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## A RETROSPECTIVE LOOK AT THE VOLUNTARY SECTOR INITIATIVE (VSI): WHAT LESSONS DID WE LEARN?

Patrick Johnston

### INTRODUCTION

IN MARCH OF 1999, 13 FEDERAL CABINET MINISTERS CONVENED IN OTTAWA for a working dinner. It was neither an official Cabinet nor a Cabinet Committee meeting, however, and attendance was voluntary. As one Minister quipped at the outset of the meeting, “It is the largest number of Ministers I’ve seen together in one room – when they didn’t have to be.”

The Ministers were meeting with about 25 representatives of the voluntary sector.<sup>1</sup> They were discussing options to strengthen the relationship between the federal government and the voluntary sector. Those discussions ultimately led to the creation of the Voluntary Sector Initiative (VSI). Operating from 2000–2005, the VSI entailed a \$94.6-million commitment by the federal government to undertake a work plan that had been jointly developed by voluntary sector and federal officials.

The VSI was, without doubt, the most ambitious and comprehensive attempt ever made to strengthen the relationship between Canada’s voluntary sector and the federal government. It accomplished a great deal. But the VSI also fell short of the high hopes and expectations that had been placed on it. This article, written a decade after the VSI was in full swing, is an attempt to draw out key lessons from the initiative. Hopefully, these lessons will inform current and future efforts to strengthen voluntary sector-government relations whether at a federal, provincial, or municipal level.

### VSI: THE CONTEXT

The state of voluntary-government relations at the federal level from the late eighties until the mid-nineties has been characterized by Susan Phillips (2009) of Carleton University as one of “mutual isolation and suspicion and outright antagonism” (cited in Elson, 2011, p. 54). Hostility peaked following the introduction of the 1995 federal budget, which contained massive cuts in federal expenditures, many of them having significant negative repercussions for voluntary sector organizations.

The 1995 budget was a prime motivating factor leading to the formation later that year of the Voluntary Sector Roundtable (VSR).

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An initiative of the voluntary sector itself, and supported by some modest funding from foundations, the VSR convened the leaders of national umbrella organizations representing the major sub-sectors that make up the voluntary sector as a whole. The VSR was, in many ways, a coalition of coalitions.<sup>2</sup>

The VSR established four cross-cutting objectives: (i) to improve the relationship with the federal government, (ii) to strengthen capacity of the sector, (iii) to increase awareness of the sector, and (iv) to enhance tax incentives.

The creation of the VSR marked the beginning of a steady improvement in the sector's relationship with the federal government, backed up by a series of concrete measures. Manifestations of the improved relationship included the following:

- The federal budget of 1996 and, in particular, the 1997 budget included major incentives to boost charitable giving – in part to counter the damaging impact of 1995 budget cuts.
- In response to requests from sector leaders, the federal government committed funds for the Canada Survey on Giving, Volunteering and Participating (CSGVP). The massive survey of 19,000 Canadians (a unique collaboration of four federal departments, one private foundation, and two national voluntary organizations) provided detailed data and information about Canadians' engagement in the voluntary sector that had never before been available.
- During the 1997 election, the Liberal party's platform included some major commitments to the sector and declared that "enhancing the capacity of the voluntary sector is a key objective of this government" (*Securing Our Future Together*, 1997, p. 67).
- Following its re-election, the Liberal government of Jean Chretien established a Voluntary Sector Task Force to advise the government on implementing their platform commitments. The location of the Task Force in the Privy Council Office (PCO), a key central agency of government that also provided bureaucratic support to the Prime Minister's Office, was taken as a sign of the government's commitment to strengthening relations with the voluntary sector.
- The March 1999 meeting of 13 federal Ministers and voluntary sector leaders resulted in the creation of three "joint tables" – a unique innovation in policy development. Co-chaired by, and including equal representation from, 45 senior government and voluntary sector leaders, the joint table participants developed 26 recommendations that were contained in the August 1999 report *Working Together*. That report became the basis for the VSI work plan.
- The federal government further reiterated its commitment to the sector in the October 1999 Speech from the Throne and again in early 2000 when it announced the creation of a Reference Group of Ministers for the Voluntary Sector to be headed by then-president of the Treasury Board, Mme. Lucienne Robillard.
- Finally, in June 2000, Mme. Robillard announced a commitment of \$94.6 million to launch the five-year Voluntary Sector Initiative (VSI). Adopting the joint table approach used successfully in 1999, the VSI charged 77 voluntary sector VSI participants and approximately the same number of federal officials to give effect to the recommendations contained in the *Working Together* report.

