

Bridging the Gap: Reconnecting to Canadian Values

Speaking notes for

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1. Introduction

Good morning everyone. It's a great pleasure to be with you today.

I'm particularly pleased for the opportunity to come to the beautiful City of Richmond. My friends at Statistics Canada tell me that this community has the greatest life expectancy in all of Canada, nearly four years longer than the national average. Just being here is like experiencing a little taste of Shangri-La – complete with magnificent snow-capped mountains and cool rivers.

Thank you so much, Art, for your warm introduction. I couldn't help but notice that the word "former" cropped up there a few times. I suppose that's only natural. And when you reach a certain stage in your career, you become somewhat linked to particular events and your name starts taking on a kind of small symbolic value.

But I have to echo the words of Tommy Douglas, who said, in this regard, *"I don't mind being a symbol but I don't want to become a monument...I've seen what pigeons do to monuments."*

I want to thank COSCO for your very kind invitation to speak. Let me begin by congratulating all of you for your willingness to take on the difficult but very necessary task of developing a blueprint for improving and extending the quality of life of seniors. Let me also congratulate you for your commitment to recruiting younger seniors and strengthening seniors' organizations so that they can play a full role in developing this blueprint.

And I salute you for recognizing that if we are to truly realize the vision of a "Global Age-Friendly Community", it will take considerable political will and the combined efforts of government, civil society and individuals.

2. The Importance of Demographics

The issues that you are confronting at this conference, and in your ongoing work – the health, and social and economic wellbeing of seniors – have, of course, long been of importance to Canadians. But they will become all the more so in the coming years and decades, given the changing face of Canada.

Back in the 1920s and 1930s, seniors made up just 5% of the population and even by the 1950s and 1960s the figure was just 8%. But by 2005 it was up to 13% and it will nearly double to 25% by 2036. By 2056, more than one-in-four Canadians –

over 27% – will be seniors, and while I’m not sure how many of us here will be part of that cohort...with advances in modern medicine we live in hope.

But my serious point here is that with growing numbers comes growing clout – both political and economic. And if we learn how to use that power correctly and lever the knowledge that comes with age and life experience, we should be able to force seniors’ issues onto the political and policy agendas of our country in a way that they have never been there before. Make no mistake, we can do that.

3. A Global Issue

The dimensions of wellbeing that you’re focusing on, and in a few moments I’ll mention a few others – like preserving and enriching the health of our ecosystems – are not only of concern to seniors in British Columbia and Canada, but to people of all ages around the world.

Over the last few years I’ve had the privilege of working with the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, or OECD as it’s better known, and with Canadian and international wellbeing experts. Our goal is to promote a broader and more holistic understanding of what constitutes wellbeing, and new ways that we can measure whether as a society we’re making progress or falling behind.

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

One thing that struck me was the extent to which those at the gathering, spoke with almost one voice, about how public policy – or if you will, the decisions that governments make – is losing its ability to connect with the core values that are shared by citizens. It’s as if public policy and citizen values rarely intersect.

People are asking: how is it possible that in the midst of economic wealth, there are still so many children living in poverty? Why is it that the gap between rich and poor continues to grow?

How is it that in the midst of unprecedented housing booms 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 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 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?

4. The Drift from Canadian Values

That's what I heard in Istanbul and that's what I hear as I travel around Canada. I have to tell you, those kinds of questions sounded very familiar to this pair of Canadian ears. So let me try to speak to them from a Canadian context.

I think we would all agree that every nation has its own narrative – a history. Canada's history offers a strong and rich legacy of people acting together for the common good. It's different from others. Former Ontario Premier David Peterson described how the lasting image of American pioneer days was that of the lone gunman riding off into the sunset whereas the corresponding Canadian image was that of the community barn-raising.

It is this Canadian legacy of a "shared destiny" that is key to understanding our young but dynamic history.

For those like me, and maybe some of you, who came of age in our prairie communities, the notion of "shared destiny" was key to our existence. The harsh, often snow-blown conditions, droughts, distance and isolation, and small population, forced us together, like poplar trees huddled on a windswept plain.

So, through the years, as we lived together, worked together and built together, this notion of "shared destiny" was transformed into the foundation of a nation.

If I may put this another way, Canada's history has 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. And, from this, sprung core Canadian values like fairness, diversity, equity, inclusion, health, safety, economic security, democracy and sustainability.

And from those values we have created national programs like Medicare – whose seeds were first sown and nourished, I’m proud to say, in my home province of Saskatchewan – others like the Canada Pension Plan, Unemployment Insurance, the CBC, the Charter of Rights and Freedoms, and many additional strands that have woven together to form Canada – and a Canadian safety net – a line of decency beneath which no Canadian should be allowed to fall.

