

**The Canadian Index of Wellbeing:**  
*Taking Measure of the Things that Count*

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**Notes for Remarks**

**United Ways of Canada**

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*Please Check Against Delivery*

I am honoured to speak to you today at your National *Mission in Movement* Conference. And I'm very pleased that you've asked me to share my views on Building a Better Canada.

I'm going to take advantage of your kind invitation to talk about one of the most exciting opportunities for positive transformation that I have been involved in over my many years in public life.

In many ways, this is the perfect forum for my comments, because the launching pad for change is leadership, and you are all leaders in your respective communities. You understand that nation-building is not only the drama that plays out day-to-day on the national political stage, but also what we do in our communities each and every day.

You also understand that while true leadership is always vital, it is rarely easy. Indeed that great philosopher Casey Stengel once observed that the key to leadership is keeping the 20 people who hate you away from the five who are still undecided.

Looking at the current political climate in Canada, he may very well have been right.

We will, in the near future – whether it's a matter of a few weeks or a few months – be in the midst of a federal election campaign. A national election raises very fundamental questions about the kind of Canada we want to build, about the role of government in that building process, and about how governments can become, and be perceived as relevant, meaningful and accountable to Canadians.

Right now, it's no great secret that there's one party with overwhelming momentum across the country. That party is called "none of the above". Many Canadians are increasingly tuning away from the political process because the political process has too often tuned out on them.

So how do we engage Canadians – especially young Canadians – in the discourse? How do we engage all of those – both young and old – whose efforts are so vital to the future of our communities and our country?

Because the real measure of a strong democracy isn't which party is in power, but in how many citizens are participating.

We start by asking the right questions. What's really important to us? What matters to Canadians? How do we keep our eye on the big picture, focusing on what binds us together, instead of on the parochial issues that so many are eager to exploit to drive us apart?

How do we get back to the point where big issues are more important than wedge issues? Where policies that are good and right triumph over those that are timely and expedient? How do we hold onto our uniquely Canadian values of caring and compassion, community and cooperative action, diversity and discourse – instead of succumbing to the ever-present siren call of individualism?

How will we know when we are on the right track? And how can we ensure that we stay on it?

I don't claim to have all the answers to these questions. But I have had my share of experience, participating in some of the critical moments in the history of this country. One thing I've learned is that taking the longer view of things and having clarity of purpose – taking your eye off of the next quarter of a year every now and then, to gaze ahead to the next quarter of a century – provides one of the antidotes to the myopia of short-termism.

Over the years, I have been blessed with many opportunities to help build a stronger nation – not just for a few but for all. My recent effort to work with Canadians across the country in charting the course for renewing, strengthening, and sustaining Medicare, was a very special privilege for me.

Here the over-riding goal was, and continues to be, to make Canadians the healthiest people in the world. Our recommendations pointed the way to an absolutely crucial piece of the puzzle: universal access to a reformed and strengthened not-for-profit health care system.

Regardless of what you may read in the *National Post*, Canadians still believe that this is the smartest, most cost-effective, and “proudly Canadian” pathway to contributing to better health outcomes for all Canadians, regardless of income.

Having said this, I’m sure I don’t have to convince you, as the people who are most in tune with what is happening everyday across our communities, that a viable health care system – or illness system – even the best in the world, cannot, by itself, produce the healthiest people in the world.

As community leaders from across this great country, you know first hand that there are many other factors that affect the health and wellbeing of Canadians. You’ve seen the devastating human consequences of poverty for individuals, families, and society. I call attention to the important work done by the United Way of Greater Toronto’s recent reports – *A Decade of Decline and Poverty by Postal Code*, which documents the increases in economic insecurity of Toronto residents – and the growing income gap – even after years of substantial economic growth.

Let me echo the questions that your organizations are asking on a daily basis:

How is it possible that in the midst of such economic progress, there are still more than one million children living in poverty right across this country?

Why are there more people living without adequate shelter or any shelter at all despite resources, political lip service and numerous reports?

Why has the water we drink and air we breath--certainly something that should unite all Canadians in mutual concern--been taken for granted for so long?

Let me also echo your frustration in grappling with these questions, and wondering why is there such an apparent disconnect between what you see on the ground in your communities across Canada, and the policies – in particular, their implementation – emanating from the different levels of government?

Why is it that poverty and lack of affordable housing and other important issues do not seem to register with our policy makers?

And what can we do that will actually make a difference in bridging this disconnect?

## **WHAT WE MEASURE COUNTS!**

Well, there is one major project that will be invaluable. It's an initiative that I've been working on for several years, and that others across this country have been working on for many more years. It's an initiative that over the long haul has the potential to completely change the political discourse in this country, and to re-shape the direction of public policy in a way that will benefit all Canadians.

It's an initiative that is now being realized. It's called *The Canadian Index of Wellbeing*.

And it's based on this premise: what we count matters, especially when we seek to build a better nation.