By the launch of the VSI in 2000, voluntary sector issues had risen significantly on the government's priority list and voluntary sector leaders had access to key government decision makers. It marked a change in fortune for the voluntary sector that had hardly been imagined only five years earlier.

## LESSONS LEARNED

Given the length of time since the formal conclusion of the VSI in 2005, several evaluations and analyses of the VSI have been undertaken. I will not repeat their conclusions, but they should be consulted for more specifics about the actual outcomes of the VSI – both successes and shortcomings.<sup>3</sup>

While some evaluations identified “lessons learned,” this paper offers a personal perspective from one who was intimately involved over a seven-year period in both the lead up to and the operation of the initiative.<sup>4</sup> My observations are intended to complement the more formal, objective VSI evaluations, but they come with a disclaimer: this paper reflects my own personal biases. It also views the VSI from the perspective of someone who has spent almost all of his professional life in the voluntary sector. As a result, my views may not necessarily be shared by other colleagues who were active participants in the VSI, whether from the voluntary sector or the federal government.

There are many lessons that can be drawn from the VSI. The following, in my opinion, are the most relevant.

### Overly ambitious

As already mentioned, the VSI work plan, with some important exceptions, had been jointly agreed on by voluntary sector and government representatives and was based on the report *Working Together*. But that report contained 26 recommendations.

During one of the meetings between voluntary sector representatives and Cabinet Ministers, Sheila Copps asked a question of voluntary sector representatives. Then Minister of Canadian Heritage, Copps wondered, “Which two or three of the *Working Together* recommendations should be assigned the highest priority?” I responded by saying that the sector had two priorities; our first priority was the first set of 13 recommendations, and our second priority was the last set of 13 recommendations.

Although somewhat flippant, my comments reflected the views of many other sector leaders. We shared a concern that if we were put into the position of having to “cherry pick” from the 26 recommendations, we might weaken the consensus and solidarity demonstrated by the sector to that point. Not all of the recommendations were considered to be of equal importance by all parts of the sector. In addition, many sector leaders believed that the then-positive relationship with the federal government wouldn't last forever. As a result, many felt that we should try to accomplish as much as we could and as soon as we could (Wyatt, 2009).

Sheila Copps' question reflected wisdom about the reality of governing. She understood that, when you have multiple priorities in government, you have none at all. The sheer number of initiatives we were pursuing simultaneously – added to the complexity of

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many of them – overwhelmed the capacity of both federal and voluntary sector representatives to address them all effectively. And for many participants, the work entailed by the VSI was in addition to their day jobs. This led to exhaustion and no small degree of frustration on the part of both voluntary sector and federal participants.

### **Mutual misunderstanding**

The VSI established seven formal joint tables. Several informal working groups were also created.

A four-person, independent selection panel had been charged by the VSR to solicit applications from and select individuals who would represent the sector in the initiative. The panel received 700 applications from people volunteering to fill the 77 slots on the various tables and working groups. The selection criteria used by the panel were intended to ensure that sector representatives reflected, to the greatest extent possible, the breadth and diversity of the sector with respect to organizational mandate, size, working language, geographic location, etc. They also privileged deep and long-standing engagement in the voluntary sector.

It soon became apparent, however, that there was one glaring omission: there was no explicit criterion that participants have an understanding of and experience working with the federal government.

While many voluntary sector representatives had worked with governments, their engagement had been primarily at the municipal and/or provincial level. And, as often as not, the nature of the engagement related to issues of funding rather than policy. Even of those voluntary sector participants with prior experience, few had a comprehensive understanding of the labyrinthine operations of the federal government. Several VSI federal representatives privately expressed their dismay at what they considered to be the naïveté and lack of understanding of the voluntary sector VSI participants about “how Ottawa works.”

