, its vast geography and natural wealth were also mentioned, but only by a few groups in passing.

Both surveys asked participants if they thought the economy was getting stronger or weaker. After the assembly, more said the economy is getting stronger but more also said it was getting weaker (**Figure 5**). The assembly experience seems to have pushed participants away from the middle position - fewer said the economy was “staying the same.”

## 5. FUTURE OF CANADA

Large swings in opinion occurred on the *unity* issue (**Figure 6**). Following the assembly, support for status quo federalism fell dramatically from 64% to 22%. Support for some type of undefined special status for Québec grew from under 10% to almost a third. Support for the more familiar “distinct society” increased significantly from 34% to 74%. Support for a general devolution of powers to the provinces also grew from 67% on the first survey to 89% on the second. In the first survey, only 18% of participants were “strongly” in favour of a more decentralized federation, but in the second, almost 60% were “strongly” in favour. Much of this data confirms what was happening in the workshops as many groups came out in favour of a more decentralized Canada and some for special recognition of Québec.


Support for an independent Québec fell to 3% following the assembly, but support for some form of “sovereignty-association” did grow. While the reasons for this growth are unclear, it may simply mirror increased support for “decentralization” in general, with some participants seeing sovereignty-association as a model of a significantly decentralized federation.

## 6. THE ASSEMBLY ‘96 EXPERIENCE

Participants were favourable towards the *Assembly ‘96* experience. Most (70%) said they learned a lot through the process and that the opportunity to discuss issues with other young Canadians was a meaningful part of the experiment (**Figure 7**). More participants said the assembly was an “encouraging” experience than a “discouraging” one. In another question, participants were asked what they appreciated most about the assembly. Almost 60% claimed it was simply “people” - meeting others, making new friends, and coming to an increased understanding of Canadians living in other parts of the country.

Participants were also asked about their *future participation* in public affairs - whether or not they wanted to be contacted about opportunities to take part in similar discussions at the community level (**Figure 8**). Over 90% said they would be willing to participate with others in a similar discussion like *Assembly ‘96*, and a majority felt they would like to speak to other groups about these issues if given the opportunity.

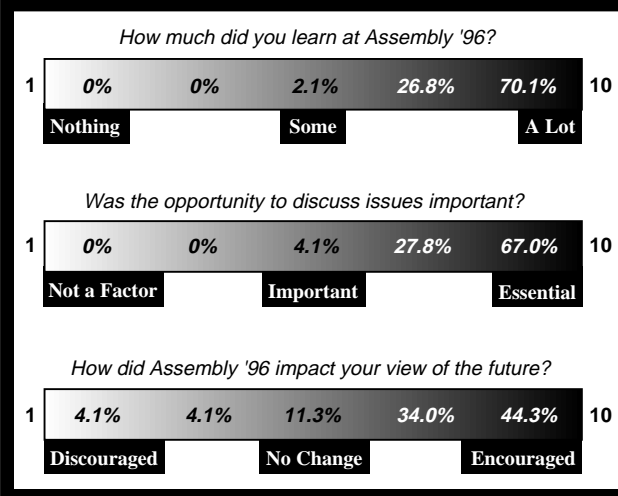
**FIGURE 5: Is the Economy Getting Worse?**

	 <b>Better</b>	 <b>Same</b>	 <b>Worse</b>
<b>Survey 1</b>	<b>30.9%</b>	<b>25.8%</b>	<b>43.3%</b>
<b>Survey 2</b>	<b>33.0%</b>	<b>16.5%</b>	<b>50.5%</b>

**FIGURE 6: Support for National Unity Options**  
(% of participants in agreement)

<b>Unity Option</b>	<b>Survey 1</b>	<b>Survey 2</b>	<b>Change</b>
<i>Stay with status quo</i>	63.9%	21.6%	- 42.3%
<i>Special status for Québec</i>	7.2%	28.9%	+ 21.7%
<i>Distinct Society</i>	34.0%	74.2%	+ 40.2%
<i>More Powers for Québec</i>	28.9%	50.5%	+ 21.6%
<i>Decentralized Federation</i>	67.0%	88.7%	+ 21.7%
<i>Sovereignty Association</i>	8.2%	29.9%	+ 21.7%
<i>Independence</i>	8.2%	3.1%	- 5.1%

**FIGURE 7: Participant Views on Assembly ‘96**  
(Percentage for each quintile on a 10 point scale)



**FIGURE 8: Participants' Future Participation**  
(% saying they would be willing to do the following)

<i>Participate in Community Group Discussions</i>	<b>90.7%</b>
<i>Willing to Speak to Community Groups</i>	<b>70.1%</b>
<i>Willing to Initiate Community Group Discussions</i>	<b>62.9%</b>

