

## “Who is Going to Address Canada’s Big Issues?”

Speaking Notes for  
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August, 2011

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### Introduction

Reports in the media tell us that, increasingly, political discourse in the western world is dominated by wedge issues. The issues that will help to build the communities we aspire to, that describe who we are and who we want to be, rarely get addressed.

The Manning Centre for Building Democracy conducted a poll after the federal election, and Preston Manning recently reported that most Canadians no longer look to government as the prime mover, or the “vision achiever” (June 7, 2011). Apparently most of us look to government as enabler, facilitator, security backstop. In fact, three out of four respondents to the survey said that politicians don’t share their views as to the most important issues facing the country. The Manning Centre poll also indicated three quarters of those who responded said that politicians don’t share their views as to the most important issues we face.

### What are the Big Issues / Questions?

So, what are the big issues? We can each draft our own lists, but here are several that I think have the chance to define the country that we leave to future generations:

- Climate change
- The aging of our population, in combination with declining birth rates
- We’re a nation that is dependent on continuing immigration, but our immigration policies lack a long-term vision of the Canada we wish to build
- The dis-engagement, under-employment and unemployment of a significant segment of our nation’s youth
- The deplorable conditions that many of our First Nations people live in;
- The rising cost of health care
- Our ability to develop, adopt and capitalize on new technologies
- The precarious security of our food and water resources,
- The shift in economic might from a declining US to new economies like India, Brazil, Russia and, most powerfully, China; and
- Canada’s role in the world

I do not intend to spend time today on the United States. But given our economic dependence on our neighbour to the south, I have to say that their dysfunctional political system, combined with the terrifying level of national debt, is definitely one of the “big issues” for North America, and probably for the world.

As an aside, Preston Manning’s column listed the following “big issues”:

- Economic productivity
- Health Care reform
- Climate change; and
- Moral issues

Whatever your list is, I think you will agree that the issues are huge. Their impact on Canada, and on the world is massive. And yet the media and voters – you and me – seem to accept that our governments and our political systems lack the capacity and will to address them in any meaningful way. We seem to accept that.

The question then becomes ... Where is our societal leadership to come from? I think the answer is: it is coming, and needs to come in even stronger measure, from civil society -- the not-for-profit sector. But it will not be easy.

### **The Knowledge in the Not-for-Profit Sector**

Arguably, the sector is historically shy about both the knowledge it holds and its capacity for leadership. In an age when governments do less research and policy development, the not-for-profit sector should not and cannot simply take over those roles of government – that's not my argument. Instead, we can reflect on the research and hard-earned experience that are already part of our organizations.

Imagine Canada of course is a national leader in this field. The Sector Monitor and the research on Giving and Volunteering provide vital information for the sector and beyond. And of course the National Engagement Strategy with the Framework for Action has created a national conversation on the key issues facing the not-for-profit sector, to be wrapped up in November.

Moving beyond Imagine, there exists today a range of excellent policy papers and research reports, some of which are better known than others. The environment sector, for example, is highly knowledge-based as we can see in leading examples like the David Suzuki Foundation, Pollution Probe and the World Wildlife Fund.

YMCAs across North America are impressive resources for research on the challenges and opportunities of children, youth and newcomers.

And international aid organizations like CARE Canada, Oxfam, the Canadian Red Cross and the Stephen Lewis Foundation should be among the first places we go for global information on economics, health care and civic unrest.

Let me share a few more examples of groups creating real community and social value through research.

Many Community Foundations in Canada have been working on an initiative called Vital Signs, which is at the vanguard of reporting on the dimensions and determinants of community well-being. The research has actually become a service itself, as it is raising awareness of key community attributes and challenges.

Our colleagues in philanthropy, the Maytree Foundation and the Metcalf Foundation, are both terrific examples of foundations that sponsor and conduct valuable research. Maytree's work on immigration and refugees has helped to shape government policy, and Metcalf's recent work on food security is most impressive.