By the same token, it also became apparent to the VSI voluntary sector participants that many of their federal counterparts had only a cursory understanding of the full scale, scope, and diversity of voluntary sector organizations.

Many of the original federal VSI representatives were senior officials with the ranking of Assistant Deputy Minister or Director General. These appointments were viewed positively by the voluntary sector as a sign of the importance the government attached to the VSI. But, as we came to understand, rising through the ranks of the federal bureaucracy requires a singular and almost slavish devotion to career. Very hard working, few of the federal VSI participants had much, if any, spare time to devote to volunteer or other community activities. Those who did were more the exception than the rule. In addition, unlike the corporate social responsibility practices of some enlightened private corporations, the federal government, at the time, did not actively encourage or promote volunteerism amongst its employees.

Ironically, but not surprisingly, elected officials tended to have a better understanding of the voluntary sector. Volunteer commitment and community engagement play an im-

portant role in the career paths of many politicians. Candidates for election often profile their volunteer commitments as part of their bona fides in running for public office. But the primary federal VSI players were not elected officials; they were professional public servants, many of whom had only a cursory understanding of the voluntary sector. And many of their voluntary sector counterparts had only a rudimentary understanding of federal government operations.

### The limits of collaboration

Both in the lead up to and the implementation of the VSI, there was constant talk about the benefits of partnership and collaboration between the public and voluntary sectors. Voluntary sector leaders had often aspired to a “seat at the table” with government. For many, the VSI felt like the realisation of that goal.

The success of the initial voluntary sector-government collaborations masked a more fundamental truth that revealed itself early on in the VSI: the protocols involved in a Westminster style of government result in an inherent and fundamental power imbalance between the voluntary and public sectors. For all the rhetoric about “working together,” when it came to the allocation of federal resources for the VSI, there was no such thing as shared decision making. Whether one is dealing with the federal or the provincial governments, ultimate and final decision-making will always rest with government.

One incident, in particular, highlighted this fundamental power imbalance.

Following the release of the *Working Together* report, a cone of silence descended on the process and our public sector colleagues were, essentially, incommunicado. They were preparing the submission to Cabinet, seeking support for the VSI initiative.

After months of limited contact, members of the VSR suddenly received an invitation to a meeting with our federal colleagues. The lead government official – well liked and known to be very supportive of the sector – said something along these lines: “We have some good news and some bad news. The good news is that Cabinet has approved a substantial initiative to advance the recommendations contained in *Working Together*. The bad news is that, because of the rules with respect to Cabinet secrecy, we can’t tell you anything more.”

The voluntary sector leaders were being asked by our federal colleagues to partner with them in a joint venture. Other than knowing that it would be based on the *Working Together* recommendations, however, we didn’t have any details about the timeframe, the format, or the specific objectives, let alone the level of funding, for the initiative. While our federal colleagues tried to provide as much information as they could to help us move forward together, that meeting confirmed what some of us already suspected: whether it was the VSI or any other joint venture, public servants would always have access to certain information that would not be available to the voluntary sector. The voluntary sector participants, in other words, would always be the junior partners in any relationship.

This power imbalance was manifest in other ways. For example, while the VSI work plan was based on the jointly developed report *Working Together*, there were some key differences.

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VSR leaders were ultimately briefed by federal officials on the detailed allocation of the \$94.6 million just prior to the public launch of the initiative. (VSR members were the sector's primary interlocutors with the federal government until the VSI was launched.) We were taken aback that almost a third of VSI funding – \$28.5 million – was to be allocated for a specific initiative that had never been discussed, the Sectoral Involvement in Departmental Policy Development (SIDPD). We were told, officially, that SIDPD was intended to improve opportunities for input to federal departments from voluntary sector organizations. Unofficially, and privately, we were told that this was the “price of admission” extracted by some key departments concerned about the additional work burden imposed by the VSI. While described as a capacity-building initiative, SIDPD seemed designed to strengthen the internal capacity of the federal government rather than voluntary organizations.

