

Celebrating the Canadian Index of Wellbeing's New Home

Speaking notes for

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

Chair, Canadian Index of Wellbeing Advisory 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

Keynote Address

Celebrating the Canadian Index of Wellbeing's New Home in the
Faculty of Health Sciences at the University of Waterloo

Waterloo, Ontario, Canada

April 7, 2011

1. Introduction

Thank you Dean Elliott for your very kind introduction.

Dr. McBoyle, Dr. Dixon, Mr. Mackenzie, Dean Elliott, friends of the CIW, members of the Kitchener-Waterloo and University of Waterloo community, ladies and gentlemen: It's a great pleasure to be with you today to mark this historic occasion – the inauguration of the CIW at the University of Waterloo's Faculty of Applied Health Sciences. This is a great University with a demonstrated commitment to progressive research. My thanks to all of you for coming out today.

That the Governor General of Canada, and immediate past President of this University, His Excellency The Right Honourable David Johnston, was able to join us by video link, underscores the national importance of this occasion.

2. Acknowledgements

They say that success has many parents, so let me begin by thanking those of you who have played such a big part in making this day possible.

First, I would like to acknowledge the important role played by The Atkinson Charitable Foundation of Toronto. The ACF gave birth to the concept of a Canadian Index of Wellbeing, and like any good parent, nurtured it, supported it during our developmental years, provided it with opportunities for growth, and even gave us a generous allowance. And when it was time for us to move to this University, they wished us well and even showed up here today, on our first day, as we begin this exciting new phase of the CIW.

The ACF will continue to be a core member of our Funders' Alliance. Speaking of which, I would also like to express my gratitude to the other members of the Funders' Alliance: The Lawson Foundation, RBC Foundation, J.M. McConnell Family Foundation, the Province of Ontario, and the Canadian Council on Learning.

I should perhaps mention at this juncture that membership in the Funders' Alliance is by no means closed, and so if any of you would like to be part of a groundbreaking Canadian initiative, and you have money left at the end of this month's tax season, we would be more than happy to welcome you into the fold.

3. Waterloo and CIW

I would especially like to thank Dean Elliott and Dr. Bryan Smale, the new Director of the Canadian Index of Wellbeing, for taking on the daunting, but vital task, of shepherding the CIW through its next important phase of development. Bryan has, of course, already been heavily involved in the work of the CIW, having led the development and co-written our report on the Leisure and Culture component of the Index.

Friends, I can't think of a better home for the CIW than the Faculty of Applied Health Sciences, with:

- its focus on quality of life throughout the lifespan;
- its understanding of the importance of action at the individual, community and population levels;
- the premium it places on interdisciplinary teaching and research;
- its recognition, that focusing on upstream solutions that address root causes is more sensible, more effective and in the long-run less expensive than trying to mitigate downstream symptoms; and,
- its awareness that while knowledge for its own sake is good, knowledge that changes the world is even better.

The University of Waterloo is the most desirable home for the CIW. I say this because, the University has for many years enjoyed a global reputation for advancing the frontiers of knowledge. Its contributions have spanned the spectrum from the microscopic like nanotechnology and quantum computing, to the macroscopic like the great issues surrounding the future of the universe.

What more need I say about a bold and visionary university that counts Stephen Hawking as a Distinguished Research Chair, that Bill Gates has cited as a top source of Microsoft's student and grad hires, that has been ranked as the best overall comprehensive university in Canada and also most innovative university in Canada for 19 straight years and counting, and whose research has led to the founding of more than 250 companies in the technology sector.

Perhaps only that in the next decade, the university has made a commitment to build a better future for Canada and the world by championing innovation and collaboration in new and synergistic ways – one of which will involve refining and advancing a pioneering tool to measure and improve well being.

That tradition continues with the CIW Network and our signature project the Canadian Index of Wellbeing.

We bring together, under one umbrella, leading Canadian and international researchers and practitioners. We take an interdisciplinary and intergenerational approach that “connects the dots” among all of the factors that shape our wellbeing – social, health, environmental and economic. Our focus is also on policy solutions and actions that will improve the quality of life of Canadians, and we have links with many other organizations that are striving to improve quality of life at the neighbourhood, community, municipal, provincial, and regional levels.

