

Accounting for Progress: Measuring what matters to Canadians

Speaking notes for

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1. Introduction

Good evening everyone. It's a great pleasure to be with you tonight. Now, after so many excellent speakers and discussions all day today, I feel a little like the time when I was first introduced – at a political rally “Good food, good music – now that all the good things are over, here's your guest speaker, Roy Romanow.”

Let me begin by thanking the Canadian Sustainability Indicators Network (CSIN) and the International Institute for Sustainable Development (IISD) for your kind invitation to speak.

I've long been a great admirer of the IISD's commitment to championing sustainable development around the world, and I congratulate IISD on celebrating its 20th anniversary this year. Friends, that's an incredible milestone in this relatively young field, and we're all the better for your having reached it.

It's interesting to note that the IISD was already 10-years old when the earliest discussions began taking place about the possibility of creating the Canadian Index of Wellbeing (CIW). Since, the IISD has been a mentor and a big brother to us and was among our earliest partners. I want to thank David Runnalls who has been the IISD's CEO for the last 10 years. I know his leadership will be missed and David, I wish you well as you start a new phase of your life. I also want to thank Dr. László Pintér for his many contributions to the overall development of the CIW and to his specific work on our Environment Domain. László, your advice was invaluable.

And, as importantly, I also want to salute CSIN for creating a network of private sector, academic, government and non-governmental organizations in Canada, the US and beyond to advance best practices in measurement and sustainability indicator systems. The CIW is proud to be a member and a supporter.

From what I have learned through my experience in the political world, it seems to me that societies work best when we create opportunities for meaningful engagement and thus we seed a culture of collective engagement by government, business and civil society. Friends, that kind of cooperative or coordinated action is particularly critical when we are talking about our natural environment. Issues of climate change, greenhouse gas emissions and constructive approaches to environmental stewardship and sustainability are everyone's problem. And, they must be everyone's solution.

This national conference creates a space for learning and strengthening our

capacity to share ideas and approaches; ideas and approaches that can lead to sound decisions and progress toward sustainable development. Again, congratulations for this week's event. As I learn more about the wide variety of activities in which you're involved, I'm reminded of an observation Marshall McLuhan made many years ago, but which seems even more true today. McLuhan said, "There are no passengers on Spaceship Earth. We are all crew."

We are all crew.

In other words, we are not caught up in some form of pre-deterministic drift, rushing headlong toward an inescapable future. We have the collective capacity to shape our future, to decide which values we will embrace and which visions we will pursue, and to find the passion and tools that will take us there. *Accountability Through Measurement*, is all about those values and tools for now and for the future.

2. The Challenge of Sustainability

Today, we discussed three of the strongest forces that are sweeping our planet:

- First, the demand for accountability;
- Second, the need for leading-edge measurement tools to track our progress or regression as a society; and,
- Third, the imperative to transform our economy in a way that ensures prosperity and sustainability for ourselves and future generations.

There can be no doubt that the sustainability of our environment and its impact on the human condition is one of the greatest issues of our times. We are, of course, not the first civilization to be confronted with such a challenge. I'm sure many of you have read Jared Diamond's book *Collapse* where he provides a veritable catalogue of societies that have collapsed due to environmental catastrophe and their failure to recognize the warning signs.

What makes our situation unique, however, is that this time today may be the first time that failure has global consequences. These may include, at the very least, a seriously diminished quality of life for those who are now being born. At worst, the consequences could be far more serious.

Yet, as we saw in Copenhagen, there is still a kind of global myopia that prevents us from fully seeing or understanding the damage that we are doing to our planet. There is also a kind of institutional paralysis that keeps us from taking the actions that are essential to our survival. Friends, when matters of process and

protocol take centre stage and then descend into a quagmire, it doesn't leave a great reservoir of hope that discussions over matters of substance will be any more fruitful. Nor has that reservoir been replenished by what has happened since Copenhagen. For those of you who haven't yet read it, I highly recommend the IISD's statement last month to a roundtable on climate change. It talks about:

- First, the ongoing disruptive efforts by a group of small countries that played a similar role in Copenhagen;
- more serious procedural roadblocks put forward by the larger countries of China, India, Brazil and South Africa;
- And, the extremely modest targets for greenhouse gas mitigation submitted by most countries as part of the Copenhagen Accord.

