

# Measuring Quality of Life: The Use of Societal Outcomes by Parliamentarians

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# Acknowledgements

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# Parliamentary Librarian's Foreward

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In the late winter and early spring of 2001, the Library of Parliament asked the Centre for Collaborative Government to organize a series of three seminars that brought together parliamentarians, senior public servants and members of the policy community. The main goals were to explore the actual and potential political impact of societal indicators and outcomes, and quality-of-life measurement and reporting, and to assist parliamentarians who wished to use these new tools of governance for the 21st century more effectively.

The seminars were co-chaired by Carolyn Bennett, MP for St. Paul's, and John Williams, MP for St. Albert. The project rapporteur was Donald Lenihan, Director of the Centre for Collaborative Government. Bill Young, a Senior Analyst from the Parliamentary Research Branch, served as both an advisor and a contributor. Treasury Board Secretariat, the Auditor General's Office and Statistics Canada acted as co-sponsors of the series.

The following paper, written by the co-chairs with the assistance of the rapporteur and the Library, is based mainly on discussions and presentations from the roundtable process, but also draws on informal discussions between the authors, parliamentarians and other interested individuals engaged in the subject. This paper is a think-piece or discussion paper with the primary goals of providing a thoughtful primer on the topic of societal outcomes and measures for use by parliamentarians, and a basis for further discussion and debate on the topic among politicians, public servants and the broader policy community.

The paper is divided into three sections and two appendices. After considering and explaining the concept of a system of measurement for societal outcomes, the first section draws some conclusions about the implications for parliamentarians. The second section explores the trend to more horizontal government. It links the current interest in measuring societal outcomes to this trend and discusses the possible impact on representative government. The third section sketches out some key issues. Finally, Appendix 1 sets out some possible projects that parliamentarians could undertake to experiment with using societal outcomes and measures, while Appendix 2 lists the participants who attended the seminars.

I would like to thank the co-chairs, all the parliamentarians who shared the benefit of their insights, the other participants, and the Centre for Collaborative Government for its assistance in preparing this seminar series and this paper.

Richard Paré  
Parliamentary Librarian



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As co-chairs of the Library of Parliament's seminar series, *Measuring Quality of Life: The Use of Social Outcomes by Parliamentarians*, we approach the issue with very different, but complementary, perspectives. This is hardly surprising by virtue of the fact that we come with different roles and interests within Canada's Parliament. One of us chairs the House of Commons Standing Committee on Public Accounts, and is a member of the Official Opposition with an ongoing concern with public-service management. The other of us is Chair of the Sub-Committee on the Status of Persons with Disabilities and a member of the government party with a strong interest in social outcomes.

Yet, both of us believe that Canadians deserve the best lives possible and that our job as parliamentarians is to facilitate this goal. Both of us are also concerned that parliamentarians need to take an ongoing interest in the new tools of governance that are being used not just in Canada but also around the world. We want to avoid contributing to a situation where public servants working in the executive branch of government treat parliamentary interest and scrutiny of programs, policies and legislation as a minor process obstacle to their work. For us, good government involves identifying goals and outcomes, and finding out whether government activities have moved in the direction of making those objectives a reality. Government needs to report adequately and appropriately to Parliament on how it spends and what it has achieved—not just in the restricted silos most obviously represented by departmental structures, but also in the broader sphere of society as a whole. We know that Canadians do not measure their quality of life against departmental mission statements, but against whether their basic needs are met or exceeded.

These are the reasons why we agreed to collaborate in co-chairing the Library of Parliament's seminar series and in writing this report.

Finally, a word of caution is in order about the use of societal outcomes and indicators in political debate. Societal outcomes are long-term goals. Governments measure for the ones that reflect the vision of the society they hope to build. The fact that a government may fall short of achieving all the goals it has identified is not always a failing. Governments usually have many goals but limited resources. Choices must be made about where to invest—about which goals will be given priority. Our support for a measurement and reporting system based on societal outcomes and indicators should not be taken to imply that, when a government reports it has fallen short of a particular long-term goal, it automatically becomes a priority for resources. Societal indicators provide useful information about how programs and policies are performing; not where a government's priorities lie. That is a matter for political debate and decision making.

We would like to thank all of those who made presentations during the three seminars, particularly Dr. Geert Bouckaert of the Public Management Centre – Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, Belgium (see Appendix B for the full list of presenters and topics). In addition, we are grateful for the thoughtful contributions of our parliamentary colleagues in the House of Commons and the Senate. Finally, we know that this series would not have been possible without the work of Donald Lenihan of the Centre for Collaborative Government.

We would like to thank the Library of Parliament for providing the opportunity for us to gather and check our partisanship at the door so that we can explore together how best to ensure that Canadians have parliamentarians equipped to do the best possible job.

Carolyn Bennett, MP (St. Paul's)  
John Williams, MP (St. Albert)

# Measuring Quality of Life: Executive Summary

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This discussion paper is a think piece that emerges from a series of three seminars that brought together parliamentarians, senior public servants and members of the policy community. The paper seeks to explore the current and future political impact of societal indicators and quality-of-life measurement and reporting with a view to making these tools of governance more accessible to parliamentarians, and to bring about further discussion about these measures among politicians, public servants and the broader policy community.

The paper is divided into three sections and two appendices. The first section addresses the concept of a system of measurement for societal outcomes, and brings to the fore implications for parliamentarians. The second section looks at the trend towards more horizontal government, and links the measurement of societal outcomes to the growth in horizontal government. The third section examines some key issues that relate to measurement of societal outcomes and horizontality in government. Finally, the appendix posits some projects that parliamentarians could undertake to experiment with societal outcomes and measures.

Section one frames the discussion by looking at the gradual shift in government from process to results, from how policies and programs work to whether they work. The paper then defines societal outcomes as outcomes that result from many different factors, including government actions, private and voluntary sector initiatives, and individual decisions. Societal outcomes may include safer communities, a healthier population, a more educated community, or a cleaner environment.

Parliamentarians should have a role in facilitating discussions about what outcomes are desirable for citizens. Until now, the major players in the debate over societal outcomes have been results managers in central agencies, policy analysts of government departments, statisticians, program reformers outside government, and social activists within society. It is essential that parliamentarians become more aware of both different quantitative and qualitative indicators as well as subjective and objective approaches used by different groups in the debate to assist them to better perform their roles as public representatives, and to better track quality of life and societal measures. This will also allow parliamentarians to represent their constituents more effectively.

The shift to results-based measures creates the opportunity for elected representatives and citizens to participate more in the policy process. The choice of societal outcomes involves a commitment to values, and provides a transparent point of reference against which public debate can be framed. It could also lead to a better working relationship between politicians and public servants by breaking down the barrier of jargon between the two sides.

Section two is a discussion of horizontal government. In recent years, we have witnessed a shift from vertical command-and-control style of government to more horizontal government. The Strategic Social Plan of the Government of Newfoundland and Labrador is an example of the integration of economic policy development and social policy. The Strategic Social Plan sought to affect communities and individual well-being through social and economic investments. The Plan makes use of societal outcomes in the form of four overarching goals: vibrant communities, sustainable regions based on investing in people, self-reliant, healthy educated citizens, integrated evidence-based programs. They are all societal outcomes since they result from many causal factors from many sources, and together they provide an over-arching framework for social and economic programming. The Plan also developed a set of indicators, which were both qualitative and quantitative, the measure the implementation of the approach.

Newfoundland's initiative highlights the move to more horizontal planning and programs. The implications are that elected representatives become more involved in identifying outcomes, conducting public consultations at initial phases, assessing the progress of horizontal planning and programs, and suggesting modifications to plans by civil servants and other stakeholders. It changes the relationship between legislators, bureaucrats and citizens. It replaces the hierarchical governance structure with a horizontal one that involves greater collaboration between legislators and the bureaucracy, needed to integrate diverse policy areas and vertically separated tasks.

Section three brings to the fore a number of specific issues and opportunities regarding societal outcomes and horizontal government raised during the roundtables. One important issue is the question of whether to develop an overarching framework or vision statement of the society citizens seek to build, or to pursue a bottom-up framework for identifying policies and gaining consensus. Other issues related to how we know what is to be measured and why. What indicators should be looked at for measuring poverty, for example? Parliamentarians should be aware that there is no single perfect set of indicators, and that it should be kept in mind what can and cannot be measured by particular indicators.

A final issue relates to the fact that tracking societal outcomes is a long-term process, but parliamentarians work on short timelines. If they are to be re-elected they need to show measurable progress from election to election. But many projects that track societal outcomes will not pay dividends in this time. One participant suggested that if citizens were directly engaged in the process, they would have a clearer stake in it, and get politicians to gear their platform to maintaining the long-term progress.

