

Toward Wellbeing: A Pan-Canadian Project

Speaking notes for

The Hon. Roy J. Romanow, P.C., O.C., S.O.M., Q.C.

Founding Chair, Canadian Index of Wellbeing (CIW) Institute Board

Senior Fellow, Political Studies, University of Saskatchewan;

Atkinson Economic Justice Fellow;

Former Commissioner on the Future of Health Care in Canada;

Former Premier of Saskatchewan

To Determinants of Our Health: Toronto in a Global Village

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1. Introduction

Good afternoon everyone. It's a great pleasure to be with you and my Atkinson fellow colleagues today.

I want to thank Toronto Public Health and The Centre for International Health, Dalla Lana School of Public Health at the University of Toronto for your kind invitation to speak at this important symposium.

I also want to congratulate all of you – public health advocates, community leaders, front-line staff, researchers and policy makers – for your commitment to tackle the full range of issues that affect health and wellbeing, and the causes of health inequities. And, as important, your determination to promote an action agenda for change.

I particularly want to congratulate Toronto Public Health on the celebration of your 125th anniversary. Much has changed in Toronto, and indeed the world, since 1883. Over the years, you and your predecessors have worked to protect us and contain the ravages of: smallpox in the 19th Century, the great influenza outbreak in 1918, AIDS from the 1980s on, SARS in 2003, while at the same time addressing many of the causes of poor health including economic hardship and homelessness.

Your wisdom in times of crisis has spared us from under-reacting and your calm and authoritative voice has, when needed, saved us from over-reacting. You've educated us. You've advocated for us. And you've saved lives. In short, you've served as a model of public health service for Canada and the world. And for that we all thank you very much.

You have also been at the forefront of the evolving international public health movement. Historians and health experts tell us that there have been two great revolutions in the course of public health. The first was the control of infectious diseases, notwithstanding some recent challenges. The second was the battle against non-communicable diseases. You've played a big part in both of these revolutions.

So it doesn't surprise me that on the occasion of your 125th anniversary, you've chosen to put the spotlight on what I believe to be is the third great revolution – moving from an illness model to a new one that emphasizes action and progress in the full range of human activities that determine our health and wellbeing.

2. Global Action

Recently, there has been a great deal of activity in this area – both on the global front and here in Canada – activity aimed at delivering real progress in areas that matter to our wellbeing. This morning, we heard from Professor Margaret Whitehead about the work of the World Health Organization Commission on the Social Determinants of Health, and the need to now close the gap between research and action.

For my part, over the past several years I've been closely observing the work of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, the OECD, and even participating in its global project entitled "*Measuring and Fostering the Progress of Societies*". The goal is to promote a broader and more holistic understanding of what constitutes wellbeing, and to develop new ways that we can measure whether as a society we're making progress or falling behind. The ultimate aim is to advance policies that will improve citizen wellbeing in all of its dimensions.

At home, I have the honour of being involved in a partnership of national leaders, organizations, and grass-roots Canadians across the country. We're working in consultation with Canadian and international experts, and with the support of The Atkinson Charitable Foundation, to achieve the same goal. I'll have more to say about that in a few moments.

But first, you might well ask, why the apparent sudden global interest in social determinants? Or put another way, why has it taken so long to pursue this approach to wellbeing?

It certainly hasn't been for lack of information or knowledge.

Here in Canada, we've known since at least 1974, when the federal government released the landmark "Lalonde Report", that health and wellbeing are determined by much more than biology and health-care services. This report was fundamental in identifying health inequities and emphasizing that the importance of the determinants of health, exist largely outside the traditional health-care system.

Again we were told in 1986 by the federal Epp Report, that policy areas like income security, employment, education and housing all have a major impact on personal and societal wellbeing.

And it's been 22 years since the Canadian Public Health Association issued its *Action Statement for Health Promotion in Canada*, targeting priority areas such as reducing inequalities in income and wealth, and strengthening communities through local alliances.

And then in my final report as Commissioner on the Future of Health Care in Canada, one of my central points was that we had to set a national goal of making Canadians the healthiest people in the world, and that one of the keys to doing that was a greater public policy emphasis on preventative health measures and improving population health outcomes.