Amongst developed countries, with the notable exception of the EU – which has set a very bold and responsible target – most of the post-Copenhagen national targets are conditional on either domestic legislation, as in the case in the U.S., or on complementary actions by other countries.

Canada, for example, has made its target conditional on action and legislation in the U.S. – legislation whose chances of passage by Congress (most political observers say), grow dimmer by the week as the Republican Party's prospects for success in the November mid-term elections grow stronger. And let's not forget that what we're talking about here is just targets. Targets are only as good as the political will and the policy strength to meet them. It's one thing to want to "Own the Podium" of greenhouse-gas reduction, quite another to actually deliver on it.

Earlier today, if you attended the Canadian Index of Wellbeing workshop, you heard Hans Messinger point out that despite the fact that Canada was one of 37 nations that agreed to the Kyoto protocol to reduce GHG emissions by 5.2 percent below 1990 levels by 2012, the fact is our country's GHG emissions are actually more than 20 percent higher than 1990. I repeat, our country's GHG emissions are actually more than 20 percent higher than 1990.

I'm not trying to be a Cassandra or deliver a Jeremiad here. There is much good work being done across this country and around the world. But it is not happening quickly enough or comprehensively enough to produce the kind of transformative change we need to see. So I'm beginning to understand where David Suzuki was coming from when he said:

"I feel like we're in a giant car heading at a brick wall at a million miles an hour."

Someone's got to say, 'For God's sake, put the brakes on and turn the wheel!' But everybody in the car is arguing about where they want to sit."

My hope – my belief – is that the CIW will be one of the tools that empowers Canadians to say, “Put the brakes on and turn the wheel!” Because we can no longer accept – in this country or any other – the implicit assumption of “limitless growth” that underlies our economic paradigm. Our scientists have taught us, after all, that the natural world thrives on equilibrium and balance. Biological organisms that thrive on unlimited growth – like cancer cells, weeds and algae – are inherently destructive. This may be an apt metaphor and a warning for a human economic paradigm that remains wedded to a doctrine of limitless growth.

Which is why one of the guiding principles of the CIW is to focus on intergenerational sustainable development – a principle that recognizes that social, human and economic wellbeing are dependent upon the health and wellbeing of the natural world.

Friends, I'm very pleased to tell you that the work on our Environment Domain has progressed to a point where we plan a release of the report in the fall. This work was led by László Pintér in its first phase, and is now moving forward under the leadership of the Pembina Institute supported by an expert group of advisors including László, Environment Canada, and with data support from Statistics Canada. They're working hard and are in the final stages of choosing the eight headline indicators that will allow us to accurately, reliably, regularly – and in an integrated way – report to Canadians on the health and sustainability of our environment. The report will include metrics that track the quality of our air, freshwater, space and ecosystem; and our use and stewardship of energy, mineral, and metal resources.

3. The Importance of Measurement

Friends, it's vital that Canadians have access to these new kinds of measurements. Indicators are powerful. What we count matters. What we count helps shape the dialogue in this country – on the factory floor, around the water cooler, in the media and in the corridors of power. What we count often influences the policy agendas and decisions of governments.

What we count determines the extent to which people are able to hold governments and leaders accountable for their directions and decisions. And, as the legendary Canadian economist, John Kenneth Galbraith said, “If you don't count it, it doesn't count.”

Unfortunately, for about 80 years now, the dominant yardstick – or indicator – in the western industrialized world has been Gross Domestic Product or GDP. Over time – because most countries, including Canada, lack a single, national instrument for tracking and reporting on our overall quality of life – GDP has emerged as a surrogate for societal wellbeing – something it was never designed to be. Even the “father of the GDP”, Nobel laureate Simon Kuznets, recognized that:

“The welfare of a nation can scarcely be inferred from a measurement of national income as defined by the GDP.”

The reason why, was summarized eloquently more than 40 years ago by Senator Robert F. Kennedy, who noted that GDP:

“measures neither our wit nor our courage, neither our wisdom nor our learning, neither our compassion nor our devotion to our country. It measures everything, in short, except that which makes life worthwhile.”

