## **HUFFPOST CANADA**

## Open Government: Will B.C. Take the Lead in Transparency?



Posted: 06/27/11 08:56 AM ET

British Columbia's new premier, Christy Clark, has declared *open government* one of her top priorities. She <u>promises</u> to "get citizens more engaged with their government, including holding open town halls in communities around the province."

Fifteen of the world's leading experts on government would be pleased. They have just released a major report titled "The Future of Government." The report, which was sponsored by the World Economic Forum, distills a vast amount of learning down to a few basic thoughts on what governments must do to meet the challenges of the next decade. At bottom, the message is to pursue open government.

So is B.C. blazing the trail for Canadian governments?

Clark is on the right track: "Open government," she tells us, "means talking about our problems and setting our priorities openly. Government will work with citizens to find solutions and explain decisions."

Unlike her counterparts in <u>Ottawa</u>, or even <u>Washington</u>, she sees open government as much more than a commitment to more transparent government, say, by making more information available online. Clark's version also includes new approaches to decision-making through public engagement.

Nevertheless, Clark's plan to achieve this by holding town halls around the province is a little underwhelming. Town halls have been with us since the American Revolution -- maybe since the Middle Ages -- and where has it got us?

If she really wants the kind of open government she preaches, Clark will need something more ambitious than town halls to drive it. The "Future of Government" report has an excellent suggestion: develop a new set of performance measures for open government.

Readers may now be blinking: Performance measures? Is this not even more underwhelming than town halls? But stop and think about it. Performance measurement (PM) is now a core practice in every major government in the land -- indeed, throughout the OECD.

It wasn't always so. I recall when PM first surfaced on the Canadian political landscape. It was part of the Klein Revolution in the early 90s. Alberta was the first jurisdiction to apply PM at a government-wide level. I know because at the time I went across the country to discuss the merits of PM with other governments. Most hardly knew what it was.

We've come a long way. Today, all major governments are committed to PM on two key fronts: policy outcomes and service quality.

On services, satisfaction surveys are commonly used to evaluate and improve service quality. As a result, a wide range of service standards has been developed and applied, which, in turn, has revolutionized thinking around service delivery.

As for policy outcomes, before the Klein Revolution, little or no information was gathered on them. In many cases, officials were not even clear what outcomes their programs were supposed to achieve. Hard as this may be to believe, the word "outcome" was barely part of our policy vocabulary.

PM changed all that -- forever. It forced managers to start clarifying objectives, adopting indicators to measure progress, and collecting and using data to improve the results.

While we may still have a long way to travel on this road, it would be hard to overstate how much PM has already reshaped our views on policy-making and service delivery and, ultimately, our expectations around government. Whatever history will say about other parts of Ralph Klein's revolution, everyone agrees that PM is here to stay. Take note, Christy Clark.

So what does this mean for open government?

As the "Future of Government" report makes clear, open government is a kind of catch-all term for a complex array of concepts, tools and processes, including networked government, citizen engagement, innovation, interdependence, complexity, participation, collaboration and agility.

We can sum all this up without too much distortion by saying that the central challenge open government poses for governments is to develop new ways of working with the public to further improve policy outcomes and service delivery. At bottom, this means collaboration.

But if open government is a new way of doing business through collaboration, governments have a lot to learn. They have always operated on command-and-control principles. Learning to listen, discuss and share will not come easily.

PM is a critical first step on this journey. Governments will need it to help them build the new skills, structures and culture to support open government. The public will need it to hold governments' feet to the fire.

As the report notes, however, this is a whole new field of measurement, which is still in its infancy. In order to tackle the challenge of collaboration systematically, governments need to make some major progress on it. Measurement therefore should be a priority.

There's a saying that what get's measured get's done. Unless and until governments can track and assess their progress toward open government, it will remain an ideal at best, political rhetoric at worst.

The measurement barrier can be broken. The question is whether governments are ready to take up the challenge. If Clark wants to make her mark, here is a golden opportunity. Just ask Ralph.