The case for all of these social programs was perhaps best put by the great social activist and *Toronto Star* publisher, Joseph Atkinson, who through a 1946 *Toronto Star* editorial said:

"The point at issue is simply this. Is it or is it not desirable that out-of-work people should have some means of subsistence? Is it or is it not desirable that people should be able to give their children a proper start in life? Is it or is it not desirable that people should have proper medical care irrespective of their means? Should aged people be assured of at least some sort of income, or should they not? In brief, are human beings in a prosperous country like Canada entitled to some means of security in life?"

Joseph Atkinson thought that they were, and I agree.

This, then – a strong commitment to shared destiny – I argue, is our nation’s narrative and it resides in our collective DNA.

But in recent years, we have seen the emergence of views and a philosophy that are at odds with this narrative. Views that have sown seeds of doubt about our shared destiny and collective capacity to meet our future challenges, as we’ve done in the past.

Today, we feel a palpable momentum toward individualism, decentralization, and privatization that present themselves as the so-called “new way” to deal with our future challenges.

I was very pleased to see in COSCO’s Medicare brochure, your overt recognition of what this “new way” really means – an attack against universal health care and other social programs. That when proponents of this “new way” talk about “innovation” what they mean is privatizing health care as if it were just another commodity, like lumber or oil or pork bellies; that when they talk about “flexibility” what they mean is operating outside of the parameters of the *Canada Health Act*; and when they talk about “modernization” what they really mean is returning to the old

days of life before Medicare. And many of us here today will remember the kind of “pay as you go” health care we had before Medicare.

You and I both know what this attack on our social programs means, even though it is being waged in a sophisticated manner and employs words that misrepresent what they are really seeking.

In truth, it represents an abandonment of our accomplishments, our national narrative and our values, and a parting of the ways with our belief in our collective capacity to meet those future challenges and make a stronger Canada.

The fact is, Medicare is a reflection of our core values. It is universal and based on the size of your need, not the depth of your wallet.

For those who are more swayed by the prose of pragmatism than the poetry of idealism, consider this: Medicare is cost-effective – we in Canada spend less than 10 percent of our GDP on health care, compared to the U.S. which spends nearly 16 percent.

Just to give you an idea of how inefficient privatized health care is, consider this: in the U.S. about 30 cents out of every dollar spent on health care goes to administration, much of it spent on generating bills – 30%! – just to do the paperwork and not the actual delivery of health care.

Medicare also delivers better results. According to a U.S. Commonwealth Fund study, Canada is in the top third of industrialized countries when it comes to treating preventable deaths, through actual health care delivery. Our friends in the U.S. were last out of the 19 countries studied.

Perhaps that’s not surprising given that about 46 million Americans are without health care insurance; or that those without insurance are eight times more likely to skip care because they can’t afford it.

Does this sound like a system that any reasonable person in B.C. or anywhere else across Canada would want to emulate?

So I think it’s rather ironic then that the U.S., which is struggling with a broken health care system, has some leaders looking north for genuine solutions, while at the same time, many of our leaders in Canada are drifting away from the principles of Medicare. It is true that we need to reform our Medicare system, but in a way that

strengthens it and is consistent with our core Canadian principles and values, not in a way that weakens Medicare and abandons those principles and values.

5. Reconnecting to Canadian Values

So how can we reaffirm our commitment to core Canadian values? How can we reconnect those Canadian values to emerging public policy? And how can we ensure that public policy reflects what really matters most to Canadians?

We need action by individual citizens and groups like COSCO. Action – to explain the issues, and to tap into our basic values. Just like you're doing on the Medicare file and your conference these next 2 days.

There are also many other excellent projects that are doing this at the community level – projects like the Community Foundations of Canada's "*Vital Signs*", Tamarack's "*Vibrant Communities*", the United Way of Canada/Centraide Canada's "*Action for Neighbourhood Change*", and the Federation of Canadian Municipalities "*Quality of Life Reporting System*".

But, let me tell you a bit about my own experience the past few years with a pioneering project at the national level – a project that will connect social aspirations to public policy, based on hard evidence.

It's called *The Canadian Index of Wellbeing*, or CIW. The CIW is a partnership of national leaders, organizations, and grass-roots Canadians across the country, working in consultation with international experts.

Our goals are:

- to **build** a foundation to articulate what *really* constitutes sustainable wellbeing;
- to **measure** national progress toward, or movement away from, achieving that goal;
- to **understand** and promote awareness of why society is moving in the direction it is moving;
- to **stimulate discussion** about the types of policies and activities that would move us closer and faster toward achieving wellbeing;
- to **give Canadians the tools** to promote wellbeing with decision makers;
- to **inform policy** by helping decision makers understand the consequences of their actions to wellbeing;

- to **empower** Canadians to compare their wellbeing both within Canada and those around the world;

and,

- to **add momentum** to the global movement for a more holistic way of measuring societal progress.