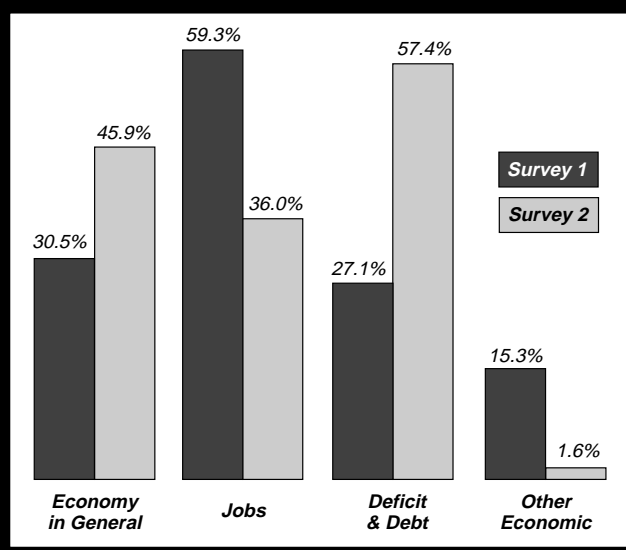
**FIGURE 2: The Most Important Issues**  
(% of participants mentioning a particular issue)

Issue Area	Survey 1	Survey 2	Change
Economic Issues	60.8%	62.9%	+ 2.1%
Unity Issues	20.6%	18.6%	- 2.0%
Social Programs	11.3%	11.3%	0.0%
Government / Politics	6.2%	17.5%	+ 11.3%
Other Issues	12.4%	24.7%	+ 12.3%
Don't Know / No Answer	6.2%	2.1%	- 4.1%

**FIGURE 3: Important Canadian Values**  
(% of participants claiming a value is important)

Value	Survey 1	Survey 2	Change
Multiculturalism	86.6%	96.9%	+ 10.3%
Bilingualism	87.7%	94.8%	+ 7.1%
Low Crime Rate	90.7%	85.5%	- 5.2%
Social Supports	87.7%	91.7%	+ 4.0%
Respect for Others	92.7%	88.7%	- 4.0%
Charter of Rights	90.8%	93.8%	+ 3.0%
The CBC	68.0%	70.1%	+ 2.1%
Large & Vast Geography	74.3%	76.3%	+ 2.0%
Environmental Respect	89.7%	88.6%	- 1.1%
Health Care	95.9%	94.9%	- 1.0%
A Peaceful Country	94.8%	93.8%	- 1.0%

**FIGURE 4: Specific Economic Issues**  
(Subsample of participants only)



## 2. MOST IMPORTANT ISSUE

Both surveys asked participants to identify what they felt were the most important issues facing Canada (*Figure 2*). About 60% chose economic issues, 20% unity issues and 10% social programs. While there was very little change between the two surveys with regards to these top three issues, more participants mentioned “government” and “other” issues the second time around. In large part, this occurred as new issues emerged within these categories. For example, “decentralization” and “accountability” appeared on the second survey, which boosted the importance of “government” as an issue. “Aboriginal issues” and the need for “more communication among Canadians” boosted the “other” category. The educational value of the assembly is also revealed in the fact that fewer participants registered an “I don’t know” response to this question on the second survey.

## 3. VALUES

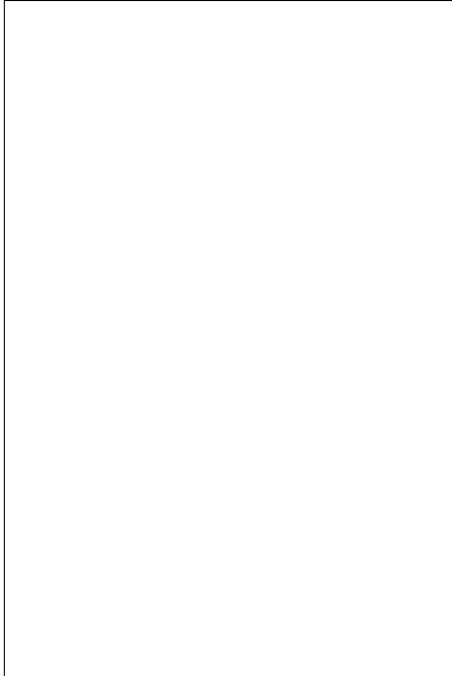
On each survey, participants were asked their opinions about the four topics discussed at the assembly. First, they were asked to rate the importance of several values (*Figure 3*). Most values recorded the same degree of importance on the second survey as they did on the first, with the possible exception of *multiculturalism* and *bilingualism*. Both showed a moderate increase in the importance attached to them following the assembly. There are two possible explanations for the minimal change between the two surveys. First, about half of the values on the list were deemed very or somewhat important by over 90% of the participants in the first survey. With such a high level of importance attached to these values, there is less room for more people to say they are important. Second, the levels of importance attached to specific values could be simply more enduring than support or opposition to specific policy issues.