In addition, federal officials made it clear that they weren't prepared to address, by way of a formal joint table, two issues of primary concern to voluntary sector organizations: funding and advocacy. Although the federal government agreed to a study of these issues, it considered them too controversial to do more than that. While the VSR members were uncomfortable with these decisions, there was never any serious thought given to walking from the table and refusing to participate in the VSI. As I recall, most of us were of the view that “half-a-loaf” was better than nothing at all.

With respect to the issue of advocacy, at least, a work-around was developed. An “alternative mechanism” that engaged both government and sector representatives produced some guidance for the CRA on a more permissive approach to the issue of political activities. The fact that there was any constructive discussion about advocacy, however, owes more to the commitment, persistence, and creativity of some VSI participants than it does to the federal government's willingness to engage the issue.

#### **Consultation blind spots**

The VSI – both in the development and implementation phases – required of voluntary sector leaders extensive and ongoing consultations with sector organizations. This included a meeting in the fall of 2000 with more than 300 voluntary sector representatives as well as issue specific consultations undertaken by individual joint tables and working groups.

The voluntary sector leaders were also engaged in ongoing consultation with federal officials; in fact, with more than 70 federal officials participating directly in the joint table process, the VSI seemed like one on-going consultation. In retrospect, however, the voluntary sector didn't adequately engage two groups that play key roles at the federal level – officials of the Department of Finance and members of opposition parties.

Federal appointees to the joint tables did include representatives of the Department of Finance. But as one of only four central federal agencies, Finance is a department unlike others, with far more authority and decision making power. This, in turn, confers more power on Finance department officials. If voluntary sector participants felt like junior partners to our federal colleagues, federal VSI participants often felt and acted like junior partners to Finance. In any difference of opinion at the joint tables, federal participants almost always deferred to the position advanced by Finance.

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Paul Martin, then Finance Minister, was not a member of the Reference Group of Ministers for the voluntary sector. His political staff assured voluntary sector representatives, however, that he was supportive of the initiative. It became apparent, however, that neither he nor his advisors had an understanding of the VSI. We will never know if a more thorough engagement of Finance representatives would have changed the outcome of the VSI. But a key group of decision makers did not have as detailed an understanding as they should have of the voluntary sector's hopes for the initiative.

During the course of the 1997 federal election, the VSR prepared resource material enabling voluntary sector organizations to submit questions to candidates for all major political parties. Following the re-election of a Liberal majority government and through to the completion of the VSI in 2005, however, the voluntary sector made little effort to apprise members of the opposition parties about the mandate and progress of the VSI.

The consequences of the failure to engage opposition members became apparent following the election of a Conservative government in 2006.

Constantly referring to itself as the “new government,” Stephen Harper's administration quickly distanced itself from any initiatives associated with the former Chretien and Martin regimes. They obviously considered the VSI to be such an initiative and an *Accord between the Government of Canada and the Voluntary Sector*, which had been signed and unveiled by Prime Minister Chretien at a public ceremony in 2001, was soon dropped from departmental websites. The *Accord*, a high-level statement of principles that should govern the relationship between voluntary sector organizations and the federal government, transcends any partisan interests. Its unveiling by Prime Minister Chretien at a public ceremony in 2001, was enough of an association to taint the *Accord*. As a result, even though it was the product of much effort by non-partisan voluntary sector representatives and professional public servants, the *Accord's* potential to strengthen the mutual relationship between both sectors was never realized.

#### **A sector divided**

One of the inherent strengths of Canada's voluntary sector is its diversity. The VSI initiative demonstrated, however, that diversity can also be an underlying weakness.

In many ways, the voluntary sector in Canada is simply an aggregation of sub-sectors defined by mandate or field of interest. The tens of thousands of organizations that make up the voluntary sector have missions as varied as the environment, social services, arts and culture, education, religion, international development, and health care. These sub-sectors have some things in common but, by and large, tend to operate pretty much independently of each other.

This absence of a unifying narrative or common cause was evident during the formation of the VSR.

