

RealityCheck

THE CANADIAN REVIEW OF WELLBEING

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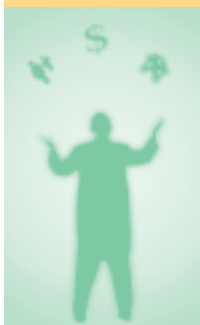
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INTRODUCING...

The Canadian Index of Wellbeing

IN DOUGLAS ADAMS'S WICKEDLY FUNNY TRILOGY *THE HITCHHIKER'S GUIDE TO THE GALAXY*, A MACHINE KNOWN AS 'DEEP THOUGHT' HAS FINALLY COME UP WITH THE ANSWER TO THE GREAT QUESTION OF LIFE, THE UNIVERSE AND EVERYTHING. "YOU'RE REALLY NOT GOING TO LIKE IT," DEEP THOUGHT TELLS THE MICE WHO EAGERLY AWAIT THE ANSWER. "TELL US!" THEY SHOUT. DEEP THOUGHT HESITATES, PAUSES DRAMATICALLY, THEN PRONOUNCES: "THE ANSWER...IS...42."



Of course, that answer makes no sense to the mice. Forty-two seems plucked out of thin air, a number with no relation to anything. With absurd, wry humour, Adams skewers our conflicting tendencies to ask enormous questions yet strive for simple, tidy answers. And he laughs at the conundrum we

face when the answer bears little relation to the questions asked, or makes no sense when it comes to evaluating "life, the universe and everything."

"There should be some place where we can all go to get a relatively reliable and valid assessment of the world that we're living in," says Alex Michalos, director of the Institute for Social Research and Evaluation at the University of Northern British Columbia. Michalos is working with a national working group of about 20 researchers on the new Canadian Index of Wellbeing (CIW). The group includes representatives from Statistics Canada and Environment Canada, and researchers from eight universities and six non-government research organizations across Canada (see CIW map on page 3). The work is also part of a broader international effort to measure the things that count: the CIW researchers have been working closely with their counterparts in New Zealand, the United Kingdom, Germany, the United States, and elsewhere.

An answer to everything?

The CIW won't come up with the answer to everything, but its aim is still ambitious. And the questions it asks are every bit as important as the answers it offers. It aims to assess whether Canadians are better off or worse off than they used to be—not just materially or based on how fast the economy is growing, but in terms of their overall wellbeing. By doing so, it will become Canada's core, central measure of progress, and it will relegate the Gross Domestic Product to the function for which it was originally designed and intended: measuring the overall size of the market economy.

"The Canadian Index of Wellbeing is intended to be a measure of the quality of life of all Canadians," says Michalos. "You could think of an Index of Wellbeing as a kind of index of people's life chances—that is the probabilities of good or bad things happening to them as they go through their lives."

Measuring wellbeing in 7 areas

Researchers working on the new Index are looking at seven specific areas or "domains" that affect the lives of everyone. The Living Standards domain, for example, will measure incomes and jobs; the gap between rich and poor; food and livelihood security; and affordable housing. The Healthy Populations domain will assess the health status and health outcomes of different groups of Canadians, as well as risk factors and conditions that affect health and disease. The Community Vitality domain will assess social cohesion, personal security and safety, and people's sense of social and cultural belonging. Other domains will measure the quality of the environment, the educational attainment of the population, and the amount of free time that people can devote to social, family and cultural pursuits. Finally, the CIW will measure people's civic engagement, and how responsive governing bodies are to citizens' needs and views.

The CIW will release its first report in the fall, on three core areas of wellbeing that matter to Canadians: healthy populations, living standards and time use.

"If you look at what people have said about what makes a 'good life' going back to at least the 5th century BC, they will say things like: 'Well, if you have health, if you have somebody who loves you, if you have financial security and you live in a friendly community and have decent housing, then you're having a fairly good life,'" says Michalos. "So the Canadian Index of Wellbeing is about that kind of common sense."

According to Dr. Robert McMurtry, a physician in London,

Ontario, who serves on the Health Council of Canada, the new Index gathers leading-edge indicator research from around the country into an integrated and comprehensive measure of wellbeing for Canada. Such a measure could guide politicians and policy-makers in making more informed choices.

