

Canadian Policy Research Networks

Sustainability: An Ethical Choice

A Message from the President

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PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE



Judith Maxwell, President

Sustainability: An Ethical Choice

“Even though the relationship between economic growth, wellbeing and human happiness is tricky territory, it is territory that should no longer be avoided...”

- UK Sustainable Development Commission

“Ingenuity consists not only of ideas for new technologies but, more fundamentally, ideas for better institutions and social arrangements, like efficient markets and competent governments.”

- Thomas Homer Dixon

A colleague once said to me, “What do I owe future generations? They never did anything for me.” In that remark, he summarized the ethical challenge of life on this planet.

Today, no one should joke about the problem of sustainability. Just as global warming makes our weather more turbulent, AIDS ravages whole continents, oil

prices test \$50 a barrel, we worry about the sustainability of our health care system and our communities.

More than ever, we have to think seriously about our ability to make choices that “*meet the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs.*” The problem is we have trouble making sustainable choices when key interests are in conflict. Even when the future trends are inevitable, like the ageing of Canadian society, we cannot agree on how to balance the needs of the older and younger generations alive today!

And when Canadians cannot agree, governments at all levels are reluctant to act until forced to do so. Even then, they do not always make the best decision.¹ The result: we lose precious time adapting to the new circumstances or taking preventive action. When you and I do this, it is called procrastination.

Yet there are promising signs. In CPRN’s recent citizen dialogues, we have noticed a distinct tendency for Canadians faced with difficult choices on health care, budget policy or the management of used nuclear fuel to make ethical choices that balance their rights and their responsibilities.

Whether the issue is our water supply or disposal of radioactive waste, participants in our dialogues accept their responsibility for pricing consumption today in terms of the costs it imposes on future generations. This is, at root, an ethical imperative.

The limitation of dialogues, however, is that only a few hundred people participate. Canadians at large need meeting places where they can have these deeper

discussions with their fellow citizens. It is only through face to face conversation that human empathy emerges. And it is empathy that triggers that sense of responsibility to others, born and unborn. It is the ability to put oneself in another person's shoes.

Toward Sustainability

The notion of sustainability is generally accepted in discussions about global environmental issues. It is now creeping into the language of corporations, governments, non-profit organizations and social policy discussion.² But it has not yet been accepted as “normal” in those domains, nor is it seen as an overarching goal for a society. Yet sustainability is in many ways the core idea that should guide all decision making. Choices that do not compromise the ability of future generations to meet their needs are choices that meet multiple bottom lines – social, political, economic, cultural as well as environmental.

In this message, I want to extend the idea into other domains – communities and cities, health care and an ageing society – all three are key drivers of well-being and are on the CPRN agenda.

Communities and Cities

The sustainability challenge hits us most directly in the communities where we live. To support themselves and their families, adult Canadians need access to a job that enables them to pay for food, shelter, physical safety, transport, education, clean air and water, and all the activities that are part of a healthy daily life. That seems pretty basic, does it not?

But Canadian communities, especially the larger cities, are hitting the limits of their capacity on environmental,

“Congratulations to you and CPRN for the ongoing research and support you provide to Canadians and policymakers in an effort to assist them in finding solutions to key public issues. You are contributing significantly to policy development in this country. Best wishes for your continued success.”

– Corporate CEO

social, political and cultural issues. They are experiencing severe shortages of affordable housing, growing poverty, and a higher degree of concentration of poverty in specific neighbourhoods among young and working age people, especially visible minorities. Cities are also becoming less liveable for a broad cross-section of the middle class due to long, congested commutes, an intensification of work, stagnating purchasing power and limits on access to public services. Meanwhile, wealth is still being created and incomes in the best neighbourhoods are rising at a robust rate.

This polarization of both incomes and neighbourhoods destroys empathy. More and more, people are working and living in separate spaces and have no occasion to meet in a shared space where they can see the effects of this yawning economic and social gap. Yet there is limited capacity on the part of federal, provincial and municipal governments to make the concerted effort required to respond effectively – to help narrow the gaps, create the public spaces and meeting places, and make the communities more liveable. And markets do not solve this kind of problem on their own.

It remains for citizens to take action themselves. Fortunately, some of them do. Neil Bradford reported,

based on 13 case studies, that the single most important ingredient for community mobilization is a local champion – someone who is seized with an issue and determined to make change. Without exception, it is individuals in cities as diverse as Kelowna, Saskatoon, Waterloo, the Beauce region of Quebec, and Halifax, who have built coalitions of local citizens and mobilized government agencies to create change.

The results have been new birth – new industries, new community leaders, new quality of life. Problems are being solved because these local champions nurture a civic culture of creativity – to do things differently and better.

What Bradford finds in these communities is connectedness – people working together from all parts of the community. Together, they connect their issues to outside partners, including governments. A recent but important new example is the Toronto City Summit, which has, among other things, formed committees to support the integration of new immigrants into the labour market and to study income security policy reform – not the focus we can always expect from business leaders.

Sustainable communities and cities have to begin with a single project. But the core of sustainability is the continuous renewal Jane Jacobs describes in many of her books. Her most recent one, *Dark Age Ahead*, is a call to arms for more champions and more responsive governments. It is also a warning not to take democracy for granted.

Health Care

As I write this, the September First Ministers Meeting on Health Care has just concluded with a massive transfer of revenues from the federal to the provincial governments.

This is the third time in four years that the federal government has committed billions of extra dollars. For the most part, it has disappeared into the health care system without apparent improvements in the care received by patients. Waiting lists are still too long for many services, hospitals are short of beds, surgeries are cancelled, people wait months for a diagnosis and others cannot find a doctor.

