

***Shared Destiny and the
Health and Wellbeing of Canadians***

**Presented at
Healthy Eating Active Living (HEAL) Conference**

By

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Speaking Notes

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1. INTRODUCTION - “SHARED DESTINY”

I am honored to speak to you today at the Healthy Eating Active Living (HEAL) Conference. Minister, my congratulations to you and your government for your health promotion leadership and for bringing together such an impressive gathering to discuss key components necessary for a healthy life and thriving communities.

This conference offers an important moment, not only for those who are already aware about the benefits of health promotion and prevention, but especially for those who work in other areas that concern the governance of Ontario. To paraphrase the World Health Organization “a comprehensive understanding of the ways in which lifestyles and living conditions determine health status,” is a good start. But for it to count, it needs to be matched by a corresponding urge “to mobilize resources and make sound investments in policies, programmes and services which create, maintain and protect health by supporting healthy lifestyles and creating supportive environments for health”

In my role as Commissioner on the Future of Health Care my charge was to deal with the health care systems in Canada, or more aptly, the illness systems. But we were also quite clear that in addition to getting health care reforms right, action was also needed in a number of key areas, including the need for catastrophic drug coverage, primary health care strategies, and attention to the so-called determinants of health, including factors such as income, education and housing.

In fact, since I completed my work on the future of health care, I have spent most of time on what I call “the chapter not written.” What I mean by that is an increased focus on the critical importance of these social determinants of health, to which health care interventions play an important but modest role. Because when it comes to overall health outcomes, some have noted that health care interventions and personal behavior contribute to forty percent, at most. It is the other sixty percent plus that I wish to address today.

But to place today's discussion in its proper context, I would like to begin with a discussion about Canadian values.

I want to do this because I believe that it is important that we approach policy-making more and more from a holistic perspective. That we overcome the silo-mentality that too often creates a disconnect between what we believe in as Canadians, what the evidence says, and what actions we end up taking on important issues.

Everyday, our nation faces new challenges that bring fundamental questions to the forefront of our collective thinking. Whether it is the integrity of our ecological environment, our role in Afghanistan and the world, or our domestic choices---to fund or not fund early learning and childcare programs--we should return to a very basic question: What kind of Canada do we want?

In answering this question, it helps to look back at our collective history. Canada's evolution as a progressive nation has been the result of Canadians believing and practicing a philosophy that I call "shared destiny". Canadians' notion of a "shared destiny" is key to understanding the legacy of our young but dynamic history, and remains the roadmap to our future, at home, and abroad.

Generation after generation of Canadians have seized on the notion of "shared destiny" and its cornerstone idea that our future and our society is frequently best shaped through collective action. That the sum of Canada is often greater than its remarkably diverse parts.

At first, the concept of a shared Canadian destiny was not so much a philosophical commitment but more as a principle of survival. In a land so vast, in a terrain so rugged, in a climate so harsh – we would not have lasted very long without embracing the idea of collective action. For those like me, who came of age on the prairie communities, the harsh, often snow-blown conditions, droughts, distance and isolation forced us together - like poplar trees huddled together on a windswept plain.

But through the years, as we lived together, worked together and built together, “shared destiny” was transformed into the foundation of a nation. Each generation added a dimension to the Canadian Dream. For one generation it was the building of a great national railroad and for another, tempered by the Dirty Thirties and the collapse of the global economic system, it was the creation of credit unions, cooperatives, health centers, and crown corporations.

Perhaps the crowning glory was the creation of our social safety net, knitted together by the strands of universal hospitalization and health care, unemployment insurance, support for the poor, and pensions for the aged.

But it didn't stop there. We built on the dream through first-rate universities, community colleges, support for the arts, literature and the CBC. We then established our own citizenship act, national anthem, and flag.

We transformed the political and legal framework of the country by affirming the equality of our two official languages, acknowledging the treaty and historic rights of aboriginal peoples, and recognizing the multicultural essence of Canada. Equalization was written into the constitution, echoing the principle that Canadians supported sharing between regions and between generations. The constitution was then patriated, the Charter of Rights and Freedoms was entrenched, and we committed ourselves to equality, diversity, civility, and the pursuit of peace.

Thus, our long-standing quest for sovereignty was finally achieved.

One of the best descriptions of “shared destiny” is found in the few words used by the Saskatchewan government in our argument to the Supreme Court of Canada in the post-1995 Quebec secession reference case:

“A nation is built when the communities that comprise it make commitments to it, when they forgo choices and opportunities on behalf of a nation...when the communities that comprise it make compromises, when they offer each other guarantees, when they make transfers, and perhaps most pointedly, when they receive from others the benefits of national solidarity. The threads of a thousand acts of accommodation are the fabric of a nation....”

