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Media Release
For Immediate Release

Public Engagement on the Big Reset is Designed to Support the PERT Agenda

St. John's, NL - The Newfoundland and Labrador Federation of Labour (NLFL) says EngageNL's questionnaire on the Big Reset pushes respondents to support the PERT Report, and calls it a fake consultation. NLFL President Mary Shortall believes that whoever designed the public questionnaire has an agenda, and rather than seeking honest feedback and input on the recommendations of the Report, the agenda pushes respondents to support PERT's recommendations.

"We asked our members to complete the online questionnaire," says Shortall. "Within hours of doing so, they told us it was a bogus exercise that did not allow for dissenting views. We expected public engagement to be transparent and allow for meaningful engagement. Our analysis supports their feedback."

Shortall notes that nearly half the questions are loaded and leading, pushing respondents towards the answers the authors want people to choose. Others are confusing, using inaccessible language.

For example, one of the questions asks; In general, do you support the realignment of education, healthcare, and social safety nets in our province?

"This question is alarming in many ways. What does realignment mean in this case? The language is baffling. And - how do you say no to this question?" says Shortall. "You're pushed towards the answer they're looking for, without even understanding what the recommendation actually means."

Virtual town halls on the PERT report are scheduled for next week. The NLFL is concerned, because while polling public opinion is important for a government, poorly drafted questionnaires like this one must not be used to influence government's decisions, nor does it constitute the consultation that the NLFL and its affiliates have been asking for.

Shortall concludes, "If the virtual town halls are organized the same way this questionnaire is, there will be no meaningful engagement with the public. We're asking EngageNL to ensure people can give their honest feedback, and not be corralled into a process that's designed to support the PERT Report's recommendations. A transparent process allows for all voices to be included and heard."

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Backgrounder

Types of Polling Questions:

1. **Leading**

- This type of question encourages a respondent toward a predetermined answer.
- It is suggestive as it is framed in a way that implies the answer.
- Often parallels the goals of the researcher.
- Can lead the respondent to unknowingly support the views held by the pollster.

Example from EngageNL questionnaire:

Question 4: The PERT Report identified a series of recommendations related to the province's education and health care systems, as well as social support programming. These recommendations centre on realigning these systems to reduce spending and improve outcomes. How important is this area to you?

2. **Assumptive/Loaded**

- This type of question makes assumptions about what the respondents know and/or feel without independent assessment.
- It leaves out crucial information that is necessary to understand to respond.
- Like leading questions, it unconsciously encourages respondents to respond in a certain way.
- Loaded questions are characterized in the same way as assumptive questions because a loaded question is a complex question that contains an assumption.
- Loaded questions attempt to limit straightforward responses to serve the pollsters' agenda.

Example from EngageNL questionnaire:

Question 22: The PERT Report identified a series of recommendations related to the economy, including the transition to a green economy and recommendations for industries such as aquaculture and tourism. How important is this area to you?

3. **Pushy**

- This type of question forces respondents to make a choice and pushes respondents towards preferred answers.
- Strategically requires a respondent to choose from a list with limited categories, precluding them from answering truthfully.
- According to the American Association for Public Opinion Research, a **push poll** amounts to political telemarketing - telephone calls disguised as research that aim to persuade large numbers of voters and effect election outcomes, rather than measure opinions*.

Note: * Although the EngageNL questionnaire does not follow that format it is very similar to a push poll.

Example from EngageNL questionnaire:

Question 10: The PERT Report identified a series of recommendations related to addressing the province's financial challenges. These recommendations centre on increasing revenue through taxes, reducing expenditures through reduction in operating grants, and selling assets. How important is this area to you?

4. Confusing/Ambiguous

- This type of question is poorly worded and can be confusing for respondents.
- Questions may be illogically formatted or the wrong question type for the matter at hand.
- **Logical fallacies*** occur when a limited number of options are incorrectly presented as being mutually exclusive to one another or as being the only options that exist, in a situation where that is not the case. Logical fallacies are confusing.

Note: * A logical fallacy is a flaw in reasoning. Logical fallacies are like tricks or illusions of thought. The use of fallacies is common when the speaker's goal of achieving common agreement is more important to them than utilizing sound reasoning. When fallacies are used, the premise should be recognized as not well-grounded, the conclusion as unproven (but not necessarily false), and the argument as unsound.

Example from EngageNL questionnaire:

Question 19: Which of the following best describes your level of support of the recommendations on government and governance?