The things we count and measure reflect our values as a society and determine what we see on the news, what we hear at the water cooler, and ultimately, what makes it onto the policy agendas of governments.

Everyday and in almost every way we are bombarded with information about whether the TSX has gone up or the dollar down. Every month 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 who scurry to their keyboards.

So what's wrong with that? What's wrong is that when the single most influential national lens that we use to measure our progress and wellbeing as a country is confined to a narrow set of economic indicators, it sends inaccurate and even dangerous signals to policy makers.

The GDP, to be fair, was never intended to be anything other than a narrow measure of the size of the economy and the total quantity of economic activity. It was never intended to be taken as a proxy for national progress or wellbeing.

The simple reality is that measurements of economic growth do not make any distinction between activities that bring benefits and those that cause harm. As long as money is spent, the GDP goes up. Crime, accidents, sickness, smoking, war, pollution, natural disasters – ice storms, floods, tornadoes – all increase the GDP simply because money is being spent on prisons, lawyers, doctors, drugs, hospitals, cigarettes, guns, pollution cleanup and damage repair.

And cutting down trees, endangering forests, and over-fishing also make the economy grow because the GDP counts the depletion of our natural wealth as if it were economic gain.

The GDP also tells us how much total income we are producing, but tells us nothing about how that income is distributed. So the economy can grow even if middle and low-income Canadians are getting poorer – as happened in the 1990s, when the gap between rich and poor in this country grew.

For all these reasons, and more, our policy priorities have often been skewed. But – to this point – we haven't had a clear or coherent alternative.

## **A NEW REALITY: THE CANADIAN INDEX OF WELLBEING**

Now, imagine what would happen if instead of every time you heard about the GDP you also heard the results of another new and important index – a Canadian Index of Wellbeing – that measures the variables that really contribute to, or subtract from, the health, wellbeing, and prosperity of Canadians both in this generation and the next.

Imagine an index that actually links the economic reality and longer-term economic prosperity of our country with the social, health and environmental conditions that shape our communities. Imagine an index:

- That distinguishes between good things (like health and clean air) and bad things (like sickness and pollution).
- That treats reaching out to those who are marginalized, promoting volunteer work and supporting unpaid care giving – those very things that in many ways define the work that you in this room make possible – as social goods, and overwork and stress as social deficits.
- That puts a value on things like educational achievement, economic security, a clean environment and social equity.
- That values a better balance between investment in health promotion and spending on illness treatment?

The Canadian Index of Wellbeing – or CIW – can be that type of a measuring stick. It will be built around powerful indicators that count and measure the extent to which we are realizing our values and goals as a society and whether we are leaving the world a better place for our children.

Our mission for the CIW is to provide Canadians with a clear, valid, and regular accounting of the things that matter to them and the genuine progress of Canada.

The task before us is to create a new tool that will help foster a common vision for the future of Canada. We want to account honestly and accurately for changes in our human, social, economic and natural wealth. We want to use that as a basis for improving our performance in areas that matter to Canadians.

We want to provide a valuable public policy tool that resonates with opinion leaders, media, and decision makers, while informing the “water cooler chat” about how we are *really* doing. To do that, we have to create a tool that is easy to communicate and simple to understand.

If we're going to engage Canadians, the CIW has to be reported on regularly, at least quarterly at first. Annual indicator projects are fine but they become one or two-day wonders in the media. If we do our work right, the CIW will become a regular feature of reporting in the media, like the Stock Exchange or the GDP.

That's the only way to ensure that the policy making processes of governments become better aligned with Canadian values, and to end the disconnect between the promises of political rhetoric and the realities in our communities.

The CIW will shine a spotlight on how the strategic allocation of economic resources 'upstream' will reduce the need for expensive health care and social services 'downstream'. In other words, it will focus on getting things right at the beginning - where the solutions are cheaper and far more effective - instead of fixing them at the end.

Let me give you an example of how the CIW will help organizations to build stronger communities. It's one with which I'm sure you can relate.

Imagine the Executive Director of a non-profit organization in any one of Canada's many communities sitting in her office looking over her group's application for increased municipal funding. Her organization serves youth at risk and youth in conflict with the law. It is part of a city-wide coalition of agencies working to address issues of racism, poverty and the rise in gang and weapons violence.

She thinks back to a time 5-10 years ago when the community was in the midst of a tough "law and order agenda" - a time when the youth population in jails was growing, with less and less attention and money being paid to grass-root solutions such as social and recreational programs for marginalized youth. The only "official" research numbers she would see coming out of the city involved volume and types of crime and age of the offenders.

Fortunately, the city eventually realized that its singular focus on crime and punishment was both short-sighted and delivering little in the way of results. Three years ago, pressure from the coalition of agencies and others had forced the city to introduce new programming for marginalized youth. But the city and its partners were uncertain as to how to measure the program's impact.

