

# IMPROVED REPORTING TO PARLIAMENT

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# Improved Reporting to Parliament

Jim Thomas

## INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the Government of Canada has undertaken a variety of initiatives aimed at helping departments develop effective results-based measurement and reporting systems. In the same period, the Improved Reporting to Parliament Project, launched in 1994, sought ways to improve how departments report to Parliament.<sup>1</sup> Though separate, the two processes are intended to be complementary. Ideally, success in one will be accompanied by success in the other. In practice, the challenge is getting the two to dovetail.

Officials reasonably maintain that departmental reports have been improved, for example, by focusing on results, linking planning and performance information, and tracking efforts to collaborate on cross-cutting issues. At the same time, these improvements must also be seen as such by parliamentarians. In terms of Estimates documents and other reporting, the level of awareness and use of these measures by parliamentarians varies extensively. This series of three roundtables was intended to examine why and to look for ways in which recent reporting improvements can better serve MPs and standing committees. The roundtable process was designed around two main objectives:

1. to determine the extent to which parliamentarians were aware of, understood, or supported the kinds of planning and reporting changes that have occurred over the past five years; and
2. to ensure federal officials are aware of what Estimates information parliamentarians and their staff need.

If there is a single-most important idea that emerged from the roundtables, it is the need for more collaboration between parliamentarians (and their staff) and departments. Developing closer relationships, possibly through the establishment of joint working groups, will be critical to achieving a successful alignment of results-based planning and reporting within government and improving government reporting to Parliament.<sup>2</sup>

The roundtables were co-sponsored by the Treasury Board Secretariat and the Office of the Auditor General of Canada, hosted by the Institute of Public Administration of Canada, and chaired by Tony Ianno, parliamentary secretary to the president of the Treasury Board. Other participants included senior federal officials, parliamentarians, and research staff from the Library of Parliament. Presentations were also made by three departments: Agriculture and Agri-food Canada; Natural Resources Canada; and Human Resources Development Canada.

## SUMMARY OF THEMES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

A number of practical suggestions or recommendations emerged from the sessions. These can be clustered around three major themes:

### **Theme 1: Further Improvements to Reports and Reporting Processes**

1. Reporting on performance and planning should be made more user-friendly by
  - developing highlights or summary documents to complement Estimates reports (which should be made available on the Internet);
  - providing informal briefings to committee members prior to the Estimates;
  - developing innovative ways to facilitate access to information through the Internet;
  - providing broader societal and other trend information as a context for the deliberations; and
  - investigating ways to reduce constituency office workloads by providing information to citizens through the Internet.
2. Reports should communicate achievements *and* under-achievements. Steps could be taken to help create an environment where this is easier, including encouraging departments to provide explanations or recovery plans and ensuring that reporting processes avoid surprises by keeping committees informed all year long.
3. Where appropriate, clear, concise statements of performance and plans should be included in the reports, using a two- to three-year horizon. Committee members want to know where the department has been, where it is going, and what has or has not worked out as planned.
4. The reports should be organized to “cascade” from a high level of generality into the detail. The presentation of background material and supporting information on the Internet, with appropriate references in the Estimates reports, may be one means of establishing such a cascade, while reducing the overall length of Estimates reports.
5. Not all performance information is equally important for parliamentary reporting. For governance purposes, parliamentarians need performance information from the accountability and policy perspectives rather than detailed management and operational performance data.
6. Where possible, the comptrollership pilot departments<sup>3</sup> should be encouraged to experiment with modifications to their information packaging. Part of the repackaging might include reviewing key measures and objectives against relevant societal measures and norms.

## **Theme 2: Horizontal Planning and Reporting**

The following recommendations were put forward to enable more effective horizontal planning and reporting:

1. Committees could be more actively engaged in the horizontal processes through a planning and reporting pilot involving an issue with interdepartmental and/or federal and provincial dimensions.
2. A pilot could be undertaken on an issue that has significant partnership involvement (e.g., with provinces / territories) to determine how best to involve partners in goal setting and performance reporting around that issue.
3. Using sustainable development, or another cross-cutting, interdepartmental issue, the relevant standing committees could be brought together for a session on development or review of key measures and objectives.
4. In conjunction with this pilot, reporting by all departments and partners on the issue, as distinct from any one department, should be established.

