

**CONTRIBUTORS** **OPINION**

# 'A quiet revolution is underway': We can revitalize our democracy by funding citizen engagement in policy reform

A Democratic Action Fund would empower thousands of Canadians to serve on a wide range of problem-solving committees, task forces and assemblies.

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Not since the Cold War have the world's democracies faced such sustained pressure.

Countries like Russia and China are sowing discord, social media platforms are polarizing debate and amplifying misinformation, and populist parties are blaming elites and promising to dismantle government. All of this is driving down public confidence in democratic governments.

The responses are well known. We need to vigorously promote democracy, harden our electoral systems and safeguard voter rights. We could also make our electoral system more reflective of voter intentions, pursue party finance reforms and lower the voting age.

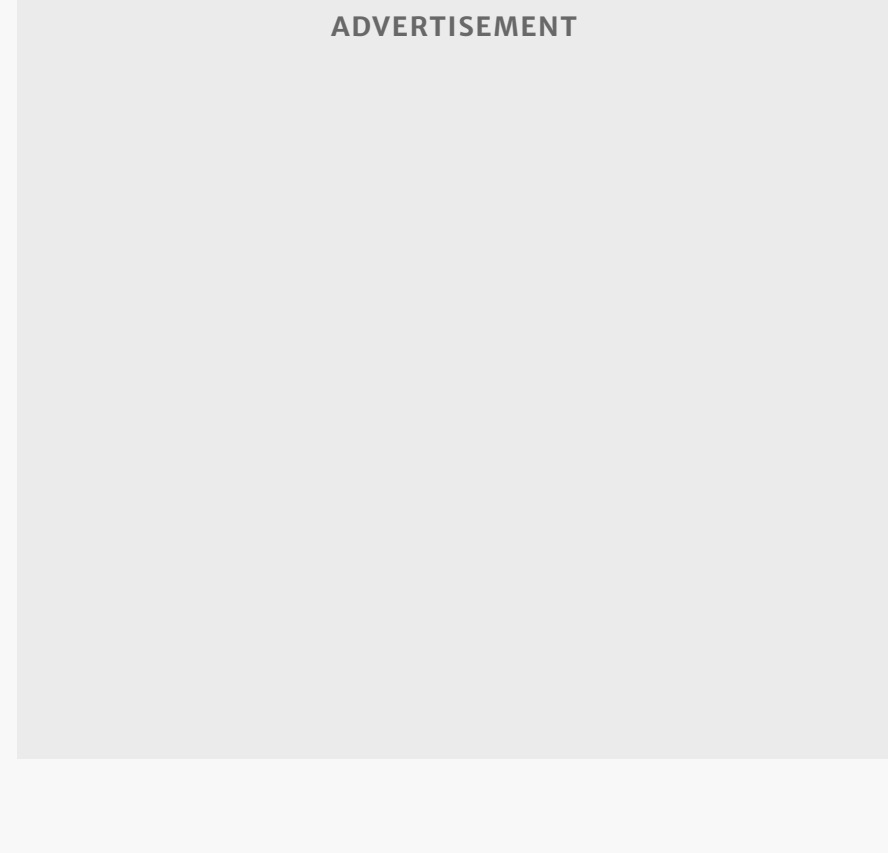
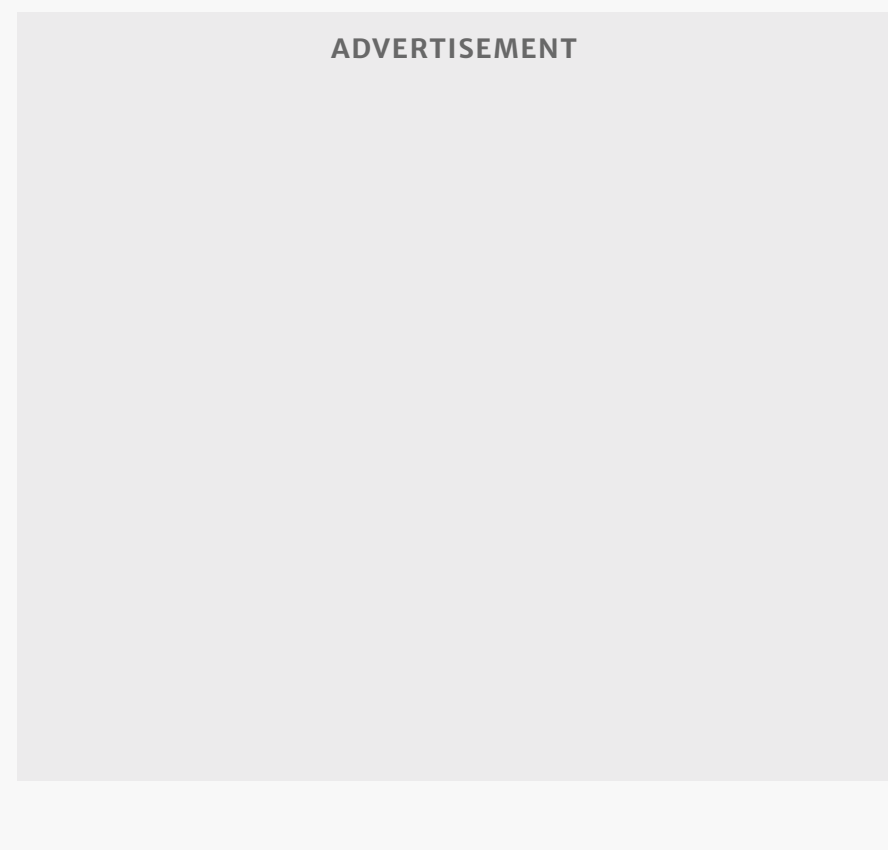
But we also need to think about how democracy itself will evolve. It's time governments in Canada actively include and fund citizen engagement in policy deliberation.