## 4. THE ECONOMY

On both surveys, about 60% of all participants cited an economic issue as their primary concern. On the first survey, over half of this 60% said it was “jobs” that concerned them most (*Figure 4*). On the second survey, this fell sharply to 36%. In essence, the concern over jobs was replaced by an increased concern with government debt. In the first survey, the debt issue was mentioned by 27% of those participants who cited an economic concern. On the second survey, debt was mentioned by almost 60% of those participants. Since no speakers gave presentations on this topic, and it was only briefly discussed in the assembly workbook, it can be argued that it was the discussion among participants that elevated this concern. In addition, concern with “other” economic issues tended to fall on the second survey, yielding more of a focus on the top three concerns.

# The Economy

Participants spent a significant amount of time discussing the economy. A number of concerns emerged, but participants also discussed potential solutions which they felt would improve not only their own future economic prospects but those of Canada as a whole.



Dean Eliason of BC and Stéphane Pigeon of Québec discuss some ideas prior to a plenary session.

## CONCERNS OF PARTICIPANTS

***The prime concern of participants was that of unemployment and job security.*** This topic was discussed in every workshop, and several groups went further, expressing concern not only with the lack of jobs but also the type of jobs available - part-time and low wage.

***Government deficits and growing debt also received significant attention.*** At least five of the seven groups reported extensive discussion on this issue, and two said it was the “primary” concern of their group.

***Government cutbacks to social programs.*** Four of the groups reported deep concern over what they saw as the erosion of Canada’s social programs, particularly healthcare and education.

***Education and job training.*** Many expressed the view that traditional forms of education and skill development may not be living up to the demands of a rapidly changing and increasingly technological world.

## OPTIONS SUGGESTED BY PARTICIPANTS

***Numerous options were put forward to eliminate deficits and lower debt.*** Reducing waste, non-essential spending and duplication of services between levels of government were the most popular options. Many favoured a reduced role for government and lower spending, but also emphasized that core social programs like health and education should not be further eroded. Things like “double-dipping” and “gold-plated” pensions and multi-million dollar paintings for the National Art Gallery became a lightning rod for some participants, who argued that these were luxuries we could do without. Privatization was suggested by two groups. Another three groups came out in favour of a tax on financial institutions and transactions. Four groups suggested establishing a ***Debt Reduction Fund*** which would receive tax deductible donations from Canadians.

***Improving the linkages between Canada’s social and economic structures is necessary to create jobs.*** At least four groups reported that more emphasis on “practical” education and “on-the-job” training would help provide Canadians with the skills to find well-paying jobs in a competitive market. Many groups supported expanding cooperative, apprenticeship and Junior Achievement programs. Some felt that business must take a more active role in education since they benefit from it financially and are also its main consumers. Several groups mentioned the need for quality healthcare, arguing that healthy Canadians are productive Canadians. Government was urged to ***reallocate*** spending by focusing on social structures which impact economic growth.

***Several groups argued for a decentralization of government roles affecting the economy.*** One such example was that of manpower training and other educational programs. It was felt that provinces could better deliver these services.

***Business must become better corporate citizens of Canada.*** Several groups simply mentioned that corporations should “do more for Canada,” while others urged companies to pursue more value-added production and focus on new technologies to create jobs.

***Other ideas included*** lowering the retirement age to open up more jobs, promoting a business friendly environment, knocking down provincial trade barriers and providing low interest loans to stimulate entrepreneurship. A tax cut was considered by two groups while another suggested shifting the tax burden to wealthier Canadians. Flexibility and personal responsibility were also mentioned as a necessity in a much changed economic world.

# Canada's Future

National unity is a perennial challenge facing Canadians, but participants met the challenge head-on. At least three separate workshop sessions were dedicated to the issue of national unity and Canada's future. Based on the reports from those sessions, a number of themes emerged, and a consensus developed on several initial steps that could be taken to address this issue.

**Canadians suffer from a chronic inability to communicate with each other their concerns and aspirations for the future.** Participants were struck by the degree of misunderstanding they had for other Canadians and other provinces and territories. This concern appeared in six workshop groups. Participants were *very clear* that Canadians desperately need to know more about each other. A number of sources for this lack of knowledge were mentioned, including geographical distance, different political and social cultures and language. Many also felt that the media had to shoulder a large part of the blame.

**A strong consensus emerged for a significant re-balancing of roles between the federal and provincial governments.** Six of the seven workshops registered support for moving a wide range of activities from Ottawa to the provinces. In fact, "decentralization" became a key word at the assembly. Support for this move was general rather than specific, but the rationale was clearly expressed. Diversity and difference are defining characteristics of Canada, and a process of decentralization would allow these differences to be more effectively managed. It was felt that changes to the division of powers would help address Québecers' desire for more sovereignty thus reducing conflict within the

federation. Most important, decentralization was seen as a practical way to increase the control that citizens exercise over government. Six workgroups emphasized the need to maintain some form of national standards in key social areas like health and education.