In response to the severe budget cuts contained in the 1995 federal budget, founders of the VSR convened meetings of those sub-sectors. At the outset, it was clear that many of those attending had never met each other before in spite of leading national voluntary organizations and having held their positions for some time.

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In addition, general references to “the voluntary sector” suggest a kind of homogenous entity that masks a host of other fault lines.

Many sector organizations, for example, receive significant public funding, which is often their primary or sole motive for engaging with governments. For the majority of voluntary sector organizations, however, their principal interlocutor is a provincial or municipal government (Lasby, 2011). It is not the federal government, which, of course, was the sole focus of the VSI.

The primacy of provincial governments was particularly relevant in the case of Quebec-based voluntary organizations. Cultural, linguistic, historical, and legal differences have resulted in the evolution of a voluntary sector in Quebec that is unique. While there were Quebec-based representatives involved, many of the most creative and innovative sector leaders in Quebec were not engaged in the VSI.

In addition, there are real divides in the voluntary sector between large and small organizations and those that are urban compared to rural based. A sense of isolation is felt, in particular, by smaller or rural organizations that are not affiliated with a national network. The VSI was criticized by some of these organizations for not adequately addressing the issues that were of most concern to them.

#### **Money changes everything**

The inherent fault lines that characterize the voluntary sector weren't obvious during the lead up to the VSI. Given the damaging impact of the 1995 budget cuts, most sector organizations seemed supportive of efforts undertaken by the VSR to defend the sector at the national level. And, because it comprised most of the key sector umbrella organizations, the VSR was seen to have legitimacy. That sense of sector support and solidarity changed, however, with the formal launch of the VSI and, particularly, the allocation by the federal government of \$94.6 million towards the initiative.

For sector leaders involved in the VSR, the commitment of almost \$100 million was seen as clear evidence of the government's interest in forging a new relationship with the voluntary sector. But that figure also became a lightning rod and focussed the attention of many sector organizations that hadn't been paying close attention until that point. Not surprisingly, sector organizations wanted to know how the VSI money was going to be spent and who was making those decisions.

Initially thinking that the \$94.6 million was a new funding program, some organizations were disappointed that they would derive no direct or immediate benefit from the initiative. The VSI offered the promise of a streamlined regulatory system for charities and an Accord between the voluntary sector and the federal government. But these and other improvements to the infrastructure of the sector, weren't seen to have much value by organizations struggling to keep their doors open.

Even those who did understand that the VSI was primarily designed to strengthen the sector's infrastructure expected that all \$94.6 million would flow directly into the sector. But, as mentioned, almost a third of the VSI allocation was for the SIDPD initiative, which was of primary benefit to federal departments. And some of the allocations were

not “new” money in the sense that the expenditures would probably have been incurred by the federal government in any case. For example, \$10 million of the VSI allocation was directed towards a national volunteerism initiative to coincide with the UN designation of 2001 as the International Year of Volunteers. It is highly likely that the federal government would have supported such an initiative even if the VSI had never existed.

Finally, where there was clear evidence of VSI funding flowing into the sector, the recipients were often national organizations based in central Canada.

Federal departments responsible for implementing components of the VSI were required to follow Treasury Board guidelines. As a result, they issued public RFPs (requests for proposals) relating to the promotion of volunteerism, for example, or sector related research. Often, those contracts were awarded to national voluntary organizations that had been VSR members and active in the development of the VSI. From the federal government’s perspective, the contracts were awarded to organizations that best demonstrated they had the experience, expertise, and capacity to undertake the assignment. For some of the unsuccessful bidders, however, this was seen as evidence that the process was “rigged” and that national, voluntary sector organizations were simply using the VSI to “feather their own nests.”

All of the confusion and questions relating to the allocation of VSI funding served to exacerbate some of the already existing fractures in the sector. As a result, some people questioned the “representativeness” of the voluntary sector participants in the VSI and their authority and legitimacy to speak on behalf of the sector. This issue of “who speaks for the sector?” has been a constant refrain and, in this instance, did nothing to strengthen our bargaining position with the federal government.<sup>5</sup>

## CONCLUSIONS

During the development and early stages of the VSI, Mel Cappe served as the Clerk of the Privy Council – the most powerful federal public servant.