Now imagine that the Canadian Index of Wellbeing could provide both national and community-specific information on a regular basis, on issues such as social inclusion, acceptable living standards, youth employment opportunities, and security and freedom. And that it was possible to correlate these data with youth crime statistics. This would be an extremely important measuring stick for tracking progress that not only would help make the case for better investment balance between prevention and short-term intervention, but monitor progress on achieving better outcomes.

We imagine the CIW will be just as useful for a variety of leaders: those who run agencies, those who head up companies, those who write editorials, and those who run and advise governments.

The Canadian Index of Wellbeing project is one of the most ambitious projects in the world in this field. Quite aside from everything else that I've talked about, it demands the greatest statistical and methodological rigour. Because if you expect anyone to pay any attention to your findings, you'd darn well better make sure that you've collected your data accurately, credibly, and using best available data sources.

Fortunately, in Canada, we now have the right mix of people and partnerships in place to do this.

Before the idea of the CIW came along, Canadian indicator researchers and practitioners had been working many years in relative isolation creating measuring tools to reflect the full spectrum of Canadian values. I'm very happy to report to you that the promise of this project has meant that most of these leading researchers from across the country are now working together towards one common goal – the creation of the CIW.

The CIW network brings together the country's leading indicator practitioners – people like Dr. Ron Colman from Halifax, Dr. Alex Michalos from B.C., Mark Anielski from Alberta, and Dr. Ron Labonte and Dr. Andrew Sharpe from Ottawa, and so many other talented people.

The veracity of data sources will be assured through our partnership with experts at Statistics Canada--people like Hans Messinger and Dr. Michael Wolfson--providing crucial advice. And so many other leaders--like Frances Lankin, Judith Maxwell, Dr. John Evans, and Dr. Robert McMurtry--are providing guiding advice on how to properly achieve this.

We are all working together and we are also working with a network of key international experts and parallel projects in several countries. We are making sure that our work lines up with the best international measures.

The team is working towards an integrated index that can best capture the full range of factors that determine wellbeing in Canada. At present, they are developing a set of indicators that will monitor progress in the areas of:

- (1) Living standards;
- (2) Health outcomes;
- (3) Education and literacy;
- (4) Environmental quality;
- (5) Community vitality;
- (6) Citizen engagement; and
- (7) Time use and work-life balance.

Plans are also well under way for a newly created Institute to keep developing the research and providing the communications to ensure that the CIW is around for a very long time, that it stays accurate and unimpeachable, and most importantly, that it become a very high-profile and widely disseminated agent for change.

As the hub of this activity, the Institute will bring together Canadian academics, government, and non-governmental leaders like you and will link satellite partner institutions and organizations across the country. The CIW has already sparked the interest of partner organizations in most provinces.

Expect a more formal announcement later in the year.

In the meantime, you will receive in the next few days an electronic copy of the publication, *Reality Check: The Canadian Review of Wellbeing, issue #10*, which is being released today and provides an overview of what we'll be measuring and who is involved.

### **Building a Better Canada with United Way Centraide:**

My friends, the ambitious Canadian Index of Wellbeing project holds huge promise for engaging Canadians in shaping a future based on the things that really matter to them.

While our work on the index is well underway, we would benefit greatly from your feedback on what we've done so far. Are we measuring the right things? Are we communicating them in the right way? Is the information of value to you? Could it be made more valuable?

Because of your deep community roots and your leadership, you have the capacity to be a very valuable partner in the ongoing development and eventual launch of the CIW. How? By testing out the Canadian Index of Wellbeing indicators in your communities.

We will be talking to your national leadership in more detail about this and we hope that we can count on a partnership with United Way Centraide.

### **A New Revolution in Wellbeing**

In closing, I want to say that I firmly and passionately believe that the CIW – given time and the execution of superior attention to communications, and with great leadership from people like yourselves – will yield positive transformative progress for Canada and its citizens.

How important is it that we do this?

Well, historians and health experts tell us that we have had two great revolutions in the course of public health. The first was the control of infectious diseases, notwithstanding some recent challenges. The second was the battle against non-communicable diseases.

The third great revolution is about moving from an illness treatment model to a new approach centered on preventing illness and promoting a holistic sense of wellbeing.

In my view, the wellness model needs to be informed in the following ways:

- by inspired leaders who genuinely share power with those less fortunate;
- by a commitment to social inclusion and Civil Society that provides opportunities for all Canadians to participate in the things that count in our communities across this great county;
- by an understanding that hopelessness kills and hopefulness with opportunity is a prescription for good health; and
- by sound and regularly reported information about how we are really doing with the things that we value.

That's my kind of revolution. It's the kind that will ensure that Canadians are the healthiest people in the world. It's also the kind that is based on a belief that the exceptional health we seek and how we achieve it, can provide a Canadian model for the world to emulate. I intend to be a part of that revolution. I hope you will too.

Thank you very much.