## **Theme 3: Re-energizing Committees**

The most novel and exciting aspect of the three roundtable discussions was the idea of greater involvement of parliamentarians in the Estimates planning and reporting processes – in ways that could re-energize the committees. Recommendations included the following:

1. The collegiality of committees could be improved by encouraging ministers to be part of the committee or to attend more often – for the purpose of listening rather than just presenting.
2. Committees could be used to participate in larger societal goal-setting exercises, particularly around horizontal issues.
3. Treasury Board Secretariat should work with the comptrollership pilot departments to test out the viability of using a committee to assist in the development or review of key measures and objectives.
4. The pilot departments could also be used to explore ways of providing information that would assist committees in performing their new roles.
5. Committees can provide an instrument for engaging citizens in the discussion of results, planning and performance information.

## **DETAILED REPORT: THE ROUNDTABLE DISCUSSIONS**

The roundtable process was first conceived to generate ideas on how improvements in departmental planning and reporting could be used to more effectively meet the information requirements of parliamentarians.

However, by the end of Roundtable One, it was clear that parliamentarians had their own goals. They wanted to explore whether or how performance management and reporting might be used to reform the nature, process and culture of committee business. A breakthrough occurred when it was suggested that examining these processes in the course of committee business might be a way to engage parliamentarians more directly in the policy process.

Parliamentarians and public servants alike were keen to explore how these ideas might be implemented and, in general, optimistic that these ideas could be used to make the committee process more functional and collegial. This theme was revisited throughout the three sessions.

### **Emerging Themes**

Through the discussions, several other major themes emerged.

1. Despite the improvements to the performance management and reporting processes over the past five years, further changes must occur if more user-friendly, accessible and relevant information is to be made available to parliamentarians, their staff, committees, and the general public.
2. Although departments are finding increasingly effective ways of collaborating around the management of horizontal or cross-cutting issues, there needs to be a clearer focus on how to engage in horizontal planning and reporting of results. This issue is one area in which committees might play a useful role.
3. There are opportunities to use results-based reporting and measurement to re-energize committees, to change the committee culture, and to engage committee members more meaningfully in higher-level planning processes and objective setting. Parliamentarians want to be more involved. They believe that they will add value. They thus want committees placed more directly on the forefront of debate and decision-making rather than being positioned where they can do little more than react to information presented to them.

## **THEME 1: FURTHER IMPROVEMENTS TO REPORTS AND REPORTING PROCESSES**

The discussions on improved reporting focused on two key issues: the need to make reports more user-friendly and the need to improve credibility through balanced reporting of achievements and under-achievements.

### **Making Performance and Planning Reporting More User-Friendly**

The presentations made by the parliamentarians during the roundtables described a consistent and compelling set of challenges that committee members face in preparing for and participating in the Estimates process. When departmental officials appear before a standing committee, the volume of information in a typical departmental Estimates report can be overwhelming. Yet, members who want to ensure that they are well informed on key issues must examine all of it.

Discussion around this issue generated a number of practical suggestions that could improve the reporting process. Bureaucrats were encouraged to look for ways of presenting information that would be more user-friendly. For example, document highlights might be included; electronic access to the more detailed reports might be provided, in case parliamentarians or their staff wish to delve into a subject more deeply. Another suggestion was to provide briefings to committee members prior to the department's turn at Estimates.

It was also suggested that, as departments begin providing supporting information for the Estimates on the Internet, they might explore using a Strategis-type Internet design to make information more accessible to the user. Finally, it was felt that parliamentarians should be encouraged to explore how Internet access could enable staff in their constituency offices to find answers to many of the questions and requests for information by their constituents.

### **Improving the Credibility of Performance Reporting – Communicating Achievements and Under-achievements**

No organization functions perfectly all of the time. Champions of results-based reporting therefore must confront the reality that there will be under-achievements – areas in which a department or group of departments fails to achieve the goals or accomplish the plan, or, at the very least, areas in which further improvements are needed. Traditionally, public servants have been discouraged from publicly airing these issues for fear that they will result in attention, especially during Question Period in the House of Commons, that may embarrass the minister.

In the roundtables, parliamentarians encouraged bureaucrats to report on under-achievements or areas in which improvements are needed. They suggested that ways could be

found to minimize the risks. For example, the element of surprise is often crucial when provoking a strong negative reaction to an under-achievement among the public. However, if there were mechanisms or processes whereby departments were encouraged to provide ongoing reports to committees on the progress of particular initiatives, the element of surprise would be removed. Of course, this requires departments to be proactive in communicating with committees, which, in turn, requires a culture shift in departments, among committee members, and with the media, who, it was suggested, tend to focus on down-sides.

In addition, it was pointed out that reporting on areas in which improvements are needed or in which results are below expectations would be received better if the department included explanations and plans showing how it intends to improve the situation.

