
Non-profits bring policy solutions to election season

As the federal election heads into its final laps, the \$8 billion/year charitable sector, which employs 2.5 million Canadians, finds itself in a significantly different position than 2015. In the past four years, the federal government has removed restrictions for charities engaging in non-partisan policy work, allowing the philanthropic sector more opportunity to promote its policy solutions this campaign season.

But in an election dominated by mud-slinging and promises of perks for the middle class, there's a grave risk that Canadians won't hear what the five parties have to say about the issues that impact the sector, its 13 million volunteers, and the countless more Canadians who either make regular donations to charities, benefit from their work, or rely on them for services.

That gap is deeply problematic, not least because of the role charities play as proxy for the most politically marginalized segments of society. As Alexa Briggs of the Calgary Chamber of Voluntary Organizations says, “[Non-profits] strengthen civic and democratic engagement by amplifying the voices of those who might not otherwise be heard.”

Over the past year, *The Philanthropist* journal [has canvassed 38 sector leaders](#) to solicit their thoughts about what they think should be up for debate during this campaign. They had plenty of ideas. Here are a few of the policy solutions they've proposed:

* **Release funds from dormant bank accounts to community initiatives**

The [Bank of Canada currently has \\$816 million](#) from dormant accounts on its books, most of which goes unclaimed. Facing pressure to find strategies to unlock new sources of revenue to address the significant funding pressures facing the social purpose sector, Lisa Lalonde, executive lead for Mowat NFP, says these dormant accounts represent an untapped resource. In the United Kingdom, [more than £600 million](#) in unclaimed funds from such accounts have been directed to charitable causes, including affordable housing, job training programs and community energy schemes.

* **End inequities in public services for First Nations children, youth and families**

According to Cindy Blackstock, director of the First Nations Child and Family Caring Society, the government has yet to fully comply with the 2016 Canadian Human Rights Tribunal [ruling](#) calling on Canada to end discrimination against 163,000 First Nations children. The Society's 2017 Spirit Bear Plan, endorsed by the Assembly of First Nations, calls on the federal government to comply with the ruling, quantify funding shortfalls for services provided to First Nations, and provide anti-discrimination training for civil servants.

* **Dedicate six per cent of the federal budget for services to children under six**

Almost a generation after Campaign 2000 led to the establishment of the National Child Benefit, Ottawa continues to underfund services to the very young, which is why we still debate the establishment of federal childcare policies first proposed as far back as 1992. “Canada's eight

million kids can't vote," says Lisa Wolff, UNICEF Canada's director of policy and education, "but this election will directly affect them." By dedicating six per cent of annual federal spending to the young, the next government will ensure that every child can access high quality early learning experiences.

*** Reward rural communities for restoring and protecting Canada's forests**

One of the promises circulating now in the election is a commitment, made by the prime minister, to plant two billion trees using profits from the federal government's pipeline investment. Canada's forests are indeed a critical source of climate mitigation, but their stewardship should also be positioned as an opportunity for rural communities to share the gains of a carbon reduction strategy, says Daimen Hardie, co-founder and executive of Community Forests International, in New Brunswick. He sees a huge opportunity for rural communities to participate in the transition to a low carbon economy. Supporting their contribution to natural climate solutions is one way to incentivize this.

If the incredible turnout for the recent climate marches revealed anything, it is that a great many younger Canadians are prepared to champion causes that focus on social and ecological well-being. Charities, non-profits and social enterprises are seeing a similar trend as growing numbers of millennials and the members of Generation Z seek to work in these organizations instead of traditional private sector careers.

This is where we're at, and it's a healthy development. But to transform all that energy into effective policy and positive social change, the politicians competing in this high-stakes election must focus on a broader range of issues than they've done thus far.

Canada's philanthropic sector has a long history of contributing valuable ideas to the policy mix, in fields as diverse as housing, education, social finance and the environment. As the four innovative proposals listed here will attest, there's no shortage of good ideas that await whichever party forms the next government.