McMurtry, who worked with Roy Romanow at the Commission on the Future of Health Care, says the CIW project is the next logical step for those interested in improving Canadians' health and wellbeing. He adds that the project grew out of a meeting to discuss the implications of the Romanow Report in December 2002. At that meeting, he met Charles Pascal, Executive Director of the Atkinson Charitable Foundation.

Romanow, Atkinson, and the Wellbeing Index: a "natural fit"

"It occurred to me that there is a natural link between the work that the Atkinson Foundation is doing promoting new measures of progress and Mr. Romanow's work on health care," McMurtry recalls. "I knew that Mr. Romanow would be interested in it. Having worked with him, I realized that he was very concerned about the health care system and what it meant to Canadians, but he also had concerns about the wellbeing of Canadians that went beyond that. I thought what a perfect, natural fit it would be."

McMurtry became co-chair of a committee working to further the development of the Canadian Index of Wellbeing. For its part, the Atkinson Foundation has committed over \$1.5 million to date toward the initiative. Other key funders plan to become partners in what organizers describe as the "nation-building work" of the CIW.

"The Canadian Index of Wellbeing is about the reality and complexity of life. When it's mature, I can see it taking on an enormous importance to Canadians," McMurtry says. "It would become part of the discourse of day-to-day life, if you will—the discussion around the water cooler."

CIW will hold governments accountable

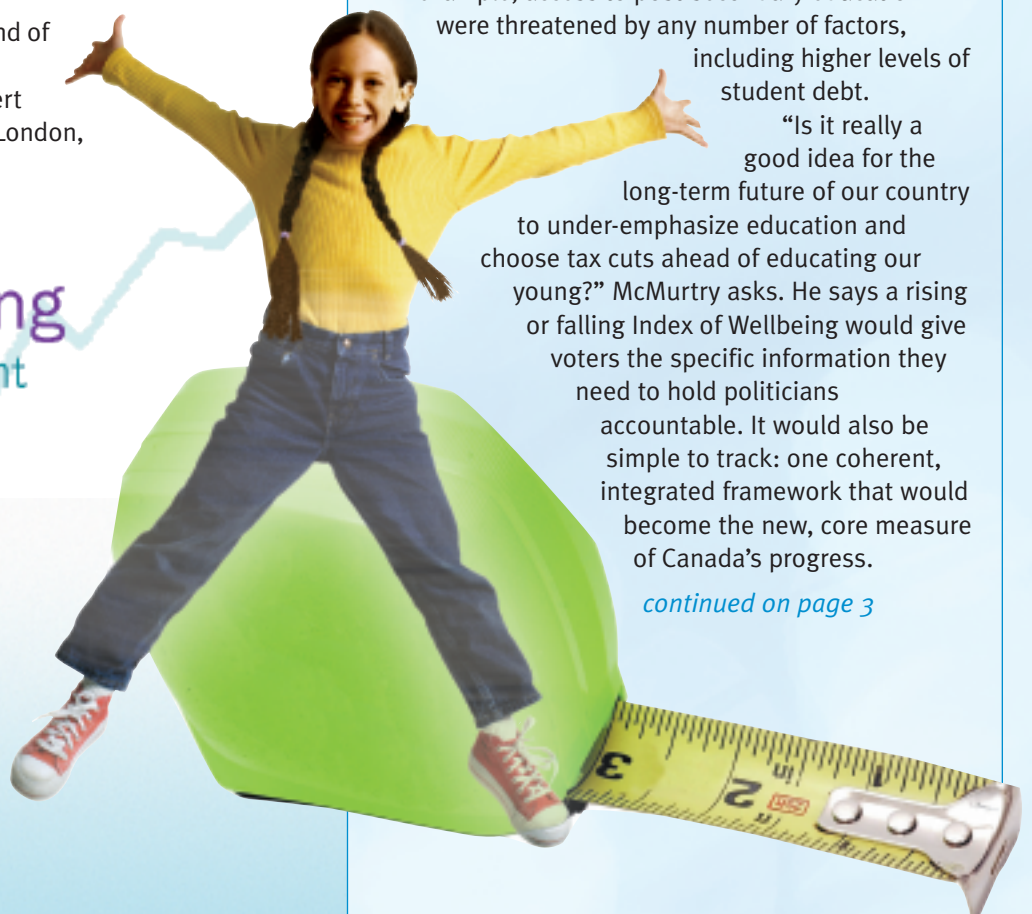
McMurtry adds that the CIW would give people the information they need to question politicians about the choices they make. He cites access to education as an example. It's well known that the better education people get, the better off they are. The Index of Wellbeing would therefore rise as the quality and level of education increase. But it would decline if, for example, access to post-secondary education