Cappe was considered to be a friend to the voluntary sector and, in a speech he delivered in the spring of 1999, he mused about the outcomes of a new, revitalized sector-government relationship:

In 15 years, how will we know that we have achieved success? Involving the voluntary sector in policy dialogue will be so deeply embedded that no one will think twice about it. Program managers will involve the voluntary sector in design and implementation as a matter of course. And dialogue will be the accepted way of doing business for departments. (Cappe, 1999, n.p.)

By any objective measure, we are far from achieving the kind of success that Cappe envisaged. There are, however, some recent and encouraging signs of a revitalized voluntary sector-government relationship at a provincial level.

In collaboration with the Ontario Non-profit Network (ONN), the government of Ontario released a document in 2011 outlining its strategy to create a stronger partnership

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with the not-for-profit sector. It has also created a Partnership Project in the Ministry of Citizenship and Immigration to advance the strategy.

More recently, a collaboration agreement between the government of Nova Scotia and the not-for-profit sector seems to be bearing fruit. The provincial government has committed funds to the creation of a not-for-profit sector council that would strengthen human resources capacity and training.

Unfortunately, there appear to be few prospects for a stronger relationship between the federal government and the voluntary sector – in the short term, at least. With federal Ministers describing some environmental groups as “radical charities” and accusing them of “money laundering” as they did publicly in the spring of 2012, the relationship appears to have hit rock bottom.

But all governments are temporary; at some point, there will be a change in the current administration in Ottawa. When that happens, a new government would be advised to consider the views of a former Prime Minister, Joe Clark, who wrote:

[T]he shift in power is not only between nation states, but from nation states to non-state actors – such as the environmental movement, non-governmental organizations, multinational corporations, foundations. ... Non-state organizations often have the imagination the world needs. But only states have the mandate and the power to change laws and regulations and obligations. (Clark, 2012, n.p.)

Joe Clark understands that the nature of current challenges, whether domestic or global, and the search for solutions requires cooperation by the state and both the voluntary and private sectors. And that, in turn, requires a structured, respectful and on-going engagement between governments and the voluntary sector built on the different and unique roles that each perform. In the absence of that kind of relationship, it is individual Canadians who have the most to lose.

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## NOTES

1. The term “voluntary sector” was used intentionally by the sector leaders of the day and will be used in this article. (See p. 16 of the 1999 Report *Working Together* for an explanation of why the phrase voluntary sector was preferred over other terms like the non-profit or charitable sector.)
2. Final composition of the VSR included: Canadian Centre for Ethics in Sport, Canadian Centre for Philanthropy, Canadian Conference of the Arts, Canadian Council for International Cooperation, Canadian Council on Social Development, Canadian Environmental Network, Community Foundations of Canada, Canadian Parks and Recreation Association, The Coalition of National Voluntary Organizations, United Way of Canada, Volunteer Canada, a representative of National Voluntary Health Agencies, and a representative of faith communities.

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3. See, for example, the 2009 report *Voluntary Sector Initiative Impact Evaluation: Lessons Learned from the Voluntary Sector Initiative (2000-2005)*, which can be downloaded from the website of Human Resources and Skills Development Canada. Peter Elson's book, *High Ideals and Noble Intentions*, assesses the VSI in the historical context of voluntary sector-government relations.

4. While President and CEO of the Canadian Centre for Philanthropy from 1995-2002, the author was actively involved in establishing the VSR which, in turn, paved the way for the VSI. He served as the voluntary sector co-chair of the VSI Joint Coordinating Committee (JCC) alongside the federal co-chair, Kathy O'Hara, Deputy Secretary to Cabinet in the Privy Council Office. The JCC had a broad oversight mandate for the VSI.

5. This illustrates the inherent differences between formal institutional structures (government) and non-formal institutional structures (e.g., VSR) as described by Peter Elson in his book *High Ideals and Noble Intentions*. See also *Bob Wyatt, Letters to (Not Always of) Joy*, (2009) for a discussion on representation on voluntary sector bodies.

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