At the Ontario Trillium Foundation, knowledge-sharing has now become an important part of what we do. Our Regional Community Profile reports are referenced by many in the sector, and by many local municipalities in Ontario. The more detailed reports on Ontario's Aboriginal, francophone and culturally diverse communities are valuable resources – work that we are proud of.

The United Way of Toronto's series of research reports that support its Building Strong Neighbourhoods Strategy are widely used across this city. From Poverty by Postal Code some years ago to the recent

Vertical Poverty report, the research sets the standard for community-based fact-finding and issue identification. The findings have quickly become a platform for priority-setting, both for social organizations and for the neighbourhoods themselves.

Active Healthy Kids Canada provides an annual report card on physical activity and related issues for young people across the country. It has become the go-to report for Health Promotion ministries and recreational departments across the country. (And next year, thanks to OTF funding, there will be an Ontario cut of the report.)

### **Convening and Collaborating: What is currently being done with the knowledge in the sector?**

I'd now like to turn to the value of collaborating, because collaboration is at the heart of much of my message today.

Matt Ridley, the author of *The Rational Optimist*, says that the concept of exchange – exchange of goods, labour, culture and ideas – is responsible for the exponential growth of innovation taking place in human society. Ridley calls this process “ideas having sex” and he makes a compelling argument that exchange – also known as collaboration – is the fundamental process behind innovation. Ridley describes the way that sex among ideas creates a “collective brain” and the more people contributing to that collective, the more innovation it produces.

So, a healthy, innovative, vibrant and successful not-for-profit sector should feature lots of ideas having lots of sex. Let's see if that's the case.

The motto of the Canadian Collaborative Mental Health Initiative – a coalition that began with 12 original partners – is “Collaboration is the Key,” so the CCMHI seems like a particularly good example. Working together, the partners are raising awareness of dementia and other mental health issues. Their advocacy has helped influence policy and make mental health disorders a national health priority.

In Toronto, we have just wrapped-up the Luminato festival, and we can point to Luminato's catalyst, CivicAction as a prime example of civic collaboration. The brainchild of the late, great David Pecaut, CivicAction (formerly the Toronto City Summit Alliance) engages thought leaders from all sectors to consider the challenges and identify action plans to cooperatively improve the economic, social and environmental future of the GTA. They've done fantastic research on global best practices and sparked some really innovative work like the DiverseCity, Emerging Leaders Network, and the Greening Greater Toronto initiatives.

They also partnered with Maytree in creating TRIEC, the Toronto Region Immigrant Employment Council. TRIEC brings together a host of partners including labour groups, occupational regulatory bodies, community organizations and all three levels of government. The goal is to increase the access to – and availability of – services and opportunities for immigrants entering the labour market. The model, started here in the GTA, is now being replicated in other parts of the country.

Thomas Friedman, the author of *The World is Flat*, argues that we have just entered a new era of globalization, an era that allows individuals and small groups to globalize without involving nations and multi-national corporations. The ability to share multiple forms of knowledge and work drives the flattening of our world and in this new paradigm, value is created not by the old vertical model of who you work for and who works for you, but rather a horizontal model in which we create value because of who we connect and collaborate with.

But interestingly, Friedman makes the point that the bump in productivity that we might expect from the convergences that made the flat world possible have yet to occur. The reason is that not enough of us have adjusted our habits to the new reality. Too many of us are working and thinking the old way – taking

leadership from the top-down, looking to governments, thinking only within the confines of our own organizations.

So we have a “challenge-slash-opportunity” for civil society in Canada. Our not-for-profit sector doesn’t need a revolution to unlock our leadership potential and start identifying – and addressing – the Big Issues of our time. What we do need to do is to recognize our strengths, seize the opportunities, and identify who the partners should be.