were threatened by any number of factors, including higher levels of student debt.

"Is it really a good idea for the long-term future of our country to under-emphasize education and choose tax cuts ahead of educating our young?" McMurtry asks. He says a rising or falling Index of Wellbeing would give voters the specific information they need to hold politicians accountable. It would also be simple to track: one coherent, integrated framework that would become the new, core measure of Canada's progress.

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the
Canadian Index of Wellbeing
Taking Measure of the Things that Count



Roy Romanow speaks for the Canadian Index of Wellbeing



Since the release of the seminal Romanow Commission report on the future of health care in Canada two and a half years ago, Roy Romanow has been advocating for a new Canadian Index of Wellbeing that

will report regularly on the things that count in ensuring health and prosperity for Canadians. In this interview, Mr. Romanow discusses the critical importance of key determinants of health such as income, early childhood education, housing, and the environment.

Q. Why do we need a Canadian Index of Wellbeing?

A. One of the key points I made in my report is that we have to set a national goal of making Canadians the healthiest people in the world. One of the keys to achieving this goal is a greater emphasis on preventative health measures and improving population health outcomes. The main factors—the main “determinants” as the experts call them—that will likely shape our health and life span, are the ones that affect society as a whole. We have to connect all of the dots that will take us there. To connect the dots, we have to know where they are. We have to measure wellbeing. What we measure counts!

As an avid reader of *Reality Check*, I know that the point has been well made, that we currently gauge how we are doing as a society according to a narrow set of economic indicators. The GDP makes no distinction between activity that brings benefit, and activity that causes harm. Crime, pollution, accidents, sickness, and war—all make the GDP go up simply because money is spent. The more trees we cut down, the more the GDP grows, so that the depletion of our natural wealth is wrongly counted as a contribution to prosperity. We ignore other kinds of wealth that are at least as valuable as the money transactions counted by GDP.

I believe we need new measuring tools to measure and track changes in the key factors that affect our wellbeing and the quality of our life. The Canadian Index of Wellbeing will provide Canadians with a new basket of indicators that reflect the values that Canadians regard as important to their quality of life. It will also point the way to long-term sustainable economic prosperity.

Q. How would such an index build on the work of your Royal Commission on the Future of Health Care?

A. Although the royal commission report noted the importance of population health work, we did not have a chapter dedicated to the social determinants of health—things like income, employment, early childhood education, social supports, housing, and the environment—that can be measured and tracked by the Canadian Index of Wellbeing. As I’ve noted, the report envisioned the national goal of making Canadians the healthiest people we can be. But, even if all of my 47 recommendations are adopted, it will only take us part way toward this goal. A health care system will only be one of the ingredients that determine whether one’s life will be long or short, healthy or not.

Q. Would it be fair to say that we need to move from an illness model of health care to a wellness model?

A. Yes. First of all, we need to remember that Medicare is the most popular government program ever mounted in Canada and according to recent polling, it still enjoys the overwhelming support of Canadians, who want to see Medicare maintained and reformed. But we need to focus on the other determinants as well. Historians and health experts tell us that we have had at least two great revolutions in the course of public health.

The first was the control of infectious diseases, notwithstanding our current challenges, and the second was the battle against non-communicable diseases. The third great revolution is about moving from an illness model to all of those things that both prevent illness and promote a holistic sense of wellbeing.