When our Health Network convened a conference on wait times on behalf of four national health associations, Cathy Fooks found that waiting lists for specific services are now being managed much better in sites from Halifax to Edmonton. How did it happen? A local champion (almost always a physician) decided to take ownership of the issue. He or she rallied all the local people and institutions with responsibility for patient care and together they designed a way to manage the patient flow from beginning to end. They radically reduced wait times for services treating illnesses as severe as heart attacks and for chronic care diseases such as diabetes, often at no additional cost.³

So there is strong evidence that Canada's health care systems can become sustainable, if the front-line leaders take charge. First Ministers obviously have to provide stable and predictable financing, but the people who make the system work are local champions capable of influencing the behaviour of others.

Ageing Society

International studies acknowledge that Canada's system of mixed public and private pensions and income security for the elderly prepares us well for the rapid ageing that will take place over the next 20 years. We have taken care of the economic security of the ageing baby boomers. What is less clear is how we plan to provide the services to support them, and how we plan to balance the needs

of the elderly with those of the working age population who will be providing the services and paying their taxes.

What is missing is a commitment to a “society for all ages.” This is a society that ensures that all ages are respected, accepted, and able to fully participate. It balances the needs of all generations from birth to death. Choices are made that recognize the interdependence of generations.

Independence will always be our goal – we foster it in our children and support it in the elderly as long as possible. But interdependence is unavoidable. We see and experience this interdependence as individuals. As individuals, our lives are interwoven with those of other generations.⁴

Yet, in our daily lives, we can lose sight of this interdependence. When the retired population vote against a new hockey rink to avoid higher local taxes, they are denying access to that rink to all the children and working age people in the community. Elderly people vote, and children do not. Think about that.

Public policy has often failed on this front. The institution of health insurance and public pensions for low and modest income Canadians in the 1960s was a landmark event in our development as a civilized society. They acknowledged that in a more urban and industrialized society, the state has to share in some of the risks in life. The trouble is that Canada failed to create the other essential national systems of caregiving for the children and dependent adults.

For example, in the 1960s the assumption was made that families (mainly women) would do the caregiving for both children and elders. Nowadays, 70 percent of mothers with young children are in the workforce, most of them full time. And with smaller families, many elders are



stranded, living some distance away from their adult children. These are the new social risks.⁵

Furthermore, income support for the working age population is so tangled in the regulations of Employment Insurance, social assistance and disability programs that, in Toronto, only 38 percent of the working age population has access to Employment Insurance.

Sharing the Risks

These are huge gaps in the Canadian systems for sharing risk. They undermine our economic future, and make it less and less likely that the elderly baby boomers will be able to access the kind of supports they will need, beyond the health care system, when their independence begins to diminish. These gaps will create unsustainable pressures on families and individual citizens in the next couple of decades. Inevitably that will spill over into pressure on governments and on employers.



Senior Management, from left to right, back row: Ron Saunders, Tom McIntosh, Neil Leslie, Cynthia Williams and Peter Puxley.
Front row: Al MacKay, Judith Maxwell, David Hay and Mary Pat MacKinnon.



Ottawa Staff.

Preventive action today would include a whole spectrum of innovative policies: to build caregiving into our social infrastructure; to foster gradual retirement plans so working people can balance their work and family commitments; to ensure that every child gets the best start in life and the best possible education; to make our cities and communities more liveable and adaptable; to give all young Aboriginals the opportunity to participate fully as citizens, workers and voters; and to speed up the innovation in health care delivery. Taken together, they would contribute enormously to the sustainability of Canadian society.

These are all simmering issues; there is no crisis to provoke a First Ministers Meeting. There is no impetus to build the necessary partnership between federal, provincial, municipal and Aboriginal leaders, and to mobilize the strengths of the private sector and social actors. Yet time is passing quickly.

This procrastination is the essence of *unsustainability*. It allows societies to make choices that do compromise the ability of future generations to meet their needs. In sum, sometimes our greatest collective sins are sins of omission – the failure to act.

If you look at the programs and plans of the four Networks in the coming pages, you will see that our job at CPRN is to provide fresh ideas to help Canadians address these simmering issues and build a sustainable society. Our job is to see the connections across the many branches of government, disciplines of the university, and places of community action. We look beyond the immediate horizon, to help Canadians learn about and work through the big challenges. Like them, we wish to build a good society in a world of increasing resource constraints, intense competition, and growing interdependence across borders.

Individuals can influence the outcome. But public and private institutions have to respond to their call for action. Our collective will is needed in every case. Public policy has to respond.

Sustainability is a core idea to guide our decisions in every domain of our lives. It is the ethical challenge of our times.

Notes

- 1 Two examples. One unintended consequence of the government budget cuts of the early 1990s was a sustained increase in income inequality (after taxes and transfers) from 1995 onward. In earlier times, the decision to control oil prices after the first oil shock in 1973 led to a deterioration in Canada's competitive position because other countries adjusted their products and services more quickly to the need to conserve energy.
- 2 You will find it, for example, in the Annual Report of Alcan Aluminium Limited, in recent reports of the Auditor General for Canada, and as the opening chapter in the report of the Romanow Commission on the Future of Health Care in Canada.
- 3 Michael Rachlis has reported remarkable improvements in efficiency and service across a wide range of specific services delivered in specific places.
- 4 We also do our best to support our elders as well as our children and grand-children. But the interdependence goes beyond family ties. When an elderly person needs health or personal services, she will often need to turn to a much younger nurse, homemaker, taxi driver, etc. She, as much as any of us, has a need for safe streets, well-trained professionals, supportive community services, access to recreation, and so on.
- 5 At the beginning of the 21st century, we still do not have a systematic approach to child care (outside Quebec) or to elder care. Jane Jensen has documented the new social risks in two publications.

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