### **What OTF is doing today**

When I shared these remarks with my Board of Directors a couple of weeks ago, it was suggested that I reflect on what we are doing at OTF. So, at the risk of being seen to be waving my own flag, I will quickly mention that our own actions on the Big Issues include the following:

1. Climate Change: We have a deliberate strategy to support the growth and capacity of Ontario’s not-for-profit environment sector. There is important work taking place in encouraging conservation, creating awareness about pollution, and creating green jobs.
2. The Aging of our population: We have identified the issue of Aging and the Not-for-Profit sector as an area of strategic focus. There are challenges for the sector as our society ages, but there are also opportunities. We’ve published a research report, held a symposium on the issue, and are now developing our next steps.
3. Disengaged and under-employed Youth: We have targeted granting programs, under the umbrella of our Future Fund, where we seek to support innovative economic opportunities for under-employed youth.
4. Conditions in First Nations communities: Outreach activities to remote First Nations communities are helping to increase awareness of our granting programs, and giving us an opportunity to help build healthy communities, often with initiatives aimed at young people.
5. Food Security: We’ve been supporting local food initiatives, community gardens, programs that encourage immigrants to consider a career in farming. And we’re looking for opportunities to collaborate with other funders.

### **Call to Action for the Sector**

Building on the examples I have listed, including our own work at OTF, here are the things that I’m suggesting we should do in the sector:

1. Figuring out what we know: This will include getting a handle on what we know about the Big Issues – individually and collectively – within the sector. Then, documenting and managing it, and learning how to better communicate, communicate, communicate.
2. Sharing the information: This will require the sector to get our ideas together into that “collective brain” more effectively. I understand that there can be competitive and even proprietary attitudes and histories to overcome. I think we all know, though, that a rising tide lifts all boats. If our sector becomes more effective, we all win.
3. Collaborating better and Convening for results: Many in the sector have experience with convening stakeholders and interested parties from all sectors, to brainstorm, to problem-solve together. This experience will be valuable in identifying solutions and opportunities. That said, we could all do a better job of collaboration. We’re pretty good at coming together to share knowledge, often to wave our respective flags so that we can receive accolades from our colleagues. I’m not sure we are as good as taking these discussions to the next step – harnessing our collective resources in a search for greater impact.
4. Leveraging the connections of community leaders and supporters: Community leaders – the corporate executives, volunteers, retired and aspiring politicians, and experienced professionals who sit on our boards – often have great credibility, powerful networks, significant political clout. They, and the organizations they support, are often very modest about these assets. It’s probably time to stop being so modest.

5. Developing models of Collective Leadership: I believe that many not-for-profit organizations can present themselves as neutral places for government, corporate, labour and community representatives to come together to problem-solve, to innovate. But collective leadership needs to emerge quickly from these processes, because without that, change will not happen.

Whether the issue is climate change, the rising cost of health care, the living conditions in many First Nations communities or food security, the not-for-profit sector already is a major player.

And the sector is highly trusted. The Edelman Trust Index, for example, consistently lists the Not-for-Profit sector as ahead of the Government, the Media and Corporate sectors when it comes to trust from the general public.

What struck me when I read Preston Manning's column in the Globe was that he made no reference to the Not-for-Profit sector. Not one word. Apparently many of the respondents to his survey said that large corporations were the best "go-to" people for issues like health care and climate change.

So we have a lot of work to do. The awareness of what we know, what is being done, what can be done in greater measure, needs to be developed. But the foundations are in place. The technical knowledge, the leadership skills, the willingness to collaborate, the communication skill – these all exist. The ability to bring together representatives of the different sectors – corporate, government, media, labour, faith groups – is very strong. These abilities need to be harnessed, strengthened, better integrated – with confidence and with pride.

Does this sound utopian, even naïve? Perhaps. But the bright and idealistic recent university graduates who are eager to make a difference would feel we are betraying future generations by not trying.

The knowledge, the skills and the passion required to make these incredible things happen exist in our sector to an extent greater than anywhere else. Yes, we may have full plates, tight budgets, limited time and important missions, but we cannot afford to let this opportunity slip. The issues are simply too big and increasingly, it appears there is no sector better equipped to influence change.

It's the sector's turn to lead, if we can seize the opportunity.