

A happy balance; Ex-PM: Money isn't everything

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PHOTO: JIM MacDONALD Kerry Prosper of Afton First Nations preparesto
ILLUSTRATION: present a ceremonial blanket to Bhutan's former primeminister during the opening of the International Conference on Gross National Happiness in Antigonish on Monday night.

ANTIGONISH – The former prime minister of Bhutan says he is encouraged by interest shown in his country's efforts to achieve happiness through unconventional methods.

Hundreds of international delegates listened intently Tuesday as Lyonpo Jigmi Thinley gave the keynote address at the Second International Conference on Gross Happiness.

For the past 30 years, the small country on the slopes of the Himalayas has focused on redefining what constitutes prosperous development, which Mr. Thinley said has traditionally been measured with a global materialist perspective.

"Evidently there is growing interest in how to be happy as opposed to how to make money," he said. "Dollars and cents are not the bottom line in life. It is our hope that as more thought is given to this common quest in life, there will be more ideas and reasons why GNH (gross national happiness) should guide human development to further human civilization."

Mr. Thinley, who is now Bhutan's home minister, said his country has strived to maintain a balance of four elements – environmental preservation, sustainable economic development, cultural promotion and good governance.

But he said the theory is tough to practise because issues such as the nature of a political economy under a GNH regime have to be addressed differently from the gross domestic product way of thinking.

"It must value social and economic contributions of households and families, free time and leisure, given the roles of these factors in happiness."

Daw Penjo, Bhutan's ambassador to Canada, said earlier that holding the conference outside of his country will help gauge other nations' interest in the Bhutanese model.

Lt.-Gov. Myra Freeman congratulated Bhutan for receiving the United Nations Champion of the Earth Award for placing the environment at the centre of its development policies.

Ms. Freeman said the conference drew "some of the world's leading practitioners of socially and environmentally responsible development."

One of those people was Rev. Francisco VanderHoff, founder of the fair-trade movement. Last week, he was knighted by French President Jacques Chirac.