Q. To what extent is this a political question, one that politicians will need to address?

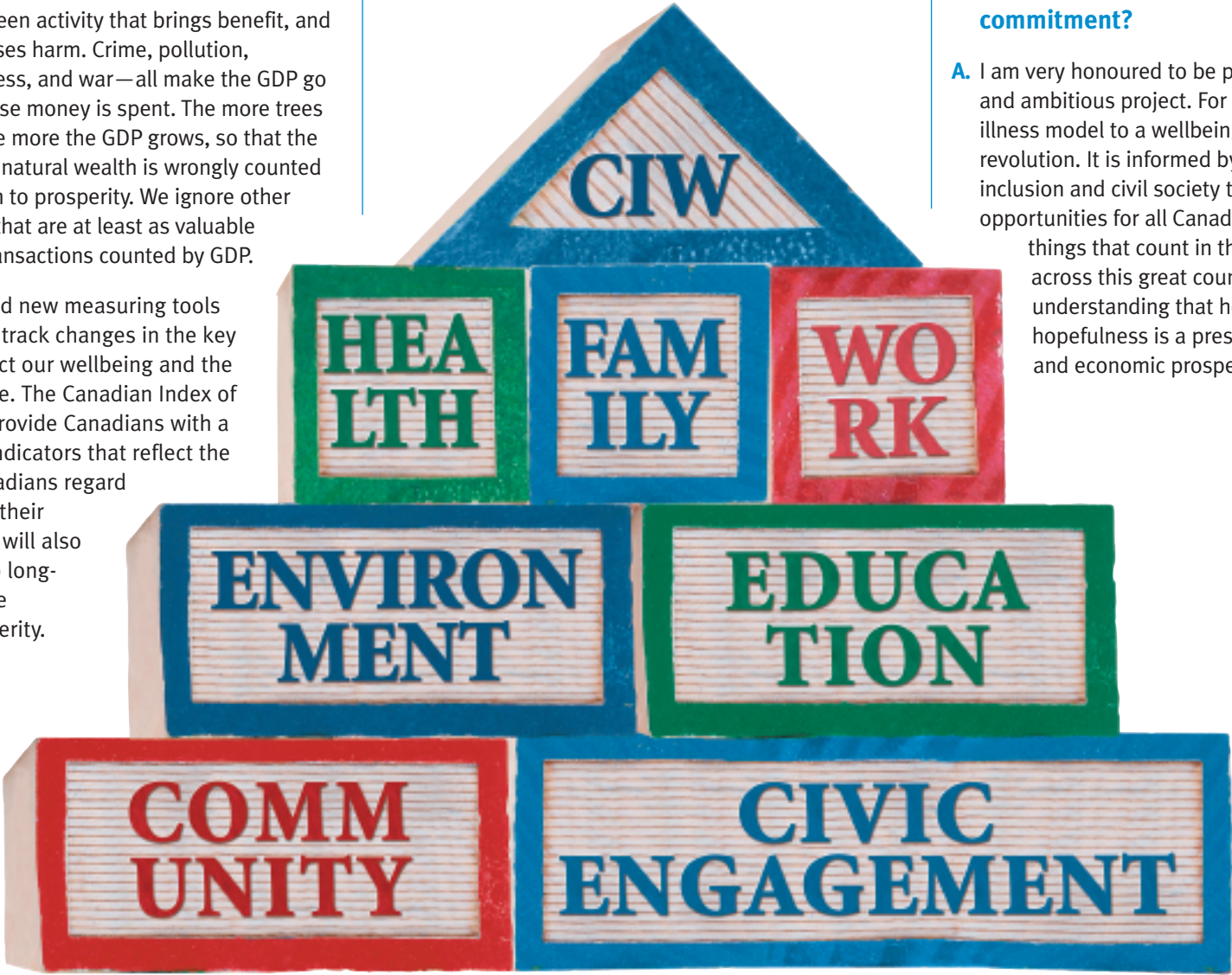
A. I think it’s a political question for all Canadians and we have to begin with a paradigm shift. It is really taking a holistic approach to our health as a capital resource and reinvesting in it every bit as much as we would in our knowledge industries or any other 21st century resource. Canada, and governments in particular, must see the importance of integrating social, health, economic, and environmental issues into an integrated approach. Governments of all stripes have to view the decisions they make through the prism of “will it invest in the wellbeing of our society—in our health and the overall quality of life—or will it diminish those things?” As a former premier, I know clearly the pressures to yield to short-term political gain. But I would have found it very helpful to have something like the CIW—independent and non-partisan information—to educate both my political colleagues and those who elect us, on how we are really progressing on the things that count.