In the tradition of the University of Waterloo, we, too, are pushing outward the boundaries of human knowledge. Our work involves nothing short of creating a new paradigm – a new way of looking at what societal progress really means; a new approach that expands the universe of wellbeing and goes far beyond the limited realm of economic consumption.

We shall work with a number of countries through our involvement with the OECD’s global project to develop a more complete and integrated way of measuring progress. By the way, the OECD has, in particular, cited the fact that our leadership comes, not from government as in most other countries, but from people like many of you who work in civil society.

Our collective international efforts are beginning to bear fruit. We saw good evidence of this when French President Nicholas Sarkozy appointed a commission that included two Nobel laureates to recommend more balanced and comprehensive ways of measuring wellbeing. Their report, saw the President promise to champion a revolutionary new approach to quality-of-life issues – one that puts them on equal footing with national income.

4. Why a New Paradigm?

You may be wondering why Canada and the world need a new paradigm for tracking progress. The answer is – as it was when Copernicus and Galileo put forward a new model of the solar system – because the old paradigm isn’t working.

For too many years, Canada, like most other countries, has lacked a single, reliable and statistically valid way of tracking its progress as a society and the quality of life of its people. Over the past 80 years or so, Gross Domestic Product, or GDP, has emerged as a kind of surrogate for societal wellbeing.

Over time, so powerful and predominant has the GDP become, that the New York Times has referred to it as “a celebrity among statistics, a giant calculator strutting about adding up every bit of paid activity...”

Unfortunately, there are a few problems with this kind of approach. GDP was never designed to be a measure of societal progress. 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.”

As a measure of consumption, GDP makes no distinction between economic activities that are good for our wellbeing and those that are harmful. Spending on tobacco, crime, accidents, natural and human-made disasters, all propel GDP upward. Conversely, the value of unpaid housework, child and elder 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.

The case against the dominance of the GDP and its cousin the GNP was perhaps put forward most eloquently by Senator Robert Kennedy in a speech he gave nearly half a century ago. 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.”

You may be familiar with the expression that if you only give a person a hammer, then everything starts to look a lot like a nail. It’s equally true that if society’s only tool for tabulating spending starts and ends with a dollar sign, then reform is required.

Let's look at a few real world examples of how growth in GDP can provide a misleading impression of how well we're doing as a society.

In 1989, Exxon Valdez oil spill led to one of the single, largest increases in U.S. GDP – at least until the more recent BP spill in the Gulf of Mexico surpassed it many times over, although neither approached the \$80-billion boost that resulted from Hurricane Katrina. It was the same here in Canada as a result of the ice storm in Quebec, floods and droughts in the Prairies, forest fires and insect damage in B.C. and the collapse of cod stocks in Atlantic Canada.

Yet, would anyone argue that war, earthquakes, tsunamis, nuclear accidents, oil spills, hurricanes, ice storms, floods, droughts, fires and depletion of forests and fish stocks represent societal progress? Would anyone argue that they contribute to the quality of life of a country and its people? Would anyone say that the toll in human lives and destruction of communities and families are offset by the jump in GDP?

The fact is, we need a clear, coherent and compelling complement to the dominance of economic issues and the GDP. We need a new and transformational approach to defining and measuring wellbeing.

5. The CIW

Which brings me back to the Canadian Index of Wellbeing.

It was more than a decade ago that 50 of Canada's leading public policy experts and advocates came together to discuss how to promote long-term economic and social justice. One participant posed the question, "What if every time Canadians heard about GDP, TSX or DOW, they also got quantitative data about a wide variety of other social, health, economic and environmental factors?"

The idea was based on the very astute observation that 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, in the halls of academe and in the corridors of power. What we count often influences the policy agendas and decisions of governments.

As the legendary Canadian economist, John Kenneth Galbraith said, "If you don't count it, it doesn't count."

It was from that first meeting – and several years of follow-up public

consultations, expert research and design, and peer review – that the Canadian Index of Wellbeing was born.

Our overriding concern was to deliver a product that was rooted in Canadian experience, and grounded in Canadian values.

To me, 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 stability that enables us to deal with an ever-changing world.