Section three ends by pointing out that whereas societal indicators once were discussed in the context of bringing in value-free 'science' to politics and administration, today it is recognized that it is not possible to ignore subjective approaches and qualitative measures in looking at societal outcomes. There is no single best set of outcomes or indicators for measuring quality of life issues, but parliamentarians should strive to create fair, open, transparent and inclusive measures that respond to citizen needs and wishes.

Finally, Appendix 1 posits five options for further action on societal outcomes and indicators. First, one option is to try to contemplate an overarching framework of societal outcomes and indicators, involving parliamentarians and departmental officials. A second option is to conduct a survey of parliamentarians overall understanding and interest in the area. Third, a seminar series would be proposed to raise awareness among parliamentarians of results-based societal outcomes. Fourth, a pilot project on the government's Estimates process may be proposed. Fifth, a pilot on horizontal approach to committee work may be proposed. Appendix 2 lists the participants who attended the seminars.

### 1.1 The Shift to Results

Over the last two decades, Canadians have become less deferential to, and more sceptical about, government—the role it plays in their lives, the efficacy of its programs, the clarity and coherence of its objectives, the way tax dollars are spent.<sup>1</sup> As a consequence, elected representatives and parliamentary institutions have lost some of their legitimacy.

One way that parliamentarians and governments have responded to this has been to express growing concern about the need *to ensure and to demonstrate* that governments such as the Government of Canada make a crucial contribution to maintaining and improving the quality of life of Canadians. Over the last decade, this has resulted in a number of major reforms. A central theme running through them concerns a shift in the way that government plans, reports on and evaluates what it does. Inside government, this change is described as a shift in focus away from *process* and onto *results*, from *how* policies and programs work to *whether* they work. This shift in emphasis is part of a larger trend that has swept provincial and municipal governments across the country as well as most countries that are members of the Organization for Economic Development and Cooperation.

The principal goal of this roundtable process was to explore a particular aspect of this shift in focus and ask how it may affect the role of parliamentarians from two broad perspectives: as *representatives of the public* and as the *legislators and overseers of government business*. Specifically, it examined government's emerging interest in the use of *societal outcomes and indicators* and *quality-of-life (QoL) measurement and reporting*. These are recent developments that could have far-reaching consequences for public servants, parliamentarians and citizens alike.

**Societal outcomes are the result of many factors, including actions by various governments, the private and voluntary sectors, and individual decisions. Examples include safer communities, a healthier or more educated population, and a cleaner environment.**

### 1.2 Defining Societal Outcomes

According to a participant from the federal Treasury Board Secretariat (TBS), when governments refer to “societal outcomes,” “outcome” is being used as another word for “result,” as in the “outcome” of a program. When governments say that these outcomes are “societal,” they mean that no single political party, government or other agent is responsible for producing them. Societal outcomes are the result of many factors, including actions by various governments, the private and voluntary sectors, and individual decisions. Examples include safer communities, a healthier or more educated population, and a cleaner environment.

A recurring conclusion during the roundtable discussions was that parliamentarians should play a key role in facilitating discussions about outcomes among citizens, perhaps helping them to arrive at an overarching set of desirable societal outcomes, which would stand as a kind of vision of the society Canadians want to build.

Citizens and politicians tend to discuss public policy issues in language that closely resembles that of societal outcomes. For example, they may debate whether they want “a healthy and safe environment” more than they want “sustainable employment that results from major new industrial investment.” Roundtable participants seemed to agree that, from the point of view of citizens, such debates often do not turn over differences that would be settled by appeals to a high level of expertise. They are about *setting priorities when interpretations of key values differ and resources are limited*.

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Sex in the Snow: Canadian Social Values at the End of the Millennium, by Michael Adams.

Once a decision is reached about the outcomes that are to be pursued, policies and programs *contribute* to these broad objectives. The manner in which outcomes are defined reflects fundamental assumptions about their nature and causes. These are frequently not fully explored when outcomes are identified and policies and programs to achieve them are put in place. It is important to remember that “ends” are not the same as “means.” The debate over “ends” (outcomes) is a political debate that is different than a debate over “means” (i.e. frequently a debate over how resources should be allocated).

**For example, the objective of a “clean needle” program in Vancouver’s east end might be “to reduce the incidence of AIDS and hepatitis among the community’s drug users.” A societal outcome, on the other hand, would be “a healthier population” to which any particular program might (or might not) contribute.**

For example, the objective of a “clean needle” program in Vancouver’s east end might be “to reduce the incidence of AIDS and hepatitis among the community’s drug users.” A societal outcome, on the other hand, would be “a healthier population” to which any particular program might (or might not) contribute. A lower incidence of AIDS and hepatitis among drug users in Vancouver’s east end will in fact contribute to a healthier population. This sets the clean needle program in a larger context.

So when constituents tell their elected representatives that they want them to work toward a particular outcome, such as a safer city, they expect that the elected representative will help to develop, promote and support policies and programs that *are reasonably thought to contribute* to it. In addition, government backbenchers and opposition members are expected to help the public understand the rationale—or lack of it—behind specific programs and to establish that there is, or is not, a real link between these and the outcomes they are supposed to promote. It is important to remember that there is often a great deal of room for disagreement over whether program objectives themselves might “reasonably be expected” to contribute to societal outcomes.

Party platforms and promises during elections provide a good example of how the system works. Political parties work hard to convince the public that the policies and programs they are proposing will contribute *effectively* to the outcomes most desired by voters, such as a healthier population. In large part, the results of elections constitute citizens’ judgement on how well the platform reflects their values and priorities, and how convincingly the case has been made that the particular policies and programs in the platform will contribute effectively to them.

**Until now, politicians, and particularly parliamentarians, have been on the margins of this process. They have often found themselves largely in the position of having to react to conflicting uses of social statistics by others, without a clear understanding of the implications.**

### 1.3 Measuring for Quality of Life

At the present time, a wide range of groups with varying interests is trying to make more systematic and practical use of social statistics—each with its own particular purpose. Until now, politicians, and particularly parliamentarians, have been on the margins of this process. They have often found themselves largely in the position of having to react to conflicting uses of social statistics by others, without a clear understanding of the implications. The major players in this debate have been:

- **Results managers** in central agencies who are concerned about the way in which government reports on its activities to Parliament and to the public. This group is mainly interested in measurement and indicators as management tools.
- **Policy analysts** in government departments, academics and the voluntary sector who are trying to define a new social policy paradigm at the national level. This group uses the term “social audit” which reflects the use of measurement or indicators to increase public accountability for spending.
- **Statisticians** with roots in the earlier social indicator movement of the 1970s who are focused on the best ways of putting in place measurement itself. They are concerned that the best available statistics be collected and analyzed.
- **Program reformers** inside and outside government who propose, plan and deliver health and social-service programs. They want to use social statistics and measures to demonstrate the benefits of this programming in order to meet the requirements imposed by those who question the programs’ costs. In short, they want to show what works.

- **Social activists** who believe that the reduction of spending and government services will lead to lower levels of social well-being. This group seems to want a kind of social report card that monitors the reductions and links them to government decisions.

**Efforts to measure standard of living ignore so-called qualitative measures or indicators. For example, someone may have a high standard of living but be working odd hours, have no job security and suffer from life-threateningly high levels of stress. These will not be reflected in his or her standard of living.**

In the current circumstances, with the primary users of social statistics and measures heading in many different directions, parliamentarians need a better understanding of what is being alleged and by whom, as well as the necessary skills to put the information to their own uses in ways that assist them to perform their roles as public representatives, government scrutineers, and legislators. In this regard, our roundtables revealed two main approaches to how we define progress on social issues: quantitative and qualitative.

As one participant remarked, use of the phrase **quality of life** (QoL) can be compared and contrasted with the phrase “standard of living.” The latter is determined by quantitative measures, such as income levels, the cost of living and the rate of inflation. Efforts to measure standard of living ignore so-called qualitative measures or indicators. For example, someone may have a high standard of living but be working odd hours, have no job security and suffer from life-threateningly high levels of stress. These will not be reflected in his or her standard of living.

According to another participant, those who advocate using QoL measures hold that quantitative measures do not provide a complete enough picture of Canadian society. Policy makers need more information to make the right decisions. Although qualitative measures are less rigorous than the objective or quantitative ones, he concluded, there is much support in the public-policy community for the view that reliable and useful information on the broader condition of society can and should be collected.

In sum, an effort to track a society’s progress toward societal outcomes, such as wellness, an educated population or safer cities, involves the use of more than just objective or quantitative measures. It also requires the use of subjective or qualitative ones, based upon citizens’ perceptions—ideally, reflecting informed judgement—of how their personal well-being is affected by a variety of factors. So if we want to track our progress toward societal outcomes, then we must be prepared to measure for quality of life.