Q. How specifically could an Index of Wellbeing help to improve Canadians’ lives?

A. A Canadian Index of Wellbeing will engage Canadians in a meaningful debate about what it means to have a world-leading quality of life and genuine sustainability. It will provide policy-shapers and decision-makers with information they need to measure the full benefits and costs of policy changes. From workplace water coolers to government policy rooms, it will put the accountability spotlight on the kind of progress that Canada truly needs. Most importantly, it will contribute to the ongoing process of nation building based on true Canadian values and concerns.

Q. It seems that you’re strongly committed to the whole concept of a Canadian Index of Wellbeing. How would you describe your commitment?

A. I am very honoured to be part of this monumental and ambitious project. For me, moving from an illness model to a wellbeing model is my kind of revolution. It is informed by a commitment to social inclusion and civil society that will provide opportunities for all Canadians to participate in the things that count in their neighbourhoods across this great country and an understanding that hopelessness kills and hopefulness is a prescription for good health and economic prosperity. ✓



JOSEPH E. ATKINSON,

Crusader for a Fair Society

ATKINSON TRADITION LED TO INITIAL CIW FUNDING

Joseph E. Atkinson, who ran the *Toronto Star* from 1899 until his death in 1948, was a principled man rarely afflicted by self-doubt. Once, a reporter showed up in his office complaining he'd just been fired by a temperamental news editor. Atkinson immediately phoned the editor, writes Ross Harkness in his book *J.E. Atkinson of The Star*.

"Has this young man's work been unsatisfactory?" Atkinson asked. "His work is fairly good but he is insolent; in the interest of discipline I had to dismiss him," the editor replied.

"Insolence and insubordination are fairly common in newspaper offices," Atkinson remarked. "That is one of the crosses editors have to bear."

The reporter was rehired. The story illustrates the value Joseph Atkinson placed on independent thinking. As one of Canada's leading newspaper proprietors, he was fiercely independent.

Economic justice is social justice

"If J.E. Atkinson were alive today he would be deeply concerned, for example, about child poverty. He'd have three or four reporters and editorial writers staying with that issue like a dog with a bone until it was resolved," says Charles Pascal, executive director of the Atkinson Charitable Foundation.

J.E. Atkinson knew child poverty well. His widowed mother took in boarders to support her eight children. When his mother died, the 14-year-old Atkinson left school to work in a textiles mill. The mill burned down a few weeks later, leaving young Joe unemployed. Only private charity kept him from going hungry.

All his life Atkinson supported charities such as the *Star* Fresh Air Fund—to help needy kids escape Toronto's summer heat—and the *Star* Santa Claus Fund, to make sure no child missed out on Christmas. He also established the Atkinson Charitable Foundation in 1942. According to its mission statement, the Foundation's task is "promoting social and economic justice"; but Charles Pascal says Atkinson himself would probably remove the word *and*.

"Take child care, for example. Is child care an economic policy or a social policy?" Pascal asks rhetorically. "Whether we're talking about housing, income distribution, child poverty—you name it—Mr. Atkinson would describe these policies as both economic and social. And he would be educating his very large readership to that effect."

"If Atkinson were still alive, he would have already invented the Canadian Index of Wellbeing."

From the beginning, J.E. Atkinson used the *Star* to campaign for the establishment of social programs such as family allowances, unemployment insurance, old-age pensions and a national health plan. He called for minimum wages and the rights of labour unions. He used his political influence to persuade the federal Liberal Party to adopt such policies, making him widely regarded as

one of the architects of the modern, social-welfare state. "If Atkinson were still alive," says Charles Pascal, "he would have already invented the Canadian Index of Wellbeing. He would have invented it 20 or 30 years ago." Pascal says such an Index fits with Atkinson's commitment to "evidence-based story telling."