## Assembly '96

participant

Jean Gauthier

ponders some

of the things

being said at

one of many

plenaries

dealing with

Canada's

future.

**Support for recognizing Québec's uniqueness within Canada was evident from the discussions, but this support was cautious and not strong enough to form a consensus.** Two of the seven workshops eventually arrived at a point where they reported a consensus for some type of distinct society status for Québec, and two other groups reported a cautious support for this position. Most participants recognized that Québecers are different than other Canadians not only in terms of language and culture but also in their desire to exert more control over their destiny. Participants did not stop at simply offering respect for these differences, they applauded them. Much of the debate on this point centered around *how* the uniqueness of Québec could be recognized without it detracting from the equality of all Canadians. An interesting idea emerged from one group, which suggested inserting a clause in the Constitution which states "Québec is an *equal but unique* partner in the Canadian confederation."

**The assembly's focus on decentralization, diversity and respect for differences spun the discussion off in several directions, most notably with respect to Aboriginal Peoples.** Five groups discussed self-determination and increased autonomy for Aboriginal Canadians, and many of these groups found that like Québecers, Aboriginal Peoples see themselves as unique. Two of the five recommended increased autonomy for Aboriginal Canadians. Many said that Canadians have a lot to learn from native culture, particularly with respect to the environment.

**The final theme to emerge concerned Canada's national identity, or lack thereof.** Participants were torn over this issue. Some lamented the lack of a single Canadian identity and questioned the merits of multiculturalism, while others seemed willing to accept this as a fact of life about Canada. Two groups mentioned that multiculturalism is a defining feature of the country and urged that it be recognized formally. Most groups did not go that far, but it was generally agreed that a perennial Canadian challenge is finding a way to accept and even promote multiculturalism without jeopardizing other elements that contribute to Canadian culture.

# Democracy & Participation

**Frustration** was the key word when it came to discussions about government, representation and democracy. In general, participants felt that government could be vastly improved. A number of concerns were first identified, after which the discussion moved to enhancing the decision-making process and improving the accountability of government and citizen participation in public affairs.

**Lack of accountability in government was a primary concern.** Despite their best intentions, politicians often ignore Canadians. Citizens must demand more of their politicians and the system itself. Every workshop, in one way or another, either mentioned this as a concern or identified possible solutions.

**Smaller provinces and territories are alienated in decision-making.** Three groups mentioned the problems of regional representation and the need for national decisions to reflect the totality of Canadian interests and desires, but no firm ideas emerged. The Senate was discussed by at least five groups with some arguing for fundamental reform and others arguing for abolition.

4) **The most popular “fix” for Canadian democracy was to increase the use of referendums.** This was mentioned by at least six of the seven workshop groups. Participants felt that referendums encourage citizens to become more informed on various issues and take an active role in the governing process. The sentiment was that if government is unwilling to handle a problem or is handling it improperly, the voters should have a chance.

2) **Reducing the influence of the party on MPs was seen as a desirable change.** At least five groups mentioned that parliament needs reform, party discipline should be reduced and more free votes should be held.

5) **The notion of recall was attractive to some participants.** At least three workshops came out in favour of some type of recall process for elected officials. The general feeling was that if politicians were unable or simply not willing to act in the interests of their voters, the voters should have an opportunity to force some type of compliance upon them.

6) **Responsibility for changing government will only come when Canadians demand it.** A number of workshops said meaningful change can only come from the ground up. Ordinary Canadians, including young adults, must press for change.

## The Survey

Both prior to and following the assembly, participants completed a survey similar to a public opinion poll. These surveys were designed to see if participants' opinions changed as a result of thinking about the issues, discussing them with others and listening to the experts. In this section, we will look at what participants themselves said had changed, and whether this is corroborated by other questions in the survey.

### 1. CHANGE IN OPINIONS

Almost 80% of participants reported a change in their opinions as a result of *Assembly '96*. Of that 80%, 65% said it was their attitudes towards national unity that had changed (*Figure 1*). Of that 65%, two-thirds said their attitudes about Québec had changed while a quarter said their opinions about distinct society had changed. Few reported any change in their opinions about the economy, social programs or government and politics.

Of the 80% of participants who said their opinions had changed, 20% commented that it was a modification about something “other” than the main categories. Of

this 20%, one-third said it was their opinions about Aboriginal issues that had changed, while another 20% said that “everything had changed.” About 12% of all participants who said their opinions had changed were unable to define the change, were unable to remember what had changed, or failed to give an answer.

**FIGURE 1: What Opinions Changed?**  
(Subsample of participants only)