#### **1.4 Some Practical Implications**

**An effort to track a society’s progress toward societal outcomes, such as wellness, an educated population or safer cities, involves the use of more than just objective or quantitative measures.**

From the perspective of parliamentarians, this approach has very practical implications for their work and their ability to represent their constituents and Canadian citizens more effectively. Drawing on the roundtable presentations (especially those of Professor Bouckaert and the TBS) and discussions, we can outline a general approach to policy development, reporting and program evaluation that began to emerge from the sessions. The basic elements include:

- an identification of the broader societal outcomes to which policies and programs are supposed to contribute;
- a commitment to clearly identify the goals of individual policies and programs, along with reliable measures for assessing progress toward the goals and a clearly articulated chain of results;
- a reporting system that (a) faithfully reports program performance, (b) tracks longer-term progress toward key societal outcomes using both quantitative and qualitative measures, (c) identifies unintended impacts of laws, policies and programs, (d) clearly sets out roles and responsibilities of the various governmental actors, and (e) permits an evaluation of whether these actors have carried out their responsibilities;

- a willingness to review and openly debate the success of policies and programs at achieving their objectives in light of performance reports;
- a willingness to adjust policies and programs in light of such debates to achieve a better “fit” between the policy or program and its goals; and
- a means of making parliamentarians aware of unsatisfactory progress toward goals.

### 1.5 The Caveats

**The idea of developing a culture of learning based upon a frank admission of mistakes certainly struck participants as a good idea, but many were sceptical about the prospects for transforming the existing adversarial culture into one that learns from error.**

Two of the above points—debating the success of policies and adjusting them accordingly—were revisited on a number of occasions. Some wondered if this might be the Achilles’ heel of the approach. In essence, they were pointing out the importance of distinguishing political debate (value conflict) from a policy seminar aimed at rational, information-based, problem solving. Elected representatives of a government party (particularly those who are members of the executive) are, at present, extremely reluctant to admit publicly—let alone debate—weaknesses in their government’s policies and programs. They fear it will only bring on an unrelenting attack from the government’s critics. The idea of developing a *culture of learning* based upon a frank admission of mistakes certainly struck participants as a good idea but many were sceptical about the prospects for transforming the existing adversarial culture into one that learns from error.

Nevertheless, a few wondered whether reliable program and societal results information might help create a new dynamic in political debate, tying it more closely to a discussion of facts and evidence. Perhaps the current lack of such information, they suggested, encourages the adversarial culture in Parliament. If so, better information might temper the partisan tone and improve the prospects for focusing debate on the effectiveness of programs and policies.

### 1.6 What Does it Mean for Parliamentarians?

**Because the choice of societal outcomes involves commitments to values, there is a natural role for politicians and citizens in debating and choosing which ones will be on the list, striving to develop a set that is as reflective of society as possible.**

What implications do defining and measuring outcomes hold for the role of parliamentarians? Over the course of the project, several themes emerged.

First, the results-based approach *creates an opportunity for elected representatives and citizens to be involved more meaningfully in the policy process*. Because the choice of societal outcomes involves commitments to values, there is a natural role for politicians and citizens in debating and choosing which ones will be on the list, striving to develop a set that is as reflective of society as possible. A parliamentarian expressed it this way: It is the job of government to create a “societal project,” a vision of the society that citizens want. Politicians, as representatives, are good at teasing this sort of thing out; and they can bring pressure to bear on the political process to make it happen through, for example, informed committee work.

Second, in their role as overseers of government activities, a legitimate and well-managed system of *societal outcomes and indicators could provide parliamentarians with transparent and relatively objective points of reference against which to carry out public debate on the goals or effectiveness of programs and services*. This would contribute to improving the quality of parliamentary debate and to the ability of Parliament to perform its main task: holding government accountable for its commitments. The idea that performance information on societal outcomes and QoL would make government more accountable found wide acceptance among roundtable participants.

Third, *it could lay the foundation for a better working relationship between politicians and public servants*. Bureaucrats' approach to policy development is often closely linked to internal administrative and management concerns that may seem irrelevant to politicians. In addition, on more than one occasion we heard that the language of the public service—"bureaucratese"—is often impenetrable to politicians, and makes it difficult for them to understand what public servants are thinking, doing and why.

**Focusing on outcomes frees up some of the public service's attention from internal processes and shifts it outside the government machine—onto achieving results.**

A set of societal outcomes could help improve this situation. Focusing on outcomes frees up some of the public service's attention from internal processes and shifts it outside the government machine—onto achieving results. At the same time, using *societal* outcomes to define a context for assessing programs may help to break down the barrier of jargon and expertise by reconnecting the language of bureaucrats with the language of politicians. From the latter's viewpoint, this helps put the relationship back in the realm of the familiar. It clears a common space where politicians can "connect" with officials who develop policy, and design and deliver government services.

Fourth, recognition that issues increasingly cut across existing departmental and other boundaries means that the legislative and executive arms of government need new kinds of tools and information to do their job. *They need governance tools that are designed to provide "a whole-of-government perspective."* As we learned through the roundtable discussions, societal outcomes are one such tool. The idea of using them to come at the business of government in a more "horizontal" fashion gripped participants' attention early and held their attention throughout the process.

We opened this paper with a discussion of government's recent shift in emphasis from how policies and programs work to whether they work, from process to results. Then, at the end of the last section, we mentioned a different but related change: *the shift from more vertical to more horizontal planning and coordination*. A case study presented to roundtable participants by the Government of Newfoundland and Labrador on its Strategic Social Plan provides an illustration of how this could work in the overall context of a government.

The officials who attended the roundtable explained that their government now views social and economic policy development, planning and investment as parts of a single, integrated whole.

### 2.1 The Government of Newfoundland and Labrador's Strategic Social Plan <sup>2</sup>

According to the Government of Newfoundland and Labrador, the Strategic Social Plan represents a fundamental change in the way that this government plans, designs and delivers social and economic programs in the province. Previously, like most governments, it developed its programs in response to specific issues and from a relatively narrow perspective focussed on the activities of a particular department. The officials who attended the roundtable explained that their government now views social and economic policy development, planning and investment as parts of a single, integrated whole.

The Strategic Plan lays the foundation for an integrated or "horizontal" approach to policy development and a multisectoral approach to service delivery. We heard that the government formerly regarded social policy and programming as if these goals were distinct from those of regional and economic development. People were one public-policy target. Communities and the economy were another. The Strategic Plan calls for a basic shift in outlook so that government no longer plans and organizes too exclusively around such divisions. Government is a single, integrated whole so that on one hand, a community or region's people—its *human capital*—is its greatest *economic asset*, especially in a knowledge-based economy. On the other hand, economic development is a critical contributor to every individual's *well-being*. The two policies' fields are intertwined and the Plan is based on the premise that policy and program development should reflect this interconnection.

The new approach views social programs as an investment in human capital, and they are being designed to strengthen links between the community, its economy and the particular skills and resources of the people who live and work within it. Similarly, regional- and economic-development policies and programs should promote Newfoundlanders' well-being by helping to renew and develop the communities in which they live. The Plan is an effort to forge new policy, and program links between these previously separate policy fields.

In developing and articulating this overarching perspective, the Plan makes critical use of social outcomes, QoL measurement and indicators in a variety of ways:

First, the framework is composed of four overarching goals:

- I. Vibrant communities where people are actively involved.
- II. Sustainable regions based on strategic investment in people.

<sup>2</sup> For a description of the initiative, see *People, Partners and Prosperity: A Strategic Social Plan for Newfoundland and Labrador*, Government of Newfoundland and Labrador, 1998.

III. Self-reliant, healthy, educated citizens living in safe communities.

IV. Integrated and evidence-based policies and programs.

Each of these meets a test for “societal” outcomes: they are the result of many causes from many sources, not just the policies and programs of a particular government. Each of these goals also gives rise to a number of sub-goals. Together, these provide the overarching framework that is to guide the integration of social and economic policy and programming.<sup>3</sup>

Second, the Strategic Plan explicitly recognizes the need to monitor actions and assess the results in order to decide whether the desired outcomes are being achieved. To this end, the Plan has included a sophisticated tracking system called the Social Audit, which has two main purposes: (1) to make government more accountable; and (2) to provide key information for program and policy evaluation. The Plan calls for the development of a set of indicators to measure progress toward the overarching goals. These indicators measure long-term outcomes, aimed at answering questions such as:

- Has there been a reduction in social problems?
- Are communities becoming more stable and self-reliant?
- Has the level of people’s health, education and employment income improved?

The Plan puts a heavy emphasis on the use of partnerships of all kinds in implementing the new approach. Partnerships are seen as a key mechanism for achieving a more horizontal approach to policy development and service delivery.

Finally, it should be noted that the initiative began with the creation of a Social Policy Advisory Committee to conduct public consultations throughout the province. The Committee was made up of fourteen independent volunteers from various regions, backgrounds and interests.