Index "mother of all policy tools"

"The whole idea of the Canadian Index of Wellbeing is to give us independent, fact-based feedback on a regular basis about how we're really doing as a nation," Pascal explains. "By pulling back the curtain on the things that really matter to Canadians we will have clear information about what's happening. Are the air and water getting cleaner or dirtier? Is the gap between rich and poor getting narrower or wider? Having an independent reporting mechanism, especially one that communicates clearly, helps to hold governments accountable for what's really going on in terms of the progress of our nation."

Pascal calls the Canadian Index of Wellbeing "the mother of all policy tools," and notes the board of the Atkinson Foundation is committed to the huge task of developing it, because it fits the Foundation mandate and J.E. Atkinson's vision so perfectly. ✓

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McMurtry notes that the CIW will also report on which parts of the country are doing better or worse—not just in material terms, but in overall quality of life. Toronto might have higher average incomes than Charlottetown, for example—but it might also have higher levels of poverty and crime, and dirtier air. Alex Michalos says it's vital that Canadians themselves have a say in how the new Index is set up. "The Index is only going to work if Canadians hear their own voices in the product that we produce," he says. "When you're talking about a measure that claims to be a measure of the good life, you really have to ask people what they think the good life is like."

Stats you can take to the bank —for all political stripes

Michalos is part of a working group that is planning public consultations as the Index is developed, to ensure that the new measures properly reflect the values of Canadians in an inclusive way. The consultations will make particular efforts to reach out to marginalized communities like Canada's First Nations, who may not have a voice in their own health and wellbeing. In addition, Michalos says it's important that the Index produce information people can trust. "Our stance has to be like Statistics Canada in the sense that they produce reliable and valid numbers, and it doesn't matter what political stripe you are or what axe you want to grind, there should be some place where we can all go to get a relatively reliable and valid assessment of the world that we're living in." It also helps that key Statistics Canada experts are involved in the project, he says.

Everyone involved with the CIW agrees that compiling the new Index is a monumental long-term initiative. It aims to transform how we measure progress and—using its suite of social, economic and environmental indicators—determine the wellbeing of Canadians. "I could see it being something that would excite people," he says. "It would make an impact on their lives because they are more educated, they have more insight as a result of the information the CIW provides. The final point I'd make about it is, when people are better informed, that imparts a sense of control as opposed to helplessness and then hope is not far behind. One of the most important things you can do for people is to ensure hope." In the fall of 2005, the Canadian Index of Wellbeing will be officially launched. ✓

Supporting the National Network of Experts: A Cross-Canada Check-in

The following government agencies, non-governmental organizations and universities are working together to develop the Canadian Index of Wellbeing.



Learning How to Live Well—From New Zealand to Canada

Canadians have a lot to learn from New Zealand—a nation that takes wellbeing so seriously its 2002 *Local Government Act* requires all regions of the country to submit regular reports on their environmental, social, cultural and economic wellbeing.

New Zealand is one of the world’s leaders in wellbeing reporting. Its *Local Government Act* is just one example of how the country has incorporated the reporting of wellbeing into its legislative and administrative infrastructure. In addition, it produces an annual Social Report on current wellbeing indicators; a sustainable development indicators report; and a report on quality of life in New Zealand’s cities.

Reality Check editor Ron Colman travelled to New Zealand in November 2004 to learn more about that nation’s wellbeing initiatives, and to introduce the proposed Canadian Index of Wellbeing (CIW). He met with representatives from the Treasury, the Ministries of Social Development and Environment, and Statistics New Zealand, among other government agencies. He also presented the CIW to Local Government New Zealand, the mayors and CEOs of New Zealand’s major cities, and to NGOs and academics involved in indicator work in that country.

The New Zealanders are particularly interested in the CIW intention to combine wellbeing and sustainability measures within a single reporting framework, says Colman, who adds they look forward to working with Canada on its indicator initiatives.

Definitions of wellbeing vary across cultures

New Zealanders are doing important new work assessing how specific life conditions have varying impacts on people’s satisfaction with life. They have found, for example, that health and physical safety have a far stronger impact than knowledge and skills on how satisfied people feel with life. Economic security is somewhere in between.