3. Public Policy and Citizen Values – The Growing Chasm

So, none of this is new. But let me tell you what I think **is** new. Canadians and people around the world are becoming progressively more frustrated by what they see as a widening chasm – a chasm between citizen values and public policy, between what people believe in and what governments do, between the world we envision and the one we live in.

When I was in Istanbul, Turkey delivering a keynote address to the 2nd OECD World Forum on Measuring Societal Progress, the audience was an exceptional group of about 1,200 people from 130 countries.

One thing that struck me at this international meeting was the extent to which people there spoke with almost one voice about how governments are losing the ability to connect with the core values that are shared by their citizens. It's as if public policy and citizen values rarely intersect.

But, there is a growing will to address this gap and questions like:

How is it that whether economic times are good or economic times are bad, the gulf between rich and poor continues to grow and child poverty becomes more and more entrenched?

How is it that as skyscrapers continue to rise around us, that there are still so many homeless people – young and old – and so many families living in sub-standard accommodation?

Why is it that so many seniors, especially women, who have worked so hard to build prosperous societies, are now living in poverty and social isolation?

Why is it that at a time when our planet is warming, our climate becoming more extreme, our natural resources diminishing, that we still do so little to protect our environment for ourselves, and preserve and enrich it for future generations?

And, perhaps most importantly, faced with these and other fundamental questions that call out for decisive action, why is there such a disconnect between the reality of everyday experience and the vision to which most people aspire?

Friends, I hear these same questions as I travel across Canada.

After all, hasn't our vision of Canada always been one of a healthy society where people live in caring and supportive communities? Where the benefits of prosperity are broadly shared. And where all of our people have access to clean water, decent and affordable housing and liveable wages?

Aren't we the country whose national narrative unfolded around the cornerstone principle of "shared destiny" – a strong and rich legacy of people acting together for the common good?

Aren't we the ones whose history taught us that frequently our dreams are best shaped through community action? That the sum of Canada is often greater than its remarkably diverse parts.

Aren't we the country whose core values embrace fairness, diversity, equity, inclusion, security and democracy? Well, we are!

But public policies frequently fail to reflect this hope and history.

And so from my perspective, it is this huge chasm between citizen values and public policy that is behind the frustration that many of us are feeling. But I also believe that there is a strong desire on the part of the public to close that chasm. And, globally, it is that same desire that is propelling the new movement to redefine societal progress, and to hold governments accountable for ensuring progress in areas that *really* matter to people.

4. Introducing the Canadian Institute for Wellbeing

So, permit me now to share some thoughts with you about a pan-Canadian project that I believe promotes Canadian values that should be reflected in our domestic public policy.

As I mentioned earlier, I've been working with a pan-Canadian group of wellbeing research experts and practitioners, including some from *Statistics Canada*, as well as a wide variety of NGOs, community groups and leaders, and grass roots Canadians across the country to develop that project. We've come together under an umbrella called "The Canadian Institute for Wellbeing" or CIW, for short.

If you haven't heard of it, don't worry – we haven't announced it yet. But we're looking forward to our public launch and releasing our first reports in 2009. And you'll be hearing a lot about us then and in the future.

Our goals are specific and straightforward. We want to:

- **promote** a shared vision of what *really* constitutes sustainable wellbeing and the elements that contribute to or detract from it;
- **measure** national progress toward, or movement away from, achieving that vision;
- **understand** and promote awareness of why society is moving in the direction it is moving;
- **stimulate discussion** about the types of policies, programs, and activities that would move us closer and faster toward achieving wellbeing;
- **give Canadians tools** to promote wellbeing with policy shapers and decision makers;
- **inform policy** by helping policy shapers and decision makers to understand the consequences of their actions for Canadian wellbeing;
- **empower** Canadians to compare their wellbeing both with others within Canada and those around the world; and,
- **add momentum** to the global movement for a more holistic way of measuring societal progress that I just described.

