

Working Together – Report of the Joint Tables

On September 27, 1999, the report of the Government of Canada/Voluntary Sector Joint Tables was released. *Working Together: Report of the Joint Tables* outlines options for how the Government of Canada and the voluntary sector can more effectively work together.

The Report is the culmination of an innovative process launched in March 1999. Discussion tables, composed of government officials and voluntary sector leaders, conducted exploratory talks in three key areas: Building a New Relationship, Strengthening Capacity, and Improving the Regulatory Framework. All three tables suggested the need for some body to continue their work.

The Table on Building a New Relationship developed a framework for a renewed relationship; defined a vision, principles, and roles; and explored ways to ensure that the collaboration flourishes. Among the options presented is a joint Accord to guide the relationship. This Table suggested the need to develop a means to orchestrate the voluntary sector's myriad voices. To focus responsibility for the voluntary sector at the federal government level, the Table explored whether there should be a federal minister responsible for the voluntary sector. In addition, the New Relationship Table suggests the possibility of an Annual Report to Parliament.

The Table on Strengthening Capacity explored ways to enhance the ability of the sector and the government to work together to meet the challenges ahead. It proposed options related to financial capacity, human resources, knowledge, information management, and information technology. For example, it suggested the development of a national initiative about volunteering to encourage Canadians to volunteer and to enhance the sector's capacity to effectively use volunteer talent and skills. In the context of financial capacity, the Table examined a range of government funding principles and the need to analyse which organizations get funding and for what purposes. Reflecting on the need to enhance knowledge, this Table suggested the need to include in Statistics Canada National Accounts consideration of the voluntary sector plus the need to develop a policy development capacity within voluntary organizations.

The Table on Improving the Regulatory Framework presented options for legislative, institutional, administrative, and funding changes. Options

include a new framework for regulatory oversight and simplified charity reporting requirements. On the matter of institutional reform the Regulatory Table suggests that there is a need for more transparency, easier methods of appeal, and more supportive and enabling regulation. In addressing the need for administrative reform, the Regulatory Table suggests a shorter reporting form be developed for charities with donations of less than \$100,000. It called for rules on business activities and compliance measures that stop short of the deregistration of charities.

The Report sets down a three stage implementation plan. The Commitment Phase, during the fall of 1999, calls for the confirmation of the intention to establish an Accord with the voluntary sector and to form an Implementation Group. The Construction Phase is to operate through the winter of 1999 and into the fall of the year 2000. This Phase would see the creation of task forces reporting to the Implementation Group established to do further research on specific issues and will develop a consultation method and agenda. The final and ongoing stage, the Consolidation Phase, will begin in the winter of the year 2000. On the basis of the framework established by the Report and the first two phases, this phase will allow for ongoing dialogue and the ability to give priority to and identify common interests for action.

The release of the *Working Together: Report of the Joint Tables* represents a formal recognition of the voluntary sector as a pillar of society equal to the public and private sectors. It is an historic step towards working together with the federal government to achieve the mutual goal of improving quality of life for Canadians. It might even suggest a new kind of governance model where the governed are consulted at the earliest stages of policy development and regulation.

But for all the positive features of this Report, it is still just another report out of Ottawa. A critical feature of the Report's success will be the ability of the federal government to involve the provinces. It is at the provincial level where so much of the legal responsibility for charities and non-profits rests. In addition, the organizations and people who volunteer for, work in, and are served by the countless charities and non-profits that exist in all parts of Canada must make their views known. It is important for those in the voluntary sector to get the Report and read it. It should be discussed by boards and by constituencies and members. The next while will see the issues which the Report raises discussed in range of situations. The outcome might well be a significantly revised policy and regulatory framework which establishes the context for the operation of the voluntary sector for many years to come. It is important that the wide range of non-profits and charities which make up the voluntary sector have clear answers to questions the Report raises.

Copies of the joint report are available either from the Voluntary Sector Roundtable (c/o The Coalition of National Voluntary Organizations, 75 Albert Street, Suite 301, Ottawa, Ontario K1P SE7. Tel: (613) 238-1591) or, in electronic version, from www.pcobcp.gc.ca/prog-e.htm, www.pcobcp.gc.ca/prog_f.htm or www.web.net/vsr/~sb

Laird Hunter is a lawyer with the firm of Worton Hunter & Callaghan in Edmonton, Alberta. He served as a member of the Regulatory Table.