The Network's mission is to regularly and publicly report on the quality of life of Canadians; to encourage policy shapers and government leaders to make decisions based on solid evidence; and to empower Canadians to advocate for change that responds to their needs and values.

We have tracked and provided unique insights in eight interconnected categories that matter – namely, our standard of living, our health, the vitality of our communities, our education, the way we use our time, our participation in the democratic process, the state of our leisure and culture, and the quality of our environment. Our approach is to treat beneficial activities as assets, harmful ones as deficits, and identify how these various dynamic aspects of wellbeing interact with one another.

Just this morning we released a report tracking Canada's major environmental trends during the time period 1994 to 2009. The report's principal researcher and author, Alexis Morgan of The Pembina Institute, is here with us today and earlier delivered an on-campus lecture presenting the major findings of his work. I would like to thank him for his thoughtful and insightful effort on this project.

The report found that while Canada isn't in a crisis situation today, there are clear warning signs of potential threats to our environment and wellbeing. Soaring

greenhouse gasses, increasing waste generation and energy use, declining stocks of large fish species, and shrinking water supplies in parts of the country are offsetting gains in other areas.

If we don't change course, some of these trends could eventually result in poorer health, a weaker economy, lower standard of living and diminished quality of life. Many of the trends are already having an impact on us. Increasing ground-level ozone, for example, is contributing to respiratory disease in parts of the country, particularly in large traffic-congested cities like Toronto, Montreal and Vancouver.

Nearly 20 percent of our children – a four-fold increase over the past 20 years – are now experiencing diseases such as asthma. Respiratory diseases attack the most vulnerable amongst us, primarily children and seniors, and account for nearly 10 percent of all hospital visits. Over time this adds up to billions of dollars worth of health care costs to taxpayers.

Meanwhile greenhouse gas emissions are rising – up 24 percent since 1990. Canada is heading in the wrong direction to avoid dangerous climate change. We are not part of the solution, we are part of the problem. Our country is amongst the highest per capita emitters in the world, second only to the U.S.

Climate change is already having an impact on our economy through droughts, floods and invasive species that have devastated huge tracts of forested lands. The landmark *Stern Review on the Economics of Climate Change* predicts that climate change will decrease global economic output by up to 20 percent. So it isn't a choice between economic growth OR a sustainable environment, it has to be economic growth AND a sustainable environment.

My hope is that our Environment Report will spark a national dialogue on the kinds of difficult challenges we will be confronted with over the coming decade, and the kinds of choices we have to make to optimize wellbeing for both humans and other species, rather than maximize one domain of wellbeing such as economic growth. I would love to see that dialogue start here on this campus.

This coming fall, the CIW will reach a major milestone with the release of our first composite index. The composite index, much like the TSX or Dow Jones, will take the 64 headline indicators we've been tracking and convert them into a single number. That number will go up or down over time, and provide a quick snapshot of how our quality of life is changing.

For the first time in our country's history, Canadians will have an evidence based, integrated picture of whether and how public policies are taking us closer to or further away from our shared vision of Canadian society.

6. Conclusion

As we take this moment to celebrate the new home base of the CIW at the University of Waterloo, my feeling is that we are embarking on a win-win-win journey. It will be a win for the CIW – our work will be enriched by the intellectual vitality of one of the world's great universities, by the broadening influence of leading thinkers in a wide variety of departments, and by the engagement of a new generation of students with an enormous stake in the future.

It will be a win for the University and the Faculty of Applied Health Sciences – a new opportunity to keep pushing forward the frontiers of knowledge, and an entry point into a pivotal and rapidly expanding OECD initiative.

And it will be a win for the Canadian people – a chance to engage in a genuine dialogue about our country's future, to help shape policies for a new century, and to feel that they have a real and welcome role in creating a stronger society and a better world. My friends, we live in a world of great challenges, but also one of great possibilities and opportunities. 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 – economically, socially and environmentally – and to define the hallmarks and benchmarks such a society has to reach. 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, instead of ad-hoc fixes that are far less effective and far more costly.

Now more than ever we need to break down silos; reaching across sectors; linking leaders and experts, planners and decision makers, academics and civil society. Now, more than ever, we need to recapture the moral 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 invite you to join me in its pursuit. I know we can do it, together.

Thank you very much.