And, the Supreme Court in its decision on the Quebec Secession reference adopted this exact description.

This, then, is our history and our future. It is our nation’s narrative and it resides in our collective DNA.

In recent years, however, there has been a noticeable drift away from this legacy. Perhaps, new international trading arrangements have ushered in an era of globalization of commerce that has weakened our capacity and our resolve to continue the nation-building enterprise. Perhaps the deficits of the 1990’s, which ballooned in all of our governments -- and resulted in the elimination, amendment, or drastic alteration of social and economic programs -- sowed the seeds of doubt about our collective capacity to meet our future challenges.

Perhaps I have overstated my concern.

But one thing is clear: the soil has been tilled for the sprouting of views at odds with shared destiny, and today, the result is a palpable momentum toward decentralization, individualism, and privatization, as the so-called “new ways” to deal with our challenges. All represent an abandonment of our nation’s narrative.

And so everyday we witness debates about our fiscal policies, our social programs, our foreign and environmental policies, in short, debates about the very foundations of our nation—that are caught up in these so-called “new ways” of thinking.

2. MEDICARE AND THE FUTURE OF CANADA

Here I am reminded of my work as Commissioner on the Future of Health Care. During my 18-month term as Commissioner, I had the privilege of hearing from thousands of Canadians who deeply understood that a renewed health care system is not just about basic Canadian values like equity and fairness for all citizens. That it's not merely about effectiveness and efficiency. Medicare is not even simply about the irrefutable evidence showing that our single-payer, public system delivers excellent outcomes, which it does.

Yes, Medicare is about all these issues. But it is also about much more.

Because Medicare is such a primary example of the kind of social program that holds such a central role in our narrative of “shared destiny”, its renewal and the very future of our nation are fundamentally intertwined. Seems like so many employers, both in Canada and the U.S. have come to understand the enormous economic advantages of Medicare as well. And by the way Minister, I believe your colleague, Mr. Smitherman, is doing the kind of heavy lifting required to renew and sustain Medicare.

3. THE CHAPTER NOT WRITTEN: SHINING THE SPOTLIGHT ‘UPSTREAM’

During my tenure as Commissioner, we always knew that one of the most important things we had to do towards achieving higher population health status was to take action on the so-called “Chapter not Yet Written” I referred to earlier.

That “Unwritten Chapter” essentially boils down to this: a health care system, even the best system in the world, can only take us part of the way to ensure that Canadians are the healthiest people in the world

Equally important is a recognition that there are broader determinants of health related to lifestyle choices, nutrition, social structures and the environment that have an important impact on the health of individuals and communities.

We know that many illnesses can be prevented if people take better care of their health. Behaviours such as smoking, lack of physical activity, poor diet, and alcohol use have profound effects on health, largely because they are related to the leading causes of death, illness and disability such as heart disease, cancer, stroke, respiratory disease, diabetes and injuries. Recent increases in certain forms of cancer and diabetes can largely be attributed to individual health practices such as smoking, diet, and physical activity. In fact, over 90% of type II diabetes and 80% of coronary heart disease could be avoided with good nutrition, regular exercise, the elimination of smoking, and effective stress management.

Provinces, territories and the federal government have taken action to put health promotion strategies in place to address these concerns and some good progress has been made. But should cast our net even wider when it comes to seizing the potential impact of preventative measures. We should be focusing our efforts further “upstream”, addressing factors such as income, education, early learning and child care, housing, and the environment, because we know that these hold such tremendous potential for improving health and preventing illnesses.

Yet look around and everywhere we see devastating human consequences of poverty and disadvantage for individuals, families, and society.

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? That the income gap continues to grow?

Why are there more people living without adequate shelter or any shelter at all despite resources and numerous reports that point the way? Too much political lip service, not enough action!

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?

Given that income is such a major contributor to healthy outcomes, how can we address the importance of healthy eating and active living in a way that places equity and the realities of those who are poor at the top of the agenda? In practical terms, this means that as you generate important ideas for nutritional eating and exercise, ask how these ideas can be accessed by the poor?

And faced with these fundamental challenges that call out for decisive action from our leaders, why is there such an apparent disconnect between what we see on the ground and the policies emanating from the different levels of government.

4. THE CANADIAN INDEX OF WELLBEING: MEASURING WHAT COUNTS

Today I want to tell you about one project that will have a major role to play in making our communities stronger, and our citizens and nation, healthier. A project that will contribute to building a Canada based on fairness, opportunity, respect and a balance between individual interests and the common good. A project that tries to “connect the dots” and connect community needs to sound social policy.