**The new horizontal approach is designed to forge new linkages between social and economic policy and programming and, in the process, to make government more responsive and more accountable to the public—at the same time that it gives the public a more direct role in governance.**

Summing up, Newfoundland’s Strategic Plan moves the government away from a system that is now regarded as too “vertical” and toward one that is more “horizontally organized.” The old approach maintained a clearer separation between various parts and functions of government. The new horizontal approach is designed to forge new linkages between social and economic policy and programming and, in the process, to make government more responsive and more accountable to the public—at the same time that it gives the public a more direct role in governance.

## **2.2 Realigning Representative Government**

The Newfoundland initiative highlights a government’s effort to become more horizontal at the policy and planning levels. However, it should be clear from the closing paragraphs of section 2.1 that the government is also committed to more horizontal governance through consultations with citizens, and to more horizontal service delivery through partnerships of various kinds with the private and voluntary sectors.

<sup>3</sup> The Plan does not propose or consider specific changes to individual programs. It provides an overarching or whole-of-government perspective. Each department is expected to make appropriate adjustments to its own programs to make them fit more closely with the broad goals and directions the Plan sets out for the whole of government.

This new approach has some important implications for the work of parliamentarians, particularly in ensuring that accountability for plans such as Newfoundland and Labrador's remain with the legislatures. Elected representatives could become involved in identifying the outcomes by conducting public consultations at the initial phase of any such planning exercise. They could also assess the progress of such a plan in seeing whether it is truly horizontal in its marriage of economic and social goals by holding government departments accountable for its implementation. They could, for example, suggest modifications by identifying successes in one area that could be copied elsewhere.

**The use of societal outcomes and indicators not only reinforces the trend to horizontal government, but also appears to realign the basic relationship between legislators, bureaucrats and citizens.**

Some participants were inclined to stand back and consider these changes from a more abstract standpoint. Their comments suggest that the use of societal outcomes and indicators not only reinforces the trend to horizontal government, but also appears to realign the basic relationship between legislators, bureaucrats and citizens. In short, they have the potential of changing some of the practices of representative government. We can see why by expanding on an observation made at one of the roundtables. A public servant noted that the discussions often shifted back and forth between two different ways of using societal outcomes and indicators: one, to make government more accountable; and two, to provide key information for program and policy evaluation. He went on to point out that, while accountability is a *governance* issue, program evaluation is largely a *management* issue.

What is the difference? Why does it matter? Elected officials see their task as governance—about deciding *what* government will do—and about setting priorities and making policy. This contrasts with the job of bureaucrats who, as managers, perform the “doing” part of government. In their jargon, a “management decision” is one about how to do something. If taxes are to be collected, for example, there are many ways of getting the job done. The bureaucrat's task is to find an efficient and effective one, while respecting other government priorities and citizens' rights.

**This process of reporting, debating, learning and adjusting is iterative. Over the long term, should significantly contribute to the improvement of governance—the parliamentarian's task. An effective set of societal outcomes and indicators could become a very powerful instrument of long-term governance.**

Participants agreed that, on one hand, identifying societal outcomes and indicators is essentially a political act because it involves making important choices about values and priorities—the “what” of government—that managers are not authorized to make. As statistics about societal outcomes are reported, the results become a key focus for deliberation and debate over the success of a government's policies. This should make it more accountable. Moreover, it should also provide the basis for a debate over how policies can be improved; which, in turn, should influence the direction and shape of parliamentary deliberations that should have an impact on the government's overall agenda and approach. Finally, this process of reporting, debating, learning and adjusting is iterative. Over the long term, it should significantly contribute to the improvement of governance—the parliamentarian's task. An effective set of societal outcomes and indicators could become a very powerful *instrument of long-term governance*. Bureaucrats and politicians therefore agreed that legislators should be assigned a key role in its design and maintenance.

On the other hand, most participants also recognized that, like Newfoundland's Social Audit, such a system could become a vital source of information on program performance. If good management requires good program evaluation and, ultimately, learning and improvement, such a system would be a huge asset. However, this suggests that a system of societal outcomes and measurement is not just an instrument of governance but also an important new management tool. If so, the task of designing and using it well will involve important technical challenges. “Getting it right” will require the input of specialists with the relevant policy or program expertise, as did the development, refinement and use of the data systems of the 20th century.

As one public servant observed, participants' discussion of societal outcomes did indeed flit back and forth between two quite different visions of the system they were considering: sometimes they tended to regard it as a management tool and, at others, as an instrument of long-term governance. *This ambivalence points to an important consequence of the trend to horizontal government—and another way in which the existing vertical system of government, designed over two centuries ago, cannot meet the demands of the 21st century.*

Although they are both part of the 'old' system, legislators and bureaucrats perform their respective tasks without much contact with each other. Indeed, the practice of modern representative government has evolved around what has become an almost universally acknowledged division of public labour: in extremely general terms, legislators concern themselves with high-level policy making and public servants with implementation. The model—in highly simplified form—works something like this:

- (1) Citizens elect representatives who have taken positions on outcomes, and the policies and programs to achieve them, in their party platforms.
- (2) The executive determines a government's priorities, and proposes policies, programs and expenditures to achieve them.
- (3) Elected representatives then debate and either ratify or do not ratify these government priorities, and expenditures.
- (4) The public service then implements the policies by creating programs and services that reflect them.
- (5) Citizens receive the programs and services and pass judgement on how their needs are met by re-electing or defeating their representatives.

In this model, the flow of decision making and action is from citizens to elected officials, to public servants, and back to citizens.

**The shift to horizontal government should reverse the trend. It can reconnect citizens, legislators and bureaucrats through the use of "new tools," such as societal indicators, that force managers and legislators to take a more holistic view of government.**

Over the centuries, the vertical structure of government has reinforced this "linear" approach to governance to the point where it is now systemically and culturally entrenched. The shift to horizontal government should reverse the trend. It can reconnect citizens, legislators and bureaucrats through the use of "new tools," such as societal indicators, that force managers and legislators to take a more holistic view of government.

If existing governments want to design and use such systems, they must revise the traditional view that governance and management, or policy making and implementation are such distinct tasks. *Collaboration between the executive and legislative arms of government is essential to the effective design and use of such systems.*

Moreover, as the Newfoundland case shows, the development of a system of societal outcomes and indicators, and QoL measurement could also enhance the *democratic* aspects of the governance triangle by creating a more *inclusive* approach. *Citizen engagement with their elected representatives is essential to legitimacy.* Participants were virtually unanimous in their view that a discussion of the contents and design of such a long-term governance system should involve citizens. At issue is nothing less than the vision of their society. If it is true that managers lack the legitimate democratic authority to make broad governance decisions without political involvement, it is equally true that legislators should not seek to introduce such fundamental changes to the system of governance without consulting citizens.

**The relationship between all three parties needs to become more interactive and engaged—more collaborative. This will take more than new tools and processes. It will take a change in culture.**

The roundtables repeatedly discussed how a horizontal model of government might affect the roles of parliamentarians, bureaucrats and citizens. If this model is correct, the general answer is that the relationship between all three parties needs to become more interactive and engaged—more collaborative. This will take more than new tools and processes. It will take a change in culture.

Participants clearly did not reject the vertically organized system of government (with separate departments and agencies functioning with their own mandates) in favour of a horizontal one organized around issues. Because participants recognized that these choices are not mutually exclusive, no one said: “Horizontal good, vertical bad!” Rather, the existing system is too narrowly vertical and new tools and instruments are needed that help legislators and managers work more effectively across departments and their vertical boundaries.

A majority of participants were optimistic that governments’ use of societal outcomes and indicators could make an important contribution. Ideally, these would be put in place as part of an evolving horizontal system of government that reintegrates diverse policy areas and re-engages the vertically separated tasks of management and governance. Such a system would provide a long-term, whole-of-government perspective that overarches and complements the vertical one.

### **2.3 Some Related Experience**

(i) The disability file

The discussions of the challenges for parliamentarians in dealing with horizontal government were practical as well as philosophical. In particular, Roundtable 3 focused attention on a number of experiences, past and present, where Parliament has experimented with a more horizontal approach. These presentations helped demonstrate that coordination of the design and delivery of related programs increases their overall effectiveness. Indeed, these days, most commentators regard that as a simple and uncontentious principle of good management. As a result, the need to *coordinate horizontally* is also fast becoming a central theme of contemporary governance.

**A key challenge, lies in respecting vertical accountabilities while devising effective ways to coordinate across boundaries and report on overall progress. Societal outcomes and measures are important tools for this task.**

Deborah Carson-Tunis, Director, Social Policy Development Group, Human Resources Development Canada (HRDC), remarked that improved information-sharing has drawn attention to the scattered nature of disability programs across many departments and governments. A key challenge, she told participants, lies in respecting vertical accountabilities while devising effective ways to coordinate across boundaries and report on overall progress. Societal outcomes and measures are important tools for this task. For example, HRDC is already using them to develop a *collective reporting* system on disability.