- *Support most or all of the recommendations*
- *Support many of the recommendations, but oppose some as well*
- *50-50 support and oppose about half of the recommendations*
- *Oppose many of the recommendations, but support some as well*
- *Oppose most or all of the recommendations*
- *Don't know/not sure*
- *Prefer not to say*

5. Double-Barreled

- This type of question squeezes too much into one question, making it difficult for a respondent to answer accurately.
- Doubled-barreled questions ask respondents to rate/rank two or more things in one question or combine two different ideas into one question.

Example from EngageNL questionnaire:

Question 7: Which of the following best describes your level of support of the recommendations on education, healthcare and social supports?

- *Support most or all of the recommendations*
- *Support many of the recommendations, but oppose some as well*
- *50-50 support and oppose about half of the recommendations*

- *Oppose many of the recommendations, but support some as well*
- *Oppose most or all of the recommendations*
- *Don't know/not sure*
- *Prefer not to say*

6. **Close Ended**

- Close ended questions do not allow for meaningful feedback

Example from EngageNL questionnaire:

Question 3: Based on the report, which of the following do you feel best summarizes the key conclusions of the report?

- *We have a spending problem*
- *We have a revenue problem*
- *We do not have a spending or a revenue problem*

The Importance of accessible questions

- Accessible language in questions accommodate the entire public.
- Accessible language uses plain language to include people of all ages and abilities.
- Accessible language is inclusive of those with cognitive disabilities, people with low literacy skills, and speakers for whom English is a second language.
- **This is a key consideration when consulting with the public, and completely absent from the EngageNL questionnaire.**

Furthermore:

- There is a question that lumps the recommendations of education, health care and safety nets – this is a blatant example of false equivalencies/logical fallacies.
- The question - “In general, do you support the goal of increased accountability and transparency within government?” belabours the acquiescence bias* and grossly skews the data results

***Acquiescence bias**, also known as agreement **bias**, is a category of response **bias** common to survey research in which respondents have a tendency to select a positive response option or indicate a positive connotation disproportionately more frequently.

The Honourable Siobhan Coady was given the following mandate on April 15th, 2021 by Premier Andrew Furey:

“As Minister of Finance, you will work closely with me in both setting and accomplishing the Government's ambitious agenda that will see us rise to the challenges facing Newfoundland and Labrador. In particular, **I ask you to lead the public consultations on the recommendations of the Premier's Economic Recovery Team**, and oversee implementation, as appropriate. The

Chief Economic Recovery Officer, a non-partisan civil servant, will report to you and will be tasked with leading a coordinated approach across the whole of government.

Conclusion:

This Questionnaire/survey is not adequately designed to measure the public's views regarding the report's recommendations.

Polling public opinion is an important endeavour especially when consulting the public on government programs and policy. However, poll results depend on the way a question is worded. Poorly drafted public opinion polls must not be used to influence government programs and policy; nor must it be considered consultation.

The survey offered through EngageNL is misleading and as such it is not a sufficient public engagement tool. The analysis demonstrates that the poll is self-serving. Logical fallacies and acquiescence biases are unavoidable which will skew results in the favour of the pollster.

It can be argued that this survey is akin to a push poll and as such it renders "the consultation" superfluous since it gives the illusion that the public has been given a voice in a definitive manner. Framing questions to get the result the pollster is aiming for renders the exercise futile. What is more, misleading the public in this format does not equate to fair consultation.

This table attempts to categorize each question:

Question	Leading	Assumptive-loaded	Pushy	Confusing-Ambiguous	Double-barrelled	Open-ended	Closed ended
1						X	
2						X	
3							X
4	X	X	X	X	X		X
5	X	X	X	X	X		X
6	X	X	X	X	X		X
7				X	X		X
8							X
9				X	X	X	
10	X	X	X	X	X		X
11							X
12	X	X	X	X	X		X
13	X	X	X	X	X		X
14							X
15						X	
16	X	X	X	X	X		X
17	X	X	X	X	X		X
18	X	X	X	X	X		X
19				X	X		X
20							X
21						X	
22	X	X	X	X	X		X
23	X	X	X	X	X		X
24	X	X	X	X	X		X
25	X	X	X	X	X		X
26							X
27						X	
28							X
29						X	
Total	13	13	13	16	16	7	22
%	45	45	45	55	55	24	76

*Questions 30 to 37 are demographic questions and not relevant to the analysis.