For the past few years I've been working with a group of exceptionally dedicated and talented national experts. Together, we are undertaking the rather daunting, but vitally important, task of creating a Canadian Index of Wellbeing (CIW).

And it is based on this concept: What we measure counts. It determines what makes it onto the front pages of newspapers and front desks of policy shapers and decision makers.

Right now, we tend to measure our wellbeing through a small set of narrow economic indicators, like the GDP for instance. Unfortunately, that kind of net tends to

get cast in a way that is both too long and too narrow. Too long, because it ensnares all monetary activity, but fails to distinguish between good activities like investing in education and bad activities like selling cigarettes. Too narrow, because it fails to capture a range of activities that improves our wellbeing, like community participation and healthy lifestyle choices.

That's why we are working on the CIW as a new tool that can account honestly, independently, and accurately for changes in our human, social, economic and natural wealth – all of the dimensions of our lives that affect our wellbeing. Our task is to connect the dots linking the economic reality and longer-term economic prosperity of our country with the social, health and environmental conditions that shape our communities.

Most importantly, we are working hard to ensure that the CIW will be grounded on the things that matter to Canadians. Factors such as our living standards, how we spend our time, the health and education of our populations, the integrity of our ecosystem, our community vitality and our levels of civic engagement.

Why these areas? Because we have taken the time to talk to Canadians about what matters to them, their families and communities during an extensive series of roundtable discussions that took place across Canada this past winter.

Canadians told us that they want to see more accountability for the decisions and actions that are taken in this country. They want tools that can provide policy shapers with the information they need to measure the full benefits and costs of policy changes. They want independently developed and disseminated information, unfettered by short-term political expediency. And they want to be engaged in a meaningful dialogue about how decisions are made and what it means to have global-leading quality of life, wellbeing, and sustainability.

The CIW is still under construction, but we are beginning to make great progress.

We have the makings of real success here: a committed group of experts, including colleagues from Stats Can, and community leaders engaged in visionary work; a growing base of partners that will keep this work sustainable, and a real commitment to anchor this work to 'main street', by ensuring that we engage Canadians from all walks of life. And we are connected to the best people in a world-wide network working and learning together about measuring national progress more effectively.

It is this combination of expertise, partnerships and connection to everyday Canadian values that will make all the difference to the success of the project.

In time, and with appropriate resources and superb communications, we believe that the CIW will join the likes of the GDP as a major influence on daily discussions around the water cooler, in media coverage and how policies are conceived and designed.

Early in 2007, in fact, you will be hearing more news about the CIW, as we release our first domains linking living standards and health outcomes. To find out more about our progress I invite you to visit the CIW website at www.ciw.ca

5. RETURNING TO “SHARED DESTINY”

Let me conclude by saying that I have been truly blessed to be involved in a good number of initiatives---large and small. But I believe that the CIW is clearly one of the most truly transformational projects that I have had the good fortune to be part of.

The CIW is a project that can contribute to building a Canada based on fairness, opportunity, respect and a balance between individual interests and the common good. It will provide us a very powerful tool for increasing the alignment among the public, the policy-making process, and the values that Canadians hold dear.

Because being anchored on values is essential. Governments that do not have a firm handle on public values and expectations will make decisions that do not reflect the collective will of the people or the public interest, with disastrous results. Too often, taxpayer paid communications are used as weapons of mass obfuscation to make it look as though a new initiative is coincident with our values.

If governments act in ways that fail to reflect Canadians beliefs, if decisions are made that fail to take into account the voices on Main Street, then the public trust in our democratic process can only become even weaker than it has become.

To be sure, a political society is always a work in progress susceptible to failure and instability. But as I have argued, Canada has a legacy that provides it with a compass, a story of a “shared destiny” that should allow it to navigate its future course with confidence and grace. If we become gripped with values amnesia and pretend that we don’t have that narrative, we will lurch about creating only the illusion of national progress.

Now, more than ever, we need to dream big dreams, backed by much stronger and much more focused political leadership.

I was a premier once. I know the pressures that mitigate against taking the longer view of things and of reaching beyond one’s particular place at a particular point in time. It’s not easy and, among other things, it does indeed require a commitment to a progressive society, a commitment to healthy public policy.

But now, more than ever, we need leadership that is informed by shared destiny and sound, trusted, and regularly reported information about how we are doing

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, and within

our own actual narrative, as an independent nation, worthy of the respect of a world that needs an even better Canada.

Thank you.