Because federal objectives in the area of disability are multiple and varied, she observed that the identification of key societal outcomes must reflect the government’s objectives in the area. Departments from across the federal government (and, ideally, the provinces) with programs and related results commitments that contribute to the objectives will then be required to report on progress. Taken together, the reports should provide a horizontal “snapshot” of how the entire ensemble is performing. This, in turn, should help parliamentarians and managers assess where adjustments, new programs or greater coordination is needed.

Parliament is already engaged on the disability file and, Tunis noted, it has made an effective contribution to better coordination on at least four fronts: committees and task forces, advocating for the rights of the disabled, engaging the disability community, and holding governments to account for their commitments. She pointed out that the Auditor General’s Office has praised Parliament for its involvement in serving as a structure to ensure horizontal coordination across the

departments with programs that have an impact on disability. She suggested that this kind of scrutiny puts pressure on officials to perform. And in fact, the federal government's initiative to establish a set of disability-related outcome measures and indicators came about as the result of recommendations by a sub-committee of the House of Commons.

Notwithstanding Parliament's work, however, Tunis warned that major challenges face those attempting to put in place greater horizontal coordination on the disability file. For one thing, key results commitments need to be more closely linked with societal outcomes. Much analytical work to establish both quantitative and qualitative indicators to measure these outcomes remains to be done. Secondly, if collective reporting is to become an effective horizontal tool, data gaps must be filled. Finally, more systematic and consistent data is needed to measure societal outcomes. Parliament could play a key role in helping to meet all three challenges by consulting the disability community and other citizens, by promoting a horizontal approach among federal departments, by monitoring their progress, and by recommending further action where required.

#### (ii) The parliamentary context

**In the past, Parliament has dealt more successfully with horizontal issues than it has today. In the early 1980s, parliamentary committees that studied horizontal issues produced "blockbuster reports and studies."**

Bill Young from the Library of Parliament presented an analysis and historical perspective of Parliament's past experiences with horizontal committee work. What has worked? What hasn't worked? Why?

In the past, Parliament has dealt more successfully with horizontal issues than it has today. In the early 1980s, parliamentary committees that studied horizontal issues produced "blockbuster reports and studies." that required many years to complete and produced a large number of recommendations for government action. They often served as benchmarks for years to come. Later, from the mid-1980s to early 1990s, another wave of horizontal parliamentary committee studies appeared—partly as a result of the fact that of the 26 House of Commons standing committees, many had mandates that were horizontal in nature.

Today, the mandates of many of these committees have been fused and the committees themselves amalgamated. One consequence is that few committees today are clearly focused on horizontal issues. The current mandates of House of Commons standing committees tends to mirror the vertical structure of government and are therefore restricted in dealing with issues that fall within the scope of a single department. The major exceptions are the sub-committees on Children and Youth at Risk, and the Status of Persons with Disabilities.

**Why is there renewed interest in horizontal issues now? In part, it is a result of the environment in which committees operate.**

Why is there renewed interest in horizontal issues now, he asked? In part, it is a result of the environment in which committees operate. For example, if the economic climate is good, support for broader more comprehensive (i.e. horizontal) studies grows. By the same token, support for them decreases in times of economic restraint. Dr. Young provided an interesting and provocative summary of some key considerations that contribute to the vertical focus of committees:

- By focusing on a particular horizontal issue, a committee study and recommendations promoted citizens' expectations that this issue had a priority in the parliamentary or government agenda. Because governments are generally disinclined to create such expectations, they tend to shy away from encouraging the establishment of committees with a mandate to deal with horizontal issues or supporting other committees that want to undertake horizontal studies.

- Committees are limited in their ability to conduct inquiries about the effectiveness of government policy and programs, particularly if these have implications for several departments. If a minister is unavailable to meet with a parliamentary committee, no one else will provide committee members with the state of thinking about a horizontal issue.

**Government organization does not contribute to an easy treatment of horizontal issues by parliamentary committees. Department amalgamation has also contributed to the vertical trend. For example, HRDC is made up of pieces from six former departments. Where previously there were six committees, now there is only one with a huge and conflicting mandate.**

- By the time legislation is sent to committees, key decision-makers have usually made up their minds. Negotiations on significant issues may be all but complete so that discussion from that point onwards is only over technical details. A broader approach could complicate the process, say, by raising new or unexpected questions. The more narrowly the committee is focused, the easier it is to keep discussion under control.
- Government organization does not contribute to an easy treatment of horizontal issues by parliamentary committees. Department amalgamation has also contributed to the vertical trend. For example, HRDC is made up of pieces from six former departments. Where previously there were six committees, now there is only one with a huge and conflicting mandate.
- Horizontal committees of the past had a reputation for advocacy and, in particular, of becoming the spokespersons of “single-issue” interest groups. As a result, many felt that the focus and quality of their work was inconsistent. At the same time, there was no authoritative way to measure their achievements

If MPs wish to become more horizontally focused in their work, Young advised, they face a series of challenges:

- Who sets the *committee agenda*? Efforts to explore a horizontal issue might work best if the issue is already a government priority, such as disability or child poverty. But how often are such priorities really the right issues to be looking at? How can MPs get other horizontal issues on the agenda?

**Horizontal issues require horizontal solutions. Because governments are organized vertically, horizontal issues raise hard questions about roles and responsibilities: Who should make a decision to act? Who should respond? Who manages coordination? Who can put an end to interdepartmental wrangling?**

- **Accountability:** Horizontal issues require horizontal solutions. Because governments are organized vertically, horizontal issues raise hard questions about roles and responsibilities: Who should make a decision to act? Who should respond? Who manages coordination? Who can put an end to interdepartmental wrangling?
- **Departmental structures:** The main thrust of departments is vertical. There is thus an inherent conflict between the approach of horizontal committees and that of departmental committees, which, like the departments they examine, are vertically organized. How can existing committees get a mandate or the legitimacy to explore issues that cut across a number of departments?
- Even where *horizontal coordination* is on the table, it is *often ineffective*. If interdepartmental planning sessions are attended by junior staff with no real power, these tend to be downgraded to information sessions.

As participants worked their way through the broader themes of the project, such as horizontality, a number of more specific issues were raised and considered. This section sketches some of those that caught and held participants' attention, and which merit further consideration and work to be undertaken.

### 3.1 Assessing the Ideological Barriers

When participants began to explore how to put measures in place, a key set of questions around the legitimacy of various models surfaced repeatedly. Must the contents of such a system reflect a broad public and/or political consensus for the system to be legitimate? How free of controversial ideological commitments could/should it be? Must a system that is designed to apply to the whole of society have the support of the whole of society? Will politicians with differing views of society reach any agreement about what should be included, given that politics involves conflict over values?

Participants in the roundtables considered several models for using societal outcomes. The one most widely discussed was the *Overarching Framework*. Building on this model, a single set of overarching, government-wide outcomes would be selected as a kind of "vision statement" of the society citizens seek to build, along with indicators to track the community's progress toward its realization. The model has already been alluded to several times in this paper.

A similar but less comprehensive model is often referred to as the report card. It functions much as the overarching framework but its scope is more limited. A report card is usually designed to apply to a specific policy field such as health, labour-market development, or the environment—or some part of it, such as hospital services. The outcomes that are chosen reflect the broad values and goals that the government hopes to realize in the area. Regular reports on progress toward the outcomes should serve as a kind of "report card" on the government's progress in the area. For example, the Government of Ontario has recently proposed that such a system be used in the field of education. This proposal has aroused a considerable share of controversy and criticism. The Government of Canada and the provinces have agreed that they will report on the state of health care in Canada, by jurisdiction, by September 2002. The federal Treasury Board Secretariat has for several years provided an annual report on progress toward key outcomes using a framework of societal indicators.

Participants were unclear about the prospects for securing high levels of support for either system from members of different political parties. Sometimes the outlook was optimistic, at others it was decidedly less so. Any ambivalence followed a pattern: the more practical the discussion, the more likely participants were to express optimism. For example, exchanges over whether a report card that would be widely supported could be created in an area such as disability seemed to proceed with a relatively high level of consensus. On the other hand, the more abstract such discussions became, particularly on the overarching framework, the more likely participants were to drift into ideological debates that threatened to divide them along those lines.

**Some felt that an effort to build consensus has a better chance if the discussion starts from an examination of some area, such as disability.**

Two lessons are suggested by these observations. First, some felt that an effort to build consensus has a better chance if the discussion starts from an examination of some area, such as disability. This would take into account the agreement on starting with something practical, but it also would recognize that those with different ideological viewpoints have a high level of consensus about the government's obligation to level the playing field for those confronted by situations that are not of their own making. In this view, the framework should be built from the "bottom up" in "bite-sized" pieces where practical and ideological differences converge. Not everyone shared this view, however.

