

Bridging the Gap: Reconnecting to Canadian Values

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

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1. Introduction

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

And, thank you, Maura, 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."*

Let me begin by thanking you for your very kind invitation to speak and I am particularly pleased to join with the Saskatoon Canadian Club – a Club that has been promoting Canadian unity and awareness of Canadian issues for over 60 years.

So, I can't think of a better platform from which to share a few thoughts on our long-standing values as Canadians; on a number of factors that are putting our commitment to those values to the test; and on my heartfelt belief that only by reaffirming and renewing our commitment to core Canadian values, can we continue the process of building what, we sometimes forget, is still a very young nation.

2. The Importance of Values

As a former Premier of Saskatchewan, and the former Commissioner on the Future of Health Care in Canada, I feel very strongly that our values as Canadians lie at the heart of what distinguishes us from many other nations of the world. They have shaped a Canada that is very much the envy of the world for its quality of life and social cohesion.

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.

Values also enable us to tackle head on challenges such as climate change, health and wellbeing, diversity and inclusion, and the impacts of a globalizing world.

In short, values provide us with a sense of connectedness and a grounding that enable us to deal with an ever-changing world.

3. The Winds of Change

Make no mistake, we are indeed living in times of great change. John F. Kennedy once eloquently stated, “*Change is the law of life. And those who look only to the past or present are certain to miss the future.*”

I agree with that. But I also believe that in order to make change work for us – to have it contribute to the ongoing process of nation-building – it should flow out of and within our national history and narrative and not be artificially grafted onto it. In this way, change can weave newer and stronger threads into our national fabric, not contribute to the process of unraveling it.

But that isn’t always the case today in Canada. Recent changes have resulted in greater inequities and disparities than we have seen in the past. People are tired of seeing the burden borne by the many and the privileges go to the few. They are asking our governments strive for real improvement in the quality of their lives and the things that really matter to them.

This past summer, I had the privilege to deliver the keynote closing address to a World Forum on societal progress sponsored by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, or the OECD as it’s more commonly known. This gathering in Istanbul, Turkey brought together an exceptional group of about 1,200 people from 130 countries.

One thing that struck me was the extent to which people 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, and families living in sub-standard accommodation?

Why is it that so many indigenous people live in conditions that are so much worse than those of other citizens?

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 and preserve 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, but 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 no doubt many 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.

Stated another way, 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 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 here in Saskatchewan – the Canada

Pension Plan, Unemployment Insurance, the CBC, the Charter of Rights and Freedoms, and many other 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.

This, then – 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.

But, in truth, it represents an abandonment of our accomplishments, our 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.

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?

The good news is that there are many excellent projects that are doing this at the community level – projects like the Community Foundations of Canada’s “*Vital Signs, 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 finally,

- 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.

But, too often, 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”?

We haven't had – up to now – a clear, coherent and compelling complement to the dominance of the GDP. Note, I do not advocate its replacement. 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 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.

The CIW is being developed by world-class experts and backed by rigorous peer review and public consultation.

Now, what I've told you today about the CIW is really a bit of a sneak preview. We're still in the process of building the Index so that it will stand up to the toughest possible scrutiny. We're hoping to release our first set of findings within the next year.

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.

And, we sincerely believe, that over the course of time, the CIW will emerge as Canada's principal means of measuring genuine, holistic progress.

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.

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.

We can help 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 at my opening and as I close – being anchored by values is essential.

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 good luck to the Canadian Club.