Our work is based on the premise that what we count matters. Or as the legendary Canadian economist, John Kenneth Galbraith once put it, "*If you don't count it, it doesn't count.*"

We know that what we count, measure, and report drives our understanding of whether we are better off than we used to be, whether we are creating a better world for ourselves and future generations, and what we need to change.

But, as you know, we still gauge our society's wellbeing according to a narrow set of strict economic indicators – perhaps even more so today than ever, as governments and those who report on their activities increasingly view the world through the narrow prism of economic issues alone.

Let me be clear. The global economic crisis is real.

But we also can't ignore what caused it: at least, in part – a western society self-absorbed with the accumulation of wealth; banks and other financial institutions so preoccupied with acquisition that they took on debt at any cost – and encouraged ordinary people to do the same – not even pausing to figure out how or even if that debt could be paid off. All the while ignoring the other gaps and challenges that I talked about earlier.

So should we be surprised that the hundreds of billions of dollars that were never there to fight poverty and homelessness, that were never there to invest in early learning or environmental protection, are suddenly there to ease the pain and suffering of banks, other financial institutions and large corporations?

By contrast, was anyone surprised that there wasn't a declaration of crisis two weeks ago when the OECD put out a report showing that inequality and poverty rates have increased so dramatically in Canada over the past decade. That they are now higher here at home than in any of the 29 other OECD countries except for Germany?

Perhaps, not because a society that is obsessed with the accumulation of capital, only sees a crisis happening when the instruments that track that capital say that there is one.

So, even before this current economic challenge, and during it, we are bombarded with information about whether the stock markets have gone up or down. Every quarter we hear about shifts in our gross domestic product – the GDP. Even small changes in the GDP send an adrenaline rush down the veins of policy makers, and editorial writers. As if nothing else is of importance to our health and wellbeing.

The case against the dominance of the GDP and its earlier cousin the GNP was perhaps put forward most eloquently by Bobby Kennedy in a speech he gave more than 40 years ago at the University of Kansas. He said and I quote:

“The Gross National Product includes air pollution and advertising for cigarettes, and ambulances to clear our highways of carnage. It counts special locks for our doors, and jails for the people who break them. GNP includes the destruction of the redwoods and the death of Lake Superior...And if GNP includes all this, there is much that it does not comprehend. It does not allow for the health of our families, the quality of their education, or the joy of their play. It is indifferent to the decency of

our factories and the safety of our streets alike...It measures everything, in short, except that which makes life worthwhile.”

Friends, we haven't had – up to now – a clear, coherent and compelling complement to economic issues and the dominance of the GDP. But maybe that's the silver lining inside the dark cloud of the global economic crisis – an opportunity to refocus on all the other things that we know matter.

It's time for us to step forward and talk about what really constitutes wellbeing and societal progress. It's time we said loudly that the accumulation of wealth by the few at the peril of the many isn't what genuine progress is all about.

Because if we don't, the danger of the current economic crisis is that it might be used as a cudgel to weaken the social progress that we've gained in the past 20 years.

So, imagine a new and transformational approach to measuring wellbeing.

Imagine an approach that charts and provides unique insights into the quality of life of Canadians: our standard of living, our health, the quality of our environment, our education and skill levels, the way we use our time, the vitality of our communities, our participation in the democratic process, and the state of our arts, culture and recreation.

Imagine an approach:

- that actually links the economic reality and prosperity of our nation to the social, health and environmental conditions that shape our community;
- that connects the dots between government policy and real-life experience based on hard evidence;
- that recognizes volunteer work and unpaid care-giving, as social goods, and overwork and stress as social deficits;
- that attaches value to educational achievement, early childhood development, economic and personal security, a clean environment, and social and health equity;
- that creates a better balance between investments in illness treatment downstream and health promotion and prevention upstream; and,
- that reports on important interconnections such as how changes in income are linked to changes in health, and how living standards affect and are affected by the quality of our environment.

Friends, the Canadian Institute for Wellbeing will take that kind of approach. It will report regularly to Canadians on our progress – or lack of it – in areas that really matter to our values and quality of life.