## **THEME 2: HORIZONTAL PLANNING AND REPORTING**

Much of the discussion in Roundtable Two focused on how to improve horizontal planning and reporting and on how committees might provide better input or guidance into the development of horizontal plans or targets. Natural Resources Canada provided a presentation on sustainable development – an issue that cuts across most departments. The presentation included a number of interesting techniques aimed at ensuring effective horizontal management of the issue. Officials acknowledged that horizontal reporting, including goal setting, planning and reporting on results, is at an earlier stage of development. Reporting to Parliament on sustainable development occurs by department, not by issue. The challenge, then, is how to ensure that all the departments involved in the issue work together to set goals, agree on programs, and report on results around the issue of sustainable development.

### **Developing and Reporting on Measures that are Societal or Global in Nature**

When one considers horizontal or cross-cutting issues, the targets or measures used tend to be high-level, societal ones, even though the individual programs that address them have more specific goals and measures. Thus, on the one hand, there may be many individual programs, each addressing different aspects of a cross-cutting issue and each with its own planning and evaluation requirements. On the other hand, when considered from the point of view of the higher-level, societal measures, the collection of programs appears as a single initiative aimed at achieving system-wide improvements or changes.

At the roundtables, it was suggested that the Estimates reports should also address the higher-level, cumulative, long-term impacts that horizontal issues have on citizens and society. Cost-benefit analyses could be provided at the individual program level. This would allow more informed decisions to be made about which programs are best situated to achieve the broader societal objectives.

Participants recognized that focusing on higher-level, longer-term societal or global

objectives can conflict with the requirement to report results annually. One response is to have a hierarchy of results – from transactions, to program effectiveness, to impact on citizens – where reporting requirements for the various levels are designed to ensure that the short-, mid- and long-term impacts are all captured.

It was also acknowledged that horizontal planning and reporting carries its own set of accountability challenges. Societal outcomes are often the product of multiple causes, whose origins lie in a variety of policy fields, governments or sectors. It can be very expensive and difficult to track and report on the specific effects of a policy or program that contributes to a complex outcome. The issue of multiple or dispersed accountabilities makes it all the more important that the players involved in a cross-cutting issue collectively adopt a set of well-defined shared outcomes and effective performance indicators. Collective planning is a necessity if there is to be shared ownership of the outcomes.

A suggestion was made that the Treasury Board consider further work to facilitate the identification of key horizontal issues that require horizontal planning and reporting and the development of joint accountability frameworks for collective planning and reporting by federal (and other governmental / societal) partners.

In the final session, participants pushed this discussion beyond the boundaries of the federal government. Solutions to large, societal issues are larger than any one federal department and often require cooperation and participation from other levels of government and other sectors. Participants posed an important challenge: Would it be possible to extend the horizontal concept to include the involvement of other levels of government or other sectors? If a societal issue could best be tackled by a combined federal–provincial approach, could planning and reporting mechanisms be developed to engage several levels of government?

In the end, then, participants found themselves asking the kinds of questions that most Canadians would welcome. Different federal departments and different levels of government have defined roles that are constitutionally based or that flow from the way the government is organized. However, societal issues do not divide themselves into such neat compartments. They have local dimensions, they involve provincial organizations, and sometimes they may require federal coordination. One of the more compelling challenges posed by the roundtables is the question of whether we can find ways of respecting the constitutional and management imperatives yet demonstrate to Canadians that cooperative and cohesive approaches and solutions are possible.

In sum, when considering how to approach a horizontal planning and reporting exercise, departments might be guided by some of the following questions that were posed in the course of discussion. Perhaps these could be used to develop a template or guide:

- What should be the indicators at a societal or global level (e.g., carbon dioxide target levels)?
- How are we doing in relation to those indicators? (This is the long-term set of measures.)
- Who “quarterbacks” the issue? How is ultimate accountability determined? Is there a lead department (or government)?

- What programs are in place to enable us to move towards the desired outcomes (e.g., lightweight materials for vehicles)?
- How are we doing in relation to these programs?
- Are the programs the best way to achieve those outcomes?
- Are there other programs that might affect the issue and need to be brought into the performance measurement process?
- How are competing aims and objectives (e.g., economic development and the environment) addressed?
- How do we determine progress on an annual (or more frequent) basis, where the outcome involves a multi-year program?

Finally, it was suggested that adopting the suggestions and recommendations in Theme 3 below might engage committees more actively in the horizontal processes.

### **THEME 3: RE-ENERGIZING COMMITTEES**

As indicated earlier in this report, perhaps the most exciting idea from the roundtable discussions was that of using results-based approaches to strengthen Parliament’s committee system and the role of committee members. Estimates committee work competes with many other priorities for members’ attention. Finding ways of using the committees to improve Estimates planning and reporting processes was seen by all parliamentarians to be an important objective and outcome of this roundtable. An important benefit could well be the re-energizing of committees and more meaningful and productive involvement of parliamentarians in the committee processes.

