Steering, Not Rowing: Governance for a New Social Model

May 14, 2004 – Just as much of Canada's current social policy regime is out of step with social reality, so too, is the way we design and deliver policy and programs – our governance practice.

For a variety of reasons, the search is on for new approaches to governance. Those reasons range from the growing complexity of our diverse society, to the need for multi-level collaboration, to the conviction that effective policies and programs cannot be developed and delivered without significant local involvement.

"For senior governments, the shift required is like that from rowing a boat to simply steering it, from calling the shots to providing guidance," says Denis Saint-Martin. "Collaboration and coordination are the new watchwords. No player, today, can go at it alone."

Saint-Martin, a Research Associate with CPRN's Family Network and professor of political science at the Université de Montréal, is the author of ***Coordinating Interdependence: Governance and Social Policy Redesign in Britain, the European Union and Canada***, the seventh of CPRN's Social Architecture Papers, published today. His paper compares recent changes in the institutions and practices of social policy governance in the European Union, Canada and Britain.

Despite their differences, Canada and Europe face similar problems arising from changes in productive organization, employment patterns and household/family structures over the past three decades. Adjustment to these changes is underway on both sides of the Atlantic. And both seek new ways to administer their response to a changing environment.

The author reviews governance developments in all three entities – the Open Method of Coordination (OMC) in the European Union, New Labour's "integrated government" in Britain, and Canada's Social Union Framework Agreement.

He classifies these approaches in terms of how tightly "coupled", and how coercive, their management systems are. On this basis, he describes the European Union as a case of *communicative governance*, Canada as an example of *collaborative governance*, and Britain as characterized by *holistic governance.*

"Despite their different contexts, the new forms of governance share a number of characteristics," says Saint-Martin. "They foster coordination across interdependent policy domains, they require collaboration among different jurisdictions and levels of governance, they encourage local experimentation, they seek to share best practices, and they treat social policy as a productive factor in the economy."

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While all three cases share a commitment to social learning and public participation, Saint-Martin finds a significant gap between these objectives and day-to-day working reality.

In summary, Saint-Martin finds the impact of the OMC's "soft" approach to policy coordination is yet to be fully assessed, while its policy learning remains concentrated among political elites, more than the general population. As for Labour's approach in Britain, he questions whether the growth of decentralized forms of governance has not been undermined by intensification of "command and control" at the centre.

Canada's Social Union, in Saint-Martin's analysis, falls somewhere between these two. Its main impact so far has been in the area of accountability.

"The shift to public reporting of social policy outcomes in Canada constitutes an important change," Saint-Martin says. "But outcomes measurement cannot guarantee better accountability or citizen participation, and there is work to be done to make those goals a reality."

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