SPEAKING POINTS

John Milloy
M.P.P. Kitchener Centre
Parliamentary Assistant to the Minister of Intergovernmental Affairs

INTRODUCTORY REMARKS

First, I'd like to thank Harvey Lazar and others who have organized this conference. I appreciate the opportunity to be on this panel on strengthening intergovernmental collaboration.

During the campaign and since our election, the Premier has been forceful in his commitment to a new spirit of intergovernmental cooperation to strengthen and renew the federation. Our view is that citizen disengagement is fed by perceptions of governments working at cross-purposes. In federal-provincial relations especially, finding common ground and proceeding collaboratively is an essential part of working to improve programs and services to make a difference in the lives of all our residents.

As his Parliamentary Assistant for Intergovernmental Affairs, Premier McGuinty has assigned me the job of fostering more constructive relationships between governments. I have been meeting and talking with a number of Ministers from jurisdictions across the country. I'm particularly pleased to be here today.

This conference sets up an important dialogue. Governments are grappling with issues both of strengthening intergovernmental collaboration and democratic reform. We know these are not exclusive arenas in federal systems. By definition, federal systems demand intergovernmental collaboration. And federations can strengthen democracy. They bring governments closer to citizens and they offer citizens opportunities for democratic action at multiple levels of government.

As I read the conference program and the topics under intergovernmental collaboration, I was struck that Ontario is taking action in virtually every area. Multilaterally, through the Council of the Federation, or bilaterally, we are pursuing a number of objectives through intergovernmental collaboration – strengthening the economic union, improving services to citizens, and strengthening social programs.

And ultimately, I would argue, strengthened intergovernmental collaboration serves democracy as well. When governments are actively engaged in public debate to generate consensus, when they are airing differences, when they are communicating publicly and informing citizens about the issues, releasing detailed objectives and work plans, then they are serving the democratic process and citizens can hold them accountable.

There are a number of topics that fall under intergovernmental collaboration. In the interest of time, I'll focus on a handful: the Council of the Federation and Ontario's interest in the Council, Ontario's approach to the federal-provincial-municipal relationship, and bilateral agreements and service harmonization.

COUNCIL OF THE FEDERATION

Premiers signed the Council of the Federation Founding Agreement in December last year so it's still early days for the Council. If we work at it, the COF can be a dynamic institution in the federation, a forum where provinces and territories can build consensus and work together in key areas to make a difference.

The next Council meeting is July 28-30 at Niagara-on-the-Lake, when Ontario takes over the chair. Issues of health care reform and sustainability will undoubtedly dominate Premiers' discussions. This is not surprising given their importance to governments and citizens and that a First Ministers Meeting on health care is expected later in the summer.

But it's important to keep in mind that the test of the COF as an enduring institution will be measured not only in high-profile areas like health care and Canada-US relations. Provincial-territorial cooperation through the COF can

make a difference in a wide range of areas: strengthening the economic union and internal trade, emergency management, literacy.

Recent progress on the Agreement on Internal Trade is an example of how the Council of the Federation can help focus the political will of Premiers and get governments working together. Progress on the AIT had been lackluster. Following the December meeting of the COF, Premiers Doer and Lord spearheaded work to get Provincial-Territorial trade ministers together to resolve outstanding issues and develop a work plan. The AIT work plan was reviewed and endorsed by Premiers at the Council of the Federation meeting in February 2004. Last month, PT Trade Ministers agreed on how to include procurement by Crown Corporations under the Procurement Chapter of the AIT and this will be implemented by January 2005. This is a significant achievement.

The COF will break new ground at this summer's meeting on a different front, one directly related to democratic renewal. This year the COF is hosting a three-day Youth Forum that will be held in conjunction with the COF summer meeting. The Forum will bring together twenty-six youth (two delegates from each province and territory) to learn about Canadian federalism and generate ideas about the role that governments and the Council can play in increasing participation of young people in activities such as voting, public service and public life. The Forum will lay the groundwork for a longer-term COF Youth Initiative.

It will be exciting for Ontario to be at the helm through the first full year of the Council's operation as we begin to see the fruits of our work in a number of areas.

FEDERAL-PROVINCIAL-MUNICIPAL RELATIONSHIP

There is also much happening in the arena of federal-provincial-municipal relations. In Ontario, Premier McGuinty has asked the Prime Minister to form a federal-provincial-municipal working group to address key issues on the municipal front. That includes working out ways to ensure municipal involvement in key decisions that affect them.