Yet, since the onset of the global recession – Canadians and people around the world have been bombarded with news about GDP. Numbers have been issued and then updated. Predictions have been made and then revised. News of an impending release of new GDP numbers is heralded by media days in advance. So powerful and predominant has GDP become, that the New York Times referred to it as:

“a celebrity among statistics, a giant calculator strutting about adding up every bit of paid activity...”

This, despite the fact that, as Kennedy said, GDP makes no distinction between economic activities that are good for our wellbeing and those that are harmful. Spending on tobacco, natural and human-made disasters, crime and accidents, all make GDP go up. Conversely, the value of unpaid housework, child care, volunteer work and time with our families and friends are not included in GDP because they take place outside of the formal marketplace. Nor are subtractions made for activities that heat up our planet, pollute our air and waterways, or destroy farmlands, wetlands and old-growth forests.

The notion of sustainability and stewardship – ensuring that precious resources are preserved for future generations – doesn’t even enter the equation.

So it’s no surprise that initiatives to cut greenhouse gases and conserve energy

are inevitably blunted when our current core measures of progress indicate that these initiatives will hinder our economic growth. Nor is it surprising that the depletion of natural resources can masquerade as economic growth for decades. All of which is to say we have to be very careful about what we measure, how we measure it, and how accurately we measure it. We have to be particularly careful about which indicators we accept as measurements of societal progress. Measurement has consequences.

4. Measurement Based on Values

That's why, for me, measurement begins with values. VALUES. Any time you mention the issue of progress, the inevitable question arises, progress toward what? I would answer that question like this: progress toward realizing the values; values we have chosen as a nation.

Values are an inseparable part of what defines Canada, or any 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 and society.

Values enable us to tackle head on challenges such as climate change, health and wellbeing, diversity and inclusion, and the impacts of a globalizing world – without reshaping who we are or what we aspire to be. In short, values provide us with a sense of connectedness and grounding that enable us to deal with an ever-changing world.

Friends, 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 is this Canadian legacy of a “shared destiny” that is key to understanding our young but dynamic history.

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, the notion of sustainability is a part of the very heart of our national identity. It resides in our collective DNA. I can't think of a phrase that better defines our global predicament or the solution to that predicament than “shared destiny”. In a

globalized world it is no longer possible – it has never been desirable – for one part of the planet to thrive while another barely survives. Our planet is now a closed system. We are all in the same environmental boat and we will sail or sink together. “We are all crew.”

Which is why we are here – thanks to our conference organizers – talking about a full and true accounting of wellbeing, learning from each other, and sharing news about best practices from around the world. I can’t think of a more important discussion.

5. Conclusion

My friends, the issues that we are tackling this week are not easy ones. Maybe that’s why David Runnalls once wrote that “*sustainable development isn’t for the faint of heart.*”

So, I thank you for accepting the challenge. The work that you and dedicated people like you are doing around the world is so very important. The extent to which we collectively succeed in confronting the challenge of sustainability will go a long way toward determining our future and quality of life on this planet.

For those of us in Canada who are engaged in the process of shaping, influencing or informing public policy, it seems to me that the way ahead is clear. Now, more than ever, we need to root ourselves and our work in the values that have shaped this great country: fairness, diversity, equity, inclusion, health, safety, economic security, democracy and sustainability.

Now more than ever we need to draw on those values to develop a vision of a society that is sustainable in every way and to define the hallmarks and benchmarks such a society has to reach.

Now more than ever we need to develop the tools that will allow us to see if we are making progress in creating a better world for ourselves and future generations, or if we are straying off course and need corrective action to get back on track.

Now more than ever we need to connect the dots among all the factors that affect our wellbeing, so that we can develop comprehensive policies that address root causes. Now more than ever we need to do what you are doing here – breaking down silos; reaching across sectors; linking leaders and experts, planners and decision makers, academics and civil society representatives.

And, friends, now, 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, as a nation that is worthy of the respect of a world that needs an even better Canada. That's our task and I know we can do it, together.

Thank you very much. And, good luck.