

Why Accuracy Matters More Than Consensus

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In Canadian public life, “consensus” is often treated as a civic virtue. We pride ourselves on compromise, on finding the middle ground, on being polite enough to agree to disagree and then move on. In many contexts, that instinct serves us well. But when consensus becomes a substitute for accuracy, it stops being a strength and starts becoming a liability.

Across government, crown corporations, universities, and large organizations, decisions are increasingly justified not because they are correct, but because they are widely agreed upon. Briefings emphasize alignment. Committees reward harmony. Dissenting analysis is softened, delayed, or quietly excluded in the name of unity. The result is a culture where narrative comfort can outweigh analytical rigor—and where errors persist long after the evidence against them is available.

Consensus is emotionally reassuring. Accuracy is often uncomfortable.

Consider how policy debates frequently unfold in Canada. Whether the issue is housing affordability, productivity stagnation, health-care capacity, or climate adaptation, there is usually a dominant storyline that quickly becomes the “responsible” position. Once established, this narrative is reinforced by stakeholder consultations, media framing, and institutional incentives. Challenging it is framed not as a technical disagreement, but as a social one: you are “out of step,” “unhelpful,” or “undermining trust.”

Yet reality does not negotiate. If a model is wrong, if a dataset is incomplete, if assumptions no longer hold, consensus does not make the conclusions true. It only makes the error more broadly shared.

Canada has seen the cost of this dynamic before. Large infrastructure projects approved on optimistic forecasts. Procurement failures where early warnings were minimized to preserve alignment. Pandemic-era decisions where uncertainty was sometimes masked as certainty to maintain public confidence—only to erode that confidence later when corrections became unavoidable. In each case, the problem was not disagreement; it was the suppression of it.

Analytical rigor is not the enemy of good governance. It is its precondition.

Accuracy requires incentives that are often absent in consensus-driven systems. It requires rewarding people who ask inconvenient questions. It requires separating moral agreement from empirical claims. It requires leaders who can say, “This is politically awkward, but the numbers don’t support our preferred story.” Most of all, it requires institutional humility—the recognition that being wrong is not a failure, but refusing to update is.

Canadian organizations often pride themselves on being evidence-based. But evidence is only as valuable as our willingness to let it challenge us. When analysis is filtered to fit pre-approved narratives, “evidence-based” becomes a branding exercise rather than a discipline.

This does not mean consensus has no place. Shared understanding is essential for coordination and legitimacy. But consensus should be the outcome of rigorous analysis, not its replacement.

Agreement that emerges from accurate premises is powerful. Agreement that emerges from social pressure is brittle.

In an era of rapid change—economic, technological, geopolitical—Canada cannot afford decision-making that prioritizes comfort over correctness. The questions we face are too complex, and the margin for error too thin.

Accuracy is not always popular. It rarely goes viral. It often slows things down. But in the long run, it is the only thing that actually works.

We should worry less about whether everyone agrees—and more about whether we are right.