Second, perhaps the project of developing an overarching framework involves making a choice between including, on one hand, contents that are very general but that can win broad support; and, on the other, contents that are more substantive but that involve controversial choices about values and priorities. Many participants felt that the second option was the right choice but that, because of the controversial content, *such a system must be the result of a process that is open, transparent, accountable, inclusive and fair*. In this view, democratic politics is about making controversial public-policy choices in a way that is acceptable even to those whose preferences have been rejected. It is about ensuring legitimacy. Such a system, if it is to involve controversial choices, must be the result of such a process.

### **3.2 What Should be Measured?**

**For example, measuring poverty in terms of income or basic needs, implies particular indicators for establishing base lines and monitoring progress. If poverty is viewed, however, from a human-capabilities perspective that focuses on expanding people's opportunities, other indicators, with other implications for policies and programmes, would flow from this perspective.**

Because the issues of measuring social outcomes are complex, it is important to have a clear understanding of what basic premises underlie the measurement of a particular social issue. These premises will determine the indicators that are chosen as well as the policy and program implications. *Know what you are measuring, and why*. For example, measuring poverty in terms of income or basic needs, implies particular indicators for establishing base lines and monitoring progress. If poverty is viewed, however, from a human-capabilities perspective that focuses on expanding people's opportunities, other indicators, with other implications for policies and programmes, would flow from this perspective.

Should indicators look at individuals or take an aggregate perspective and measure each community? How can indicators distinguish between inputs or "means" or others that measure basic outcomes or "ends"? Given that "inputs" are easily selected and changes can be perceived relatively rapidly while "ends" tend to change relatively slowly over time, what is the nature of the timeframe that should be used to look at the nature of change? Should indicators be used on their own or in a composite form (i.e. an index)?

The question of combining indicators into an index requires several words of warning. It is generally agreed that composite indicators or indices can be useful for comparing general trends across countries as well as for advocacy or research. This is the rationale behind the Human Development Index prepared by the United Nations. At the same time, it is appropriate to question the extent to which an index can be used within a country without close attention to the information given by each indicator that is part of the index. In the case of a country, or parts of a country, it may, for example, be more useful to disaggregate the information in the indicators by gender, age, ethnicity and location. This would provide better information to find out how specific groups or regions are doing compared to the population as a whole.

In addition, there is a tendency to assume that a composite index captures more information than it actually does. Changing the weight assigned to the various indicators can alter the ultimate ranking in any index. This relates to the use of an overarching framework as discussed in section 3.1. Merging indicators into an index allows averaging out but it also means using a small number of indicators because of methodological problems. For example, the Human Development Index (HDI) measures three aspects of a country's achievements. These are: *longevity* which is measured by life expectancy at birth; *knowledge* which is a combination of the adult literacy rate and the combined enrolment at all levels of education (primary, secondary, university) and *standard of living* or gross domestic product (GDP) per capita. Many other elements of human development, however, are omitted from the HDI, and it is an error to assume that the HDI captures human development in its entirety.

**If measurement of outcomes is accepted as a tool of governance, however, it is important for parliamentarians to recognize that the arguments over methodology can become endless and that no methodology or set of indicators is entirely perfect.**

If measurement of outcomes is accepted as a tool of governance, however, it is important for parliamentarians to recognize that the arguments over methodology can become endless and that no methodology or set of indicators is entirely perfect. *It is important not just to understand what information a particular set of indicators conveys but also to know what it does not convey.*

### **3.3 Citizen Engagement**

If the development of a system of societal outcomes and indicators implies a central role for parliamentarians, it also opens the door to engaging citizens directly in a discussion of the kind of framework they believe most adequately reflects the society they want to build.

Involving citizens, however, raises several questions: Who should engage citizens— parliamentarians acting individually, parliamentary committees, government departments, central agencies of government, non-government organizations, arms' length third parties? Who should interpret the result of consultation with citizens? What are the implications for representative government? Who will be responsible for ensuring that this consultation has some meaning and is fed into outcome measures and their ultimate use in modifying policies and programs?

Participants discussed the prospects for MP-led constituency forums and other public-consultation processes where citizens could discuss and develop such views. Participants also heard about initiatives by which non-governmental organizations such as the Canadian Policy Research Networks or the Canadian Council on Social Development were connecting with citizens for such discussions. In general, participants seemed to agree that societal outcomes provided a welcome opportunity to bring parliamentarians and citizens more directly into the policy debate and thought that more work needed to be done on exploring how to capitalize on this opportunity.

### **3.4 Government vs. Non-Governmental Sector**

The group assembled for the roundtables included more than just legislators and bureaucrats. Representatives from the voluntary sector, academia and a number of public-policy organizations also attended. Several of those from the third sector were involved in projects for societal outcome measurement of their own. At least one group, the Canadian Policy Research Networks, has been engaged in a public consultation process to develop a prototype of an overarching framework for Canadians.<sup>4</sup> Sandra Zagon, Manager of the Quality of Life Indicators Project at CPRN, presented the results of the process to the group.

<sup>4</sup> See Indicators of Quality of Life in Canada: A Citizens' Prototype, April 2001, Canadian Policy Research Networks, [www.cprn.org](http://www.cprn.org).

**Even if we assume that, as a result of a full and open public consultation, parliamentarians, government and a third-sector organization would arrive at the same societal vision, would the different uses to which they might be put by the two organizations naturally lead to the inclusion of different content?**

This raised the issue of possible differences in uses of such systems between the public and third sectors. If both are instruments of governance and management tools, it is reasonable to assume that the management needs of government may be different from those of a voluntary or research organization. The situation is further complicated by a recognition that the needs of parliamentarians may, in fact, also lie somewhere between the other two. This poses a number of questions: Even if we assume that, as a result of a full and open public consultation, parliamentarians, a government and a third-sector organization would arrive at the same societal vision, would the different uses to which they might be put by the two organizations naturally lead to the inclusion of different content? If so, how different might such frameworks need to be to meet the respective management needs of the different sectors? What conclusions, if any, should we draw from this about how such systems should be developed or how they should be used in public debate? Does it mean that governments should design their own systems to suit their own internal needs, the needs of parliamentarians, or the non-governmental sector? Or, perhaps, such systems should be designed by a coalition of parliamentary, governmental and non-governmental organizations? Could it be that we need a plurality of such systems for different purposes?

**A key question in defining any new relationships that result from measuring outcomes becomes finding a way to countervail the power that the bureaucrats will gain from their key position in any new system of outcome measurement.**

### **3.5 Information Overload**

While participants expressed optimism over the increasingly sophisticated data that technology can provide, they also showed concern over the possibility that governments—and especially Members of Parliament—could easily be overwhelmed. MPs could be unprepared or unable to sift through an ocean of data. Because of this, a new approach to measuring outcomes and putting in place social indicators potentially places a huge degree of power in the hands of the bureaucrats: they will have a very large hand in defining the issues and sifting through, preparing and presenting information provided to politicians. A key question in defining any new relationships that result from measuring outcomes becomes finding a way to countervail the power that the bureaucrats will gain from their key position in any new system of outcome measurement.

Participants seemed to agree that, if governments are to develop and use societal indicators, a close working relationship must be forged between public servants who design the systems and MPs who will receive and use the reports they generate. This collaboration is critical to ensure that such reports are not only reliable, but succinct, relevant and user friendly. Over the last five years, as a public servant pointed out in a later exchange, a number of specific initiatives have been launched aimed at exploring with elected officials how to make the reporting system more streamlined, relevant and user friendly. Indeed, since 1995 TBS has been involved in a major initiative, entitled “Improved Reporting to Parliament,” aimed at reforming the way that the government presents information to parliamentarians. As a result, a number of significant changes have been made to the system, including a major overhaul of Part 3 of the Estimates.

The official warned that general comments of the sort that reports should be shorter, more streamlined, user friendly or relevant, provide little guidance to public officials charged with improving the system. It is often very hard to know which changes will be viewed as improvements in this direction and which will not. Officials need more specific direction. This, in turn, means that elected officials must be prepared to take the time to become better acquainted with existing modes of reporting so that they can provide such guidance.

As Professor Bouckaert made clear in his presentation, an important key to improving things in the future rests on a strengthening of the relationship of supply and offer between politicians and bureaucrats. Bureaucrats are expected to respond to changes in demand from the politicians, but the demand must be reasonable in scope, clear and focused. Developing such a relationship in the context of a new system of societal outcomes and indicators will require a significant effort on both sides to develop the kind of mutual understanding and respect that is needed.

**Tracking a society's progress toward certain societal outcomes is a long-term process. Significant progress is unlikely to be recorded over relatively short periods of time. But, as more than one participant reminded us, parliamentarians work on comparatively short timelines. If they are to be re-elected, they need to show measurable progress from election to election, a period of roughly four years.**

### **3.6 Short-Term Political Interest vs. Long-Term Planning**

A further difficulty associated with developing a societal outcome system is as follows. Tracking a society's progress toward certain societal outcomes is a long-term process. Significant progress is unlikely to be recorded over relatively short periods of time. But, as more than one participant reminded us, parliamentarians work on comparatively short timelines. If they are to be re-elected, they need to show measurable progress from election to election, a period of roughly four years. If the development of policies and programs that will promote larger goals requires longer periods of time to pay dividends, isn't this a major disincentive for politicians to invest much time and energy in making the system work? What happens when a government is defeated and the new government assigns a different priority to various outcomes, policies and programs?