That was the purpose of the Istanbul conference last year.

The CIW is based on the premise that what we count matters. The legendary Canadian economist, John Kenneth Galbraith put it rather succinctly, *“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. That can be a good thing.

But, too often today, we gauge our society’s wellbeing according to a narrow set of strict economic indicators.

Everyday, 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.

So – you might ask – what’s wrong with that?

Well, what’s wrong is that it’s hard to have a balanced and objective debate on good policy when the single most influential lens that we use to measure our progress and wellbeing is confined to a narrow set of economic indicators.

What is also wrong is that the GDP wasn’t designed or intended to be used as a surrogate for wellbeing – although it is often viewed in that light. It really is simply a single measure of goods and services produced. Its objective is, by definition, to measure the size of the market economy. And, not the wellbeing of all of us and the disparities that I mentioned earlier. To make my point, more crime (and the cost of dealing with it), more cigarette sales, and more coal-powered plants, all propel the GDP upward. But, does it adequately measure our “wellbeing”?

Does it tell us anything about whether seniors are living in good health, enjoying decent living standards including quality housing, or have enough income to ensure a life of dignity and fulfillment? Or does it measure the volunteer contribution of seniors like yourselves who are working to help all of us achieve a better future?

The case against the dominance of the GDP and its 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:

“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.”

We haven't had – up to now – a clear, coherent and compelling complement to the dominance of the GDP. I imagine a tool which balances economic goals with social, health, and environmental goals.

So, what would happen if every time we heard about the GDP we also heard the results of another new and important Index – an Index of Wellbeing?

- an Index that measures the variables that contribute to, or subtract from, the wellbeing, and prosperity of Canadians;
- an Index that actually links the economic reality and prosperity of our nation to the social, health and environmental conditions that shape our communities;
- an Index that treats good things like health and clean air as national assets, and bad things, like sickness and pollution as national deficits;
- an Index that recognizes volunteer work and unpaid care-giving, especially among seniors, as social goods, and overwork and stress as social deficits;
- an Index that attaches value to educational achievement, early childhood development, economic and personal security, a clean environment, and social and health equity; and,
- an Index that creates a better balance between investments in illness treatment downstream and health promotion and prevention upstream.

Friends, the CIW will be that type of Index. It will measure and report to Canadians on our progress – or lack of it – in areas that really matter to our values and quality of life: our health, our standard of living, the quality of our environment, the way we use our time, our education and skill levels, the vitality of our communities, our participation in the democratic process, and the state of the arts and culture.

Now, what I've told you today about the CIW is really a bit of a sneak preview. As you can imagine, this project is very ambitious. I am pleased to report that we are just about finished building the Index with plans for a release of the CIW's first set of findings next spring.

We're also 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, the CIW will emerge as Canada's principal means of measuring genuine, holistic progress.

Now, an Index, no matter how accurate and powerful, cannot in and of itself create more responsive and equitable policies built around the notion of "shared destiny". But it can – and with the help of organizations like those represented here today – I believe it will, serve as a springboard for us to change the national dialogue. In doing so, we can change the course of national decision making, bringing it back into line with Canadian values.

So what can you and COSCO do to help? And I do hope that you will be inspired to do so given your active commitment to your work here in British Columbia. First, I would urge you to sign up for the CIW's e-bulletin at www.ciw.ca so that you can stay in touch with our activities as we head toward our public launch and read about ways to get involved.

Secondly, spread the word about the CIW when you can and as often as you can. Over the next few months and as part of the CIW first release in 2009, we will be counting on organizations like COSCO to help disseminate our findings to your members, to talk about what they mean for your communities and your wellbeing, and to continue to do what you are doing at this conference – identifying and pushing forward ideas that will improve the quality of life for Canadians.

6. Conclusion: A Return to Values

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. But I believe that the CIW is potentially – a truly – transformational project.

Together, we can build a Canada based on the values of fairness, opportunity, equity, respect and a balance between individual interests and the common good. Because – as I said earlier and as I close – being anchored by values is essential.

I want to thank you for doing your part by promoting seniors' health, protecting medicare, housing, and income solutions that will help bridge the gap between Canadian public policy and core Canadian values.

Values are what define us as a nation. They provide guideposts for how we can move forward as a society – how we can orient ourselves during challenging times, how we can inspire our citizens, and how we can be confident that the decisions we make and the paths we choose reflect the vision of our citizens.

Friends, now, more than ever, we need leadership that is informed by shared destiny.

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 an independent nation, worthy of the respect of a world that needs an even better Canada.

Thank you, and you have my best wishes for a very successful conference.