Our first major focus will involve tracking and reporting on a wide variety of wellbeing indicators in eight categories or domains: Standard of Living, Health, Environment, Community Support and Safety, Education, Civic Engagement, Time Use and Arts, Culture and Recreation.

We're developing an extensive communications and public outreach program so that our findings will reach the eyes and ears of every Canadian – from workplace water coolers to government decision-making chambers.

We sincerely believe, that over the course of time, our approach will emerge as Canada's principal means of measuring genuine, holistic progress – and a major catalyst for transformational change.

5. What You Can Do

Now, collecting data and releasing reports, no matter how accurate and powerful, cannot in and of itself create more responsive and equitable public policies. Advancing the yardsticks on wellbeing will require a sophisticated blend of public awareness, public advocacy and public action at the grass-roots level.

So what can you as individuals and the organizations you represent do to help? And I do hope that you will be inspired to do so, given your 125 year history of commitment to promoting an action agenda that bridges poverty, wellbeing, community development and public policy.

May I suggest the following:

First, keep doing what you're doing today – mobilizing people, shining a spotlight on the many different areas that affect wellbeing, and the types of policies and actions that are needed to achieve progress in each of the areas.

Second, be visible on an ongoing basis. Write letters to the editor and op-ed pieces, drawing on your experience and expertise to comment on how policy options under consideration will affect wellbeing. Advocate for new policy approaches that will deliver better results. Politicians respond to things that are in the media – at the very least they see government-related articles in their daily media clippings.

Keep putting out reports like *The Unequal City* that show what's really going on in our communities, that connect the dots between income and health, and that put the pressure on government to track indicators of inequality and develop strategies to reduce it.

Thirdly, educate your political representatives. Meet with your local Councillor, MP and MPP and make sure they understand the full range of issues that affect wellbeing. Discuss with them the new approaches that will improve the quality of life for all of their constituents.

And, there are two opportunities in particular that will present themselves in the coming months. The first is the poverty reduction strategy that the Ontario government has promised to introduce this December. And the second will take place shortly after that when Charles Pascal, Premier McGuinty's special advisor on early learning, tables his recommendations on full-day, pre-school learning.

It is vital that our political leaders – and indeed the entire public – understand the urgent need for action in these two areas. It is critical that they know that reducing poverty and expanding early learning opportunities are not just important in their own right, but that they are solid upstream solutions that will deliver a wealth of downstream benefits in the form of better health and wellbeing for all of us.

Fourthly, do the same awareness building with media. Reporters are good people, but they're like the rest of us, with too many things to do in too little time. Reach out to them, give them information about how bad policies are harming wellbeing in your area or how good policies are producing positive changes. Give them human stories about how public policies affect people's lives. Stay in touch with them and get to know them. Be a resource for them when they need information or a solid quote for an article.

Fifthly, stay in touch with what we're doing at the Canadian Institute for Wellbeing as we prepare for our public launch and release of our first reports. I would urge you to sign up for our e-bulletin at www.ciw.ca. Help us spread the word about the Institute to others who aren't here. And, we are especially looking for partners who can help us at launch time in 2009.

Friends, we're counting on organizations like those represented here today to help disseminate our findings to your members, and to talk about what these findings mean for your communities. Once released, please use our research to support your own advocacy. All of it will be available, free of charge, on our web site.

6. Conclusion: A Return to Values

So, let me conclude by saying that over the course of my career I have been truly blessed to be involved in a good number of initiatives both large and small. I believe that the concept of a Canadian Institute for Wellbeing is truly a transformational project.

With all of us working together, we can change the national dialogue. In doing so, we can change the course of national decision making, bringing it back into line with Canadian values.

Together, we can again build a Canada based on the values of fairness, opportunity, equity, respect and a balance between individual interests and the common good.

Friends, now, perhaps more than ever, is the time to recapture the moral and political strength to see ourselves in our own place, in our own time, informed by our own values, and within our own actual history and narrative, as a nation, worthy of the respect of a world that needs an even better Canada.

Thank you very much for the opportunity to be with you today. Congratulations again on a great 125 years and best wishes for a productive and successful conference.