The term that surfaced was *partnership* between parliamentarians and the bureaucracy. Parliamentarians suggested that ways could and should be found to create a more collegial environment within which committee deliberations on Estimates reports would occur. Common goals or results are one way of providing a more objective basis for committee discussions and a less partisan environment. For example, focusing some committee work on horizontal planning and reporting would engage members in debate and discussion of the strategic aims of government. All parliamentarians saw this as a positive and proactive way of using committees to improve the Estimates process and, at the same time, of increasing the relevance, effectiveness, and non-partisan nature of the committee.

As discussed in Theme 2, performance reporting occurs at a variety of levels. As we move up the ladder from transactions to program evaluation and effectiveness, and to global or societal measures, the involvement of parliamentarians and committees becomes increasingly appropriate. Parliamentarians have a particular stake in how the policy goals and measurements that are related to societal objectives are chosen. Decision-making at this level often involves trade-offs between competing goods, conflicting priorities or controversial values. These are precisely the kinds of decisions that parliamentarians have been elected to make.

It is clear from the comments of parliamentarians that they want to be more involved in

the Estimates planning and reporting process. Engaging members more directly in the larger goal-setting exercise should be an objective of committees and departments. In addition, it was pointed out that this also has potential for increasing citizen involvement in the exercise by having them participate through reports, committee testimony and other committee techniques. This is one way in which committees can add real value to the Estimates process.

At the same time, participants felt that committees should not interfere with the day-to-day management or operations of departments. Members should distinguish between involvement in the general management of departmental business and higher-level policy, goal-setting and governance. They agreed that they should limit themselves to the latter. One member summed up the role of parliamentarians by comparing it to that of a board of directors.

If committees are to take on new roles and responsibilities, participants felt that cabinet would have to focus more directly on the issues. For their part, departmental officials seemed enthusiastic, indicating that they are ready, willing and able to strengthen the reporting processes in ways that would better engage committees and potentially improve the functioning of committees.

As part of the strategy to improve the collegiality and effectiveness of committees, it was suggested that ministers either be members of the committee or should attend more often. There should also be sessions where ministers come to listen to committee members rather than just present. The idea is to take the politics out of the situation and focus on what is best for the long term for citizens and to discuss these difficult issues. The approach would be one of problem-solving rather than confrontation.

It was acknowledged that changing the role of the committee to better involve it in the Estimates process will require departments to consider what information is needed, how best to present or provide that information, and what sorts of issues or questions should be part of the committee process. Current pilot departments were viewed as an excellent opportunity to address the information-packaging challenges.

Finally, it was suggested that consideration be given to developing planning and reporting processes for issues that not only cut across federal department lines but that also have provincial or other sectoral dimensions as well. A pilot project could involve, perhaps, committees from several governments, focused on an issue of importance to all participating governments. This would enable the governments to build on the collaborative spirit of the Social Union agreement<sup>4</sup> towards more holistic planning and reporting around key societal issues that involve different levels of government.

## CONCLUSION

The roundtables produced a number of exciting and promising ideas for strengthening how government reports on plans and performance. Equally important, it is clear from the points raised by parliamentarians that they are seeking, and believe there can be, a more

effective role for committees in the Estimates process based upon new partnerships among them, ministers and the bureaucracy.

Achieving this will not be easy. It will take cooperation and leadership from several quarters, including ministers, departments, opposition parties and the media. This is among the most important challenges facing government. The legitimacy of Parliament depends upon parliamentarians' continued support for its decision-making processes. Yet, government backbenchers, in particular, have signalled their dissatisfaction with the system and their desire to be more meaningfully involved. Action and leadership are called for. Failure to provide them may be more than a missed opportunity.

## NOTES

- 1 See <<http://www.tbs-sct.gc.ca/tb/irpp/irppe.html>>.
- 2 This idea was reiterated in the government's response to the 51<sup>st</sup> report of the standing committee on procedure and house affairs, which proposed the launch of the second phase of the Improved Reporting to Parliament Project. This initiative would "engage parliamentarians and parliamentary committees as partners in a collaborative process" to improve Estimates reporting.
- 3 The pilot departments for the federal government's Modern Comptrollership initiative include Agriculture and Agri-food Canada, Human Resources Development Canada, Indian and Northern Affairs Canada, National Defence, Natural Resources Canada, and the Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat.
- 4 See Social Union Framework Agreement at <<http://socialunion.gc.ca>>.

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