

Time to connect social objectives to public policy

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Following is the viewpoint of the author, former premier of Saskatchewan, founding chair of the Canadian Index of Well-being Institute board, and senior fellow in political studies at the University of Saskatchewan.

I had the opportunity last summer to deliver a keynote speech in Istanbul to the OECD's World Forum on Measuring and Fostering the Progress of Societies, a gathering that brought together an exceptional group of about 1,200 people from 130 countries.

One thing that struck me was the way that delegates spoke, with almost one voice, about the difficulty their citizens were having in seeing their values reflected in government decision-making.

It's as if the two are travelling in parallel universes that can see each other but rarely intersect.

Not surprisingly, people are beginning to ask some pointed questions of their elected representatives.

How is it possible that in the midst of such incredible economic wealth, there are still so many children living in poverty? Why does the gap between rich and poor continue to grow?

How is it that in the midst of unprecedented housing booms, there are still so many homeless and destitute people, and families living in sub-standard accommodation? Why is it that at a time when our planet is warming, our climate becoming more extreme, our natural resources diminishing, we do so little to protect our environment and preserve it for future generations?

As Canadians, I believe we are ready to tackle these challenges, but in a way that is consistent with our own national values and narrative.

Our country has a rich history of people acting together for the common good and that spirit of "shared destiny" has given birth to Canadian values such as fairness, diversity, equity, inclusion, health, safety, economic security, democracy and sustainability.

From those values we have created national programs such as medicare, whose seeds were first sown and nourished here in Saskatchewan.

But in recent years, we have seen the emergence of views and a philosophy that are at odds with our narrative and our values. There is a palpable momentum toward individualism, decentralization and privatization.

It presents itself as the "new way" to deal with our most pressing common challenges, but in truth, it represents an abandonment of our accomplishments, our narrative and our values. So how can we reconnect Canadian values to public policy?

And how can we ensure that public policy reflects what matters most to Canadians?

Over the past few years, I've been working with a pioneering project at the national level -- a project that will "connect the dots" between social aspirations and public policy, based on hard evidence. It's called The Canadian Index of Well-being. The CIW is based on the premise that what we count matters.

Too often today, we gauge our society's well-being according to a narrow set of economic indicators, such as the GDP growth and movement in the stock market. It's very difficult to have a fair and balanced debate on social policy when the single most influential lens

that we use to measure our progress and well-being is confined to a narrow set of economic indicators.

I am not promoting the abolition of the GDP but instead that the CIW complement the GDP.

And so, let's imagine a better future. 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 Well-being; an index that measures and reports to Canadians on our progress, or the 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 arts and culture.

The CIW will be that type of Index. It is being developed by world-class experts and is backed by rigorous Canadian and international peer review and public consultation.

In fact, part of the index that will measure the strength of civic engagement in our country -- in effect, the health of Canadian democracy -- is being developed right here in Saskatoon. Through our links to the OECD, it may be a model that other countries can adapt to their own realities and, in turn, we benefit from advice from our international partners.

All of us involved believe that, over the course of time, as we promote the CIW and its results become widely known and broadly discussed, it will emerge as Canada's principal means of measuring genuine progress.

If we can establish a new conceptual approach to measuring how we are really doing, then we can change the national dialogue.

In doing so, we can change the course of national decision making and bring it back into line with Canadian values.

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