Participants had various reactions to this. Some thought it was a powerful argument against such a system—certainly not something to be lightly dismissed. Others thought that the situation could be addressed. For example, one participant reminded us of the distinction between program outcomes and the broader societal ones. He underlined that program objectives are often not long-term. So politicians can reap the benefits of good program performance in the shorter term, while still gaining public recognition for their efforts to line these up convincingly with the overarching or long-term ones.

Another participant remarked that, if citizens were directly engaged in the development of such a system, they would have a clearer stake in it and a better understanding of what is required to make it work. As a result, they might expect politicians to propose policies and programs that would contribute to the societal outcomes. For their part, politicians would benefit from being seen to be trying to make the system work. This would create the incentive for them to work for long-term progress.

### **3.7 Why Are There Data Gaps and What Can We Do About Them?**

As one official in the process noted, the more attention that is paid to the horizontal aspects of governance, the clearer it is that there are significant gaps in the information base. "Why is this?" she asked. "Why are there such gaps in the data?"

**The idea of a national health report card has raised concerns with more than one provincial government. What happens if provincial indicators are not comparable or are not accessible.**

If the question seemed innocuous at first, on reflection it encouraged a serious probing of some issues and pointed us in directions that need further exploration. For one thing, some gaps may be intentional. For example, federal and provincial governments are engaged in discussions on how to measure performance and report on results in a variety of areas where both levels of government are active. There may be concerns on the part of one level that making information available on its performance in that area exposes it to criticism or unfavourable comparisons with other governments. The idea of a national health report card has raised such concerns with more than one provincial government. What happens if provincial indicators are not comparable or are not accessible (for example, kept in doctors' files or school board records at the individual or local level)?

A second reason for the existence of gaps may be that, in some places, the information has never been gathered or assembled. One of the interesting things about looking at issues more horizontally is that it draws attention to important aspects of an issue that may have been hitherto unnoticed. We may find that data has never been collected because no one really looked at the issue this way before. In addition, there is always the temptation to succumb to the pressure for simplicity and neatness. Some indicators involve considerable expense to collect data while others force consideration of conflicting information that makes a "neat" conclusion difficult or impossible.

As governments become more horizontal they will surely find that new information is needed. We should again recall Professor Bouckaert's comments on the relationship of supply and offer. Perhaps standing committees that begin work on horizontal issues will help bring such gaps in the information base to light (demand) so that the bureaucrats can work on filling them (offer).

**The prospect of gathering and assembling high-grade data on a wide range of outcomes, while still a major challenge, is no longer an overwhelming one.**

As we move into the first decade of the third millennium, current information and communications technologies (ICTs) have advanced far beyond what was available in the '70s and '80s. As Professor Bouckaert noted in his presentation, the prospect of gathering and assembling high-grade data on a wide range of outcomes, while still a major challenge, is no longer an overwhelming one. Moreover, that capacity can be expected to increase exponentially in coming years. Over the next decade, sophisticated new data-collection and measurement systems will come online that will allow governments to clear what may have been the single biggest hurdle for societal outcomes in the 1970s: accumulating enough relevant data to track them, and then integrating it into high-quality, useable information.

### **3.8 Using Societal Outcomes for Results-Based Coordination and Collaboration**

**For parliamentarians there can be a downside to this. It can muddy the lines of responsibility for results so that no department or agency can be seen as having a clear and unchallenged obligation to act or to take responsibility for consequences. Who takes charge of the coordination function?**

We've seen throughout this report that the issue of horizontal coordination loomed large in the discussions. We have also seen that a measurement system for societal indicators can be helpful in promoting such coordination. By adopting government-wide outcomes and performance indicators, each government, sector, department or section is supposed to contribute to a greater focus, integration and coordination of the entire system. If individual departments pursue common goals, adopt the same performance indicators, and use the evaluation results to streamline, focus and improve their own policies and programs, a natural integration and coordination of activity should result.

For parliamentarians there can be a downside to this. It can muddy the lines of responsibility for results so that no department or agency can be seen as having a clear and unchallenged obligation to act or to take responsibility for consequences. Who takes charge of the coordination function? Who ensures that resources are available? How can the results be put at the forefront so that the process of coordination does not take precedence as an end in itself?

An interesting consequence of this approach is that it spreads the task of coordination around the system and, at the same time, encourages some decentralization with respect to making policy, and program design and delivery. This departs from the traditional view that system-wide coherence is most effectively achieved from the top down by central authorities such as treasury boards, cabinet secretariats or departments of finance which shape and maintain a system of government through a combination of policy directives, rules and regulations. The old model requires a considerable centralization of policy-making authority that, notoriously, is controlled by a small group of policy experts. In contrast, the new decentralized approach allows for greater flexibility in policy making, program design, and service-delivery methods.

How effectively might this approach to horizontal coordination be applied in key areas, including the relationship between central agencies and line departments, intergovernmental relations, and the management of partnerships between government and the private or third sectors? Much work remains to be done in developing and testing the model to see how powerful it is and how promising it may be as an alternative to the traditional, centralized, command-and-control model. Parliamentary committees could follow this up.

### 3.9 Improving Parliamentary Debate: Between the Ideological and the Anecdotal

Throughout most of the history of Parliament, debates over the merits of various government policies and programs fall into two broad categories: *anecdotal* and *ideological*.

Anecdotal arguments rely on the use of specific examples to show that a policy or program did (or did not) perform well. For example, if a member were assessing an infrastructure program, he might cite specific reports from constituents who in various ways were (or were not) served well by the program. This would count as evidence for (or against) it.

In contrast, ideological arguments are general in nature and application. For example, if a minister were defending a policy of tax cuts, he might argue that lower taxes provide a stronger incentive to work, which in turn leads to greater productivity and hence greater overall wealth. The argument turns on a number of unproven assumptions about the connections between income levels, motivation and productivity. These assumptions may be right or wrong. The argument's power lies in the speaker's ability to convince the listener of the validity of such general and unproven claims.

From the standpoint of public-policy debate, the weakness of anecdotal arguments is that they generalize about the overall performance of a program based on a few examples, which may be no more than anomalies or exceptions. The weakness of ideological arguments is that they rest on broad, largely unproven (and sometimes unprovable) assumptions. Nevertheless, neither style of argument is illegitimate, nor is their use being called into question—both are important tools of public debate. But neither one provides solid ground for pronouncing on the overall performance of a policy or program. At best, they provide indirect evidence for such judgements.

**During the past four decades, parliamentary debate has changed significantly. Anecdotal and ideological arguments are still—and always will be—used, but they are increasingly complemented by a third sort of argument based on statistical (and scientific) information.**

During the past four decades, parliamentary debate has changed significantly. Anecdotal and ideological arguments are still—and always will be—used, but they are increasingly complemented by a third sort of argument based on statistical (and scientific) information. Governments' collecting and compiling important statistical information on a wide variety of trends (such as employment levels, the rate of inflation, demographic profiles and price fluctuation in commodity markets) provides a whole new basis for policy and program debate and evaluation. Institutions like Statistics Canada have taken governments a giant step toward filling in the range of evidence that lies midway between high-level ideological arguments and the very specific information contained in anecdotal reports. Over the years, this has enriched and strengthened public-policy debate.

Nevertheless, the capacity to provide adequate and reliable information of this sort is still wanting. There are many gaps in the information base. Participants seemed to agree that access to better information in this area should contribute to a more disciplined use of ideological and anecdotal argument, especially in debates over the effectiveness of specific policies and programs.

When social indicators were being discussed in the '70s, there was an inclination to invoke the language and standards of science. Political scientists in the early post-war period—particularly in American universities—had been engaged in the task of developing a rigorous, value-neutral approach to explain politics. Scholars in public administration shared a similar dream for public management.

Although the goal of a value-free “science” of politics and public administration had been largely discredited by the '70s, its influence lingered. On the one hand, advocates of social indicators recognized the importance of qualitative judgements and measures. On the other hand, an unrealistic optimism remained about the degree of scientific rigor that such an approach could incorporate. Thus in the search for indicators, there was often a tendency to speak as though there were a single, best set.

Our discussions revealed that parliamentarians and public servants today do not share this view. If participants tended to agree that reliable and useful information on quality of life is attainable, they were equally convinced that there is no single best set of outcomes or indicators for measuring quality of life. Poverty was offered as an obvious example. Although everyone agreed that poverty is real, no one thought there was a single, authoritative way of measuring it. Choosing a set of measures is a political act that reflects the values to which a party or government is committed. The critical lesson for participants was not that measures should strive to be value-free or even that they should rest on consensus. It was rather that the process by which they are selected should be fair, *open, transparent and inclusive*. In short, that the process of selection should be genuinely democratic.