The province currently has a Memorandum of Understanding with the Association of Municipalities of Ontario on consultation on provincial initiatives that affect them, especially in terms of budgets and planning. This government will strengthen its commitment by enshrining the MOU in legislation.

And there's a lot happening on the ground. Last week, we saw announcements on infrastructure and immigration that will change the role of municipalities in these program areas. On infrastructure, the three levels of government committed a total of $900 million over five years for infrastructure in small towns and rural municipalities in Ontario. As importantly, principles of the Canada-Ontario Municipal Rural Infrastructure Program include recognition of the municipal role in identifying priorities and implementing the program. There is a separate letter of intent with the Association of Municipalities of Ontario to recognize its role in implementing the program.

On May 6, Ontario Minister Bountrogianni and federal Minister Judy Sgro signed a Canada-Ontario Letter of Intent to negotiate an immigration agreement, which recognizes municipalities as partners and creates a federal-provincial-municipal committee as part of the negotiating structure.

BILATERAL AGREEMENTS AND SERVICE HARMONIZATION

Ontario has also been working bilaterally to strengthen intergovernmental collaboration. Our objectives range from sharing information and resources, to reducing overlap and streamlining services, to making information more accessible to citizens and helping them to navigate the range of programs available to them.

On April 22 Premier McGuinty and Premier Charest jointly announced an Ontario-Quebec cooperation initiative. It recognizes Ontario and Quebec's historical relationship and mutual interests related to francophone communities

and gives public profile to collaborative activities between Quebec and Ontario.

Ontario and Quebec ministries have identified a broad range of short and longer-term sectoral initiatives. In areas such as transportation, the environment, health care, natural resources, tourism, and public security, there are opportunities to share information, work together, and provide mutual assistance in times of emergencies. Ontario ministries will be working with their Quebec counterparts to develop a general framework agreement and separate sectoral agreements for the fall.

These government-to-government agreements strengthen working relationships at all levels. And with sharing of information and expertise, they enable politicians and officials to get a wider and a more in-depth view of how programs and services are working for citizens, where they need to be improved, where there are gaps that should be filled.

SERVICE HARMONIZATION

Indeed, it's not an exaggeration to say that the Ontario government is on a mission to improve services to all our residents. We are working closely with the federal government at all levels to implement service delivery harmonization, co-locate government service counters, and on regulatory harmonization in areas such as environmental assessments. Working together, and with municipalities, we can achieve levels of efficiency and service we could not achieve on our own.

We've made a public commitment to redesigning government and developing new ways to deliver better quality services. Taxpayers and citizens are consumers of public services and it is important that governments work together to ensure effective and efficient delivery of services.

On May 13, Premier McGuinty and Prime Minister Martin signed a Memorandum of Agreement on Collaboration on the Delivery of Public Service - a first in Canada - which sets out a shared vision, principles, and a process to establish new, innovative and collaborative approaches in the provision of public services in Ontario. One priority is a jointly located coordinated Emergency Management System. Others include integrated inspections, investigations and enforcement in areas such as health and safety, environmental assessment and food safety.

As well, the federal, provincial and municipal governments will work together to co-locate where it makes sense so that citizens can get information about programs and services offered by all levels of government and access a range of services. In Sarnia, for instance, residents can access information and services from the federal Human Resources and Skills Development, from provincial ministries of Consumer and Business Services, Community, Family and Children's Services, Public Safety and Security and Ministry of Labour, and from municipal government on Ontario Works, children's services, and social housing. Another example is the Collaborative Seniors Portal with the City of Brockville, which provides access to information and services from all three levels of government. There are plans to expand to other communities.

CONCLUSION

I've only touched on these topics, but it's fair to say that there is more activity now than there has been for some time in both multilateral and bilateral intergovernmental collaboration. It's interesting that at the same time, a number of governments are also committed to democratic renewal initiatives. There's a lot of energy for change in governments these days. Governments may be playing catch up to the demands of citizens for more open, transparent and accountable government, but they are listening and acting.

As I said at the beginning, intergovernmental collaboration and democratic renewal can complement each other. By raising public awareness of issues, structuring the debate, and resolving issues by consensus, governments working together can strengthen our federal democracy. Democratic renewal is

multi-faceted process and governments are taking initiatives on a number of fronts.