New Zealanders also give stronger emphasis to the cultural dimension of wellbeing than most other jurisdictions. As a result, they are now re-evaluating their entire reporting framework to assess whether wellbeing has different meanings for New Zealand’s Maori and Pacific peoples. Statistics New Zealand is developing a Maori Statistics framework that “should recognize the demographic, socio-economic and cultural diversity of Maori, and different realities that characterize Maori society.”

Here in Canada, the CIW is committed to producing a wellbeing index that is meaningful to all Canadians. Inspired by the New Zealand example, and in order to establish a genuinely representative index, CIW researchers are now undertaking an analysis of what wellbeing means to Canada’s First Nations communities. Before the CIW is launched in the fall, First Nations communities will also be part of an inclusive cross-Canada public engagement strategy.

Canada already has some commendable examples of Inuit wellbeing indicators. Work done in

2002 by Mark Anielski and the Pembina Institute proposed an Inuit Genuine Wellbeing Indicators system for Nunavut, which pairs conventional indicators—such as life expectancy and educational attainment—with indicators based on Inuit values. The overall community wellness/wellbeing indicator system would include Inuit-specific indicators such as: diversity of skill sets; incidence of food sharing; and sharing of common assets such as community freezers. Health indicators include time spent with elders by younger people, Inuit midwife-assisted births, and amount of local foods consumed. Education, skills and knowledge are measured by indicators such as number of hours per week children spend with parents or elders learning traditional skills. And both the formal and the traditional subsistence-based economies are assessed. Potential data sources include the Government of Nunavut’s 2001 Household Survey, and special surveys tailored to gather data in Inuit communities.

These and other cross-national and cross-cultural dialogues are expected to fertilize the new Canadian Index of Wellbeing initiative and to continue fostering mutual learning among indicator practitioners globally. ✓

For further information on the New Zealand work, please see our website at: www.gpiatlantic.org/realitycheck

RETHINKING DEVELOPMENT Local Pathways to Global Wellbeing International Conference

St. Francis Xavier University, Antigonish, NS, Canada
June 20–24, 2005

Join many of the world’s leading practitioners of socially and environmentally responsible development at a landmark international conference that will also look at new ways of measuring wellbeing and sustainable development, including the new Canadian Index of Wellbeing.

Delegates will come to Canada from 28 countries and six continents. Speakers include:

- Their Excellencies The Governor General of Canada **Adrienne Clarkson** and **John Ralston Saul** ;
- **Ray Anderson**, founder & CEO of Interface Inc., the world’s largest company committed to complete sustainability;
- **Jigmi Thinley**, Home Minister and former Prime Minister of Bhutan, whose King declared that “Gross National Happiness is more important than Gross

- National Product,” and which last month received the UN’s “Champion of the Earth” award;
- **Marilyn Waring**, pioneer New Zealand economist;
- **Mathis Wackernagel**, co-developer of the Ecological Footprint—one of the most widely used measures of sustainability;
- **Hazel Henderson**, developer of the Calvert-Henderson Quality of Life Indicators;
- **John Helliwell**, author of *Globalization and Wellbeing*, and a pioneer in wellbeing measurement;
- **And many more.....**

Space is limited by facilities. Register early to reserve your space. For full conference and registration information visit: www.gpiatlantic.org/conference/conference.shtml



Gross National Happiness

More than 30 years ago the King of Bhutan declared that “Gross National Happiness is more important than Gross National Product.” Innovative ways to measure progress are now used to account more fully for social, human, and environmental realities in the country. This model was discussed by participants from more than 20 countries at a conference in Bhutan in 2004. At the upcoming *Rethinking Development* conference, these discussions will continue with a focus on strategies to counter the effects of today’s global development patterns. ✓

Tell us what you think about the Canadian Index of Wellbeing (CIW).

- How could the CIW be used in your organization, your community?
- What impact do you think the CIW will have on Canadians, on government?

E-mail us at ciw@atkinsonfoundation.ca
For more information and updates, visit www.atkinsonfoundation.ca



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