# Appendix 1

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## Five Options for Further Action

At Roundtable 3, participants were presented with five options for further action on societal outcomes and indicators. The following is a brief sketch of the options.

### **Option 1:**

Contemplating the Prospect of an Overarching Framework

One option for further work in this area would be to propose a working group of parliamentarians and officials from key departments to consider what might be included in an overarching framework of societal and quality-of-life indicators, what impact such a framework might have on the role of parliamentarians, and what challenges lie in wait. Issues to be explored might include, for example, whether all-party agreement could be reached on a tentative set of outcomes and indicators; what role public consultation might play; what related issues or areas appear to divide parliamentarians along ideological lines; and how or whether such differences could be managed without reducing the framework to a statement of platitudes.

For simplicity's sake, such a working group may wish to distinguish the task of selecting indicators from that of measuring results and presenting the information, and then focus its attention on the former. The latter task is addressed more directly in Option 4. Alternatively, consideration of the two tasks could be combined in a single study.

### **Option 2:**

A Survey of Members

The new focus on results has led to major changes in how governments plan, implement, manage and report. Although awareness of these changes is growing among parliamentarians, their implications are not well understood. Perhaps it is time for a more methodical and systematic effort to assess parliamentarians' overall understanding of, and interest in, the area; and to evaluate what might be done to support and encourage them.

One proposal advanced during the roundtables was that a survey of members be conducted to identify needs and opportunities in this area. For such a survey to be of use, however, it needs to get beyond the usual responses elicited in roundtable and other processes in recent years in which parliamentarians reply that they want better estimates, less paper, more information, the right information, greater clarity, etc. To accomplish this, how would such a survey be done? What would be included in it? Who would conduct it? How would it be financed? Should it be connected to or precede implementing one or more of the other options proposed here?

### **Option 3:**

Educating Members: The Seminar Series

The present set of roundtables was conceived, in part, as a way of raising the awareness of parliamentarians concerning changes in how government operates and the challenges and opportunities this may pose for committees and other parliamentary business. Would it be useful to have a regular program aimed at educating parliamentarians on these issues? For example, would an annual seminar series be useful? Would parliamentarians attend? If not, should such a program target or invite their staff? Should the Library of Parliament sponsor it? What form would it have? How would it be promoted among parliamentarians?

#### **Option 4:**

##### Reviewing the Estimates: A Pilot

In 1995, the federal government reformed the Estimates process. The old Part III of the Estimates contained submissions by individual departments regarding funding needs to carry out annual work plans. The sense among parliamentarians at the time was that these submissions arrived as a *fait accompli*. Between the time the Estimates became public and the time they were adopted, there was little time for debate and little willingness to encourage discussion of possible changes. From the viewpoint of departments, adoption of the Estimates was a critical priority because they could not begin implementing their work plans without it.

In 1995, Part III was split into two parts. The first sets out the department's plans and priorities over a three-year period, the second reports on its performance over the last year.

"Results commitments" are a key part of the new departmental plans and priorities. These define the outcomes the department hopes to achieve through its policies and programs, along with indicators for assessing progress. As we saw in Option 1, information on societal outcomes provides a larger context in which to consider and evaluate specific program goals.

The fact that these reports are supposed to contain measurable program goals, combined with the fact that they contain multi-year proposals, creates new opportunities for parliamentary involvement, scrutiny and influence over government spending and the setting of priorities. Roundtable participants proposed one way of exploring what these opportunities may include. It involves using a standing committee to undertake a careful review of the Estimates in its specific area.

Members of the specific standing committee would request that the respective department prepare a presentation on:

- the government's policy commitments and strategy;
- the current situation and results already achieved (as described in the performance report);
- specific steps in the plan to achieve the remaining results (as outlined in the plans and priorities);  
and
- the department's approach to measuring performance and to learning and improving its performance through results reporting.

The committee would be free to deepen its understanding of the concepts and information by questioning departmental witnesses, consulting the public (e.g. clients of related programs and other stakeholders) and by discussing and considering the adequacy of the ideas and information. Finally, the committee would recommend improvements in the information provided to it, and could also make recommendations regarding the existing strategy for achieving results.

Much could be learned from such an exercise, both by departments and committees. In addition, as a pilot project, best practices and lessons learned from the process could be drawn and codified as a first step toward a manual to assist other committees in developing a similar arrangement.

### **Option 5:**

#### A Horizontal Approach to Committee Work: A Pilot

Along with “results,” a key theme associated with recent reforms is “horizontality.” Issues, policies or programs are horizontal when they involve more than one department or policy area. One interesting consequence of focusing on results or outcomes is that it leads to a more horizontal view of public policy and administration.

For example, if a government decides that safer cities is an outcome it wants to promote, a little reflection quickly reveals that an effective strategy cannot be confined to a single department. Creating safer cities requires the coordination of policies and programs in a wide variety of areas, including policing, traffic control, public transit, social assistance, employment counselling, parks and recreation, land-use zoning, waste disposal, public housing, and education.

Traditional government systems are not designed to work horizontally. They approach the task of developing policies and programs as though issues and goals existed within the parameters of a single department, such as health, environment or industry. In this view, coordination is a task that is usually managed by a committee of senior officials from within the department. Coordination of the overall system is managed by central agencies, such as treasury boards or executive councils and, ultimately, by Cabinet.

This traditional approach has served Canadians well, but times are changing. New forces ranging from increased international trade to the use of new information and communications technologies are making once-unconnected activities increasingly interdependent. As a result, the old, relatively self-contained spheres of policy making are becoming increasingly diffuse and interconnected. Managing in such an environment requires a different approach, one in which interdependence becomes the rule rather than the exception. What does this imply for standing committees?

The existing committee system reflects the old model of self-contained policy areas. As government moves to an outcome-based reporting and management system, the old committee system becomes increasingly inadequate to the task of reviewing and evaluating government work—that is, of holding government to account. Committees must modernize, function more along horizontal lines, to reflect changes in the system of government. They must be free to track issues that cut across a variety of policy and program areas, and to consider how these latter may combine to produce or prevent a desired outcome.

There is some experience with such issues in the federal government. Experiments have been undertaken. The learning from these should be deepened. One proposal suggested by participants is to create a subcommittee of a standing committee to investigate a particular outcome or issue such as, for example, homelessness. The particular topic should be one that has obvious links to several departments. The departments could be approached beforehand in an effort to secure a commitment to participate in the pilot. An appropriate form of public consultation could be decided.

Departments would prepare briefings on the policies and programs in their areas that impact on the issue or outcome, based on the priorities and planning reports and performance reports that they table each year. Together, departmental officials and committee members could examine, discuss and consider a range of key questions, including:

- What are the policies and programs in the area that impact on the issue?
- How do we know how well they are working?
- What mechanisms, if any, exist to ensure coordination across departments?
- How effective are they?
- Is there any attempt to provide horizontal or collective reporting?
- Would that be feasible?

In addition to providing insight into the issue and how it may be managed better, the process would provide important generic lessons for other committees seeking to take a similar approach. The proposal thus should be seen as having two tracks and two separate tasks. The first is to investigate the particular issue. The second is to discuss and record the lessons learned and best practices from the process as an innovative committee experience. The results of the latter would provide a first attempt to develop a manual that could guide other committees in setting up and investigating issues horizontally.

## Appendix 2

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### List of Participants

#### Quality of Life and Social Indicators Seminar Series

February 12, March 12, and April 30, 2001

Jean Augustine  
Member for Etobicoke-Lakeshore  
House of Commons

Aileen Carroll  
Member for Barrie-Simcoe-Bradford  
House of Commons

Raymonde Folco  
Member for Laval-Ouest  
House of Commons

Larry Bagnell  
Member for Yukon  
House of Commons

Laura Chapman  
Executive Director  
Policy Research Secretariat

Paul Forseth  
Member for New Westminster-  
Coquitlam-Burnaby  
House of Commons

Roy Bailey  
Member for Souris-Moose Mountain  
House of Commons

Mohamed Charih  
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Member for Don Valley  
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Statistics Canada

Len Beerschoten  
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Janice Elliott  
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John Bryden  
Member for Ancaster-Dundas-  
Flamborough-Aldershot  
House of Commons

Hon. Sheila Finestone  
Senator for Montarville, QC  
Senate of Canada

Andrew Jackson  
Research Director  
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Marlene Jennings  
Member for Notre-Dame-de-Grâce-  
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Division Planning, Performance and  
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John Lobsinger  
Senior Governance Analyst and  
Deputy Director  
Governance and Social Policies  
Canadian International Development  
Agency

John Mayne  
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Val Meredith  
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White Rock-Langley  
House of Commons

Jonathan Murphy  
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7th Generation Initiative

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Member for Kelowna  
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