Fortunately, a quiet revolution is underway. Many democratic societies have begun experimenting with new approaches that dramatically expand the range of opportunities available for people to play a meaningful role in shaping their societies. These countries are creating new roles for citizens to fill, which give them a real voice in shaping the policies that affect their lives.

Like jurors, citizen representatives are randomly selected. In Paris, they are advising the mayor on urban priorities; in Belgium, sitting on parliamentary committees alongside MPs; and in Canada, advising ministers on how to regulate social media. Citizen representatives and the citizens' assemblies on which they serve presage a future where everyone has a chance to take a seat at the table.

Evidence shows that participation in these assemblies pays a democratic dividend and leads to increased levels of political engagement, greater civic literacy and a deeper appreciation for different perspectives. Participants come to understand that there are rarely easy answers to complex issues, while governments earn a mandate to take up controversial decisions on issues ranging from climate change to reproductive rights, and from police reform to combating online abuse.

This is why we need to make this participatory approach a much bigger part of our democratic culture, and why we're calling on all levels of government in Canada to create Democratic Action Funds to invest in citizen problem-solving.



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**How would a Democratic Action Fund work?**

Each year, local, provincial and national governments would commit to investing five per cent of the cost of administering its elections into a fund. These arms-length trusts would then use the proceeds to cost-share high quality participatory programs across government that involve citizens in policy reform.

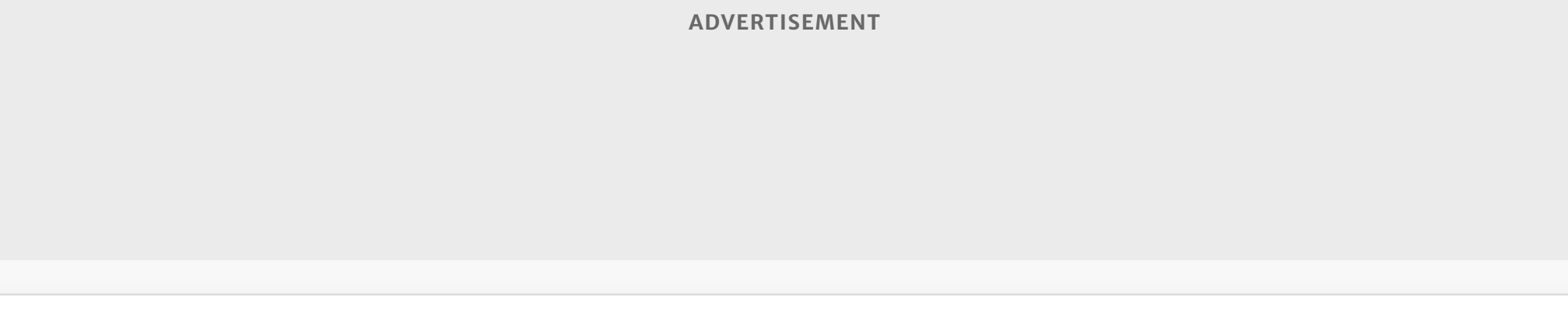
In Canada, where national elections cost approximately \$630 million to administer, a Canadian Democratic Action Fund would receive \$30 million annually and empower somewhere on the order of 6,000 Canadians to serve on a wide range of problem-solving committees, task forces and assemblies.

A Democratic Action Fund would dramatically expand the role of citizens in advising our public institutions and ministries — just the revitalization our democracy needs.

*Peter MacLeod is chair of the Canadian Citizens' Assemblies on Democratic Expression and principal of MASS LBP. Marjan Ehsassi is a non-resident fellow at the Berggruen Institute.*

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