

BUILDING CONSENSUS: WHAT WORKS? CASE STUDY: THE NATIONAL ROUNDTABLE ON THE ENVIRONMENT AND THE ECONOMY (NRTEE)

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Study in Brief

Beginning in 1988, the NRTEE was created by the Government of Canada to promote sustainable development that advanced environmental and economic interests simultaneously using policy research and directly advising the government. This analysis assesses how the NRTEE in its 25-year history addressed conflict in the energy arena, built consensus around energy and environmental issues, and which aspects of its institutional design and process contributed to those outcomes.

This case study is part of Positive Energy's "What Works?" Series which focuses on identifying organizations, institutions, and programs which may help build consensus and address polarization, conflict, and tensions between energy, the environment, and the economy in Canada. Within the energy sector, the lack of clear pathways and conflict over Canada's energy future are impacting climate change policymaking and decisions for the future of energy. Much of this is because of increasing levels of polarization over some aspects of Canada's energy system and policies. There is even disagreement over terms such as "energy transition." (Beck 2020) Within government, mandates concerning the environment and economic development are separated across departments. Extensive conflict and polarization, and the lack of consensus concerning Canada's energy future have profound implications. They reduce Canada's global competitiveness, slow down the country's ability to address significant questions and problems in the energy sector, and lessen policy clarity for industry, NGOs, and Canadian citizens.

This analysis of the NRTEE focuses on the goals, effectiveness, and design of the processes

established by the Round Table. The research has four main components: (i) literature review on energy conflict and multi-stakeholder processes for consensus building; (ii) systematic review of NRTEE publications to better understand and assess its 25-year history; (iii) semi-structured interviews with NRTEE staff, participants, and observers; and (iv) media analysis of coverage of the NRTEE across its history to better understand its impact and effectiveness. The NRTEE worked on a range of topics relating to sustainable development and the economy such as water and toxins, natural resources, transportation, foreign policy, and sustainable citizenship. Many of those issues were either directly relevant to energy, or indirectly linked.

Key Findings

Impact was assessed in three different ways. First, by determining the degree to which NRTEE influenced government policy and/or policy-makers in direct or in-direct ways. Second, by assessing how NRTEE developed outputs (publications, workshop, other activities) which impacted the policy process. Third, by assessing NRTEE processes and structure to determine if they were scientific, consensus-based, and reflected a broad representation of stakeholders.

The analysis demonstrates that much of the NRTEE model was an effective and useful approach for developing consensus on many (but not all) controversial policy arenas in the environmental and energy realm. The NRTEE achieved notable successes and influenced policy for sustainability planning in business and urban arenas, carbon accounting, climate change impacts, waste-water solutions, energy efficiency, forestry management, and international environmental partnerships and dialogue.

The investigation also reveals that the NRTEE model had specific aspects of its institutional design that contributed to its success. These include:

- The use of consensus-based round table processes which included diverse representation across regions, institutions, sectors with representatives who had access to scientific expertise, and multi-disciplinary backgrounds.
- Substantive involvement by high level decision-makers across government, industry, NGOs, and academia. This included some closed meetings (with a mix of

occasional open meetings) and “no-substitutes” rules designed to encourage frank discussion and maintain high level engagement.

- Agenda setting that was realistically limited to issues for which the group had the appropriate resources, bandwidth, and expertise.
- In its early years, the appointment of members by an independent advisory committee.
- A focus on leading edge policy issues, but without formalized policy or lawmaking abilities. Thus the institution could advise and emphasize solutions to government, media, the general public, and other stakeholders.

Discussion and Implications

As a result, the NRTEE improved networks and partnerships across sectors and between industry, NGOs, and government, and broadly increased trust in that context. Interviewees from all time periods agreed that an effective round table process with an emphasis on consensus-building had been successfully realized. Further, it helped to contribute to improved solutions and policies across a wide context of issue areas in the environmental and energy arenas. These included the first comprehensive modelling of climate change impacts in Canada, new ways to calculate CO₂ emissions adopted by the government, and extensive guidance on sustainability reporting that was adopted by many private sector companies.

The analysis also shows areas of concern. For instance, mechanisms to maintain both political independence and engagement were particularly challenging. In this, the influence of NRTEE discussions and reports on government and beyond varied enormously over its twenty-five year period. As a result, we suggest mechanisms for institutional design that can help maintain independence, but also maintain relevance.

In particular, the potential opportunities for NRTEE outputs and policy suggestions to be put into the public sphere via more assertive outreach to media, citizens, and other venues were missed.

A variety of recommendations that provide suggestions for improving impact:

- Independent Board oversight with requirements for cross-partisan and non-partisan expertise, heterogeneity, and diverse representation; including appointment of an apolitical chair.
- Creation and support of the institution via long-term legislation but still ring-fenced from Government. This would include clear legislation for funding, independence, and high level government involvement in an advisory or consultative role, with specific roles for Ministers and the Federal Public Service
- Stronger emphasis and requirements for public and media engagement on solutions, reports, and analyses. This would include requirements for a response or acknowledgment from the government in power.
- The use of mechanisms to encourage frank and open discussion, such as Chatham House rule.

Relevance for Decision-Makers

The NRTEE model shows great potential for contributing to effective policy solutions, strengthening networks and improving communication between key stakeholders in important areas of highly challenging and seemingly intractable energy challenges. As a result, the development of a new institution with similarities to NRTEE's processes and structure could help improve the many aspects of the dialogue over highly polarized and conflicted areas in Canada's energy policy going forward.

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