
Throne Speech a mixed bag for the charitable sector

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The federal Liberals have pledged to create one million jobs through “direct investments in the social sector and infrastructure,” including affordable housing, and also promised to launch an action plan for women in the economy that includes a national childcare system.

The plan, delivered yesterday by Governor-General Julie Payette in a speech from the throne, set Parliament’s agenda for the coming months. It came as COVID-19 cases across Canada are rising “at an accelerated rate,” according to public health officials, raising concerns about the government’s ability to support vulnerable communities across the country.

The government has also promised to extend the wage subsidy (CEWS) until next summer, create national long-term-care standards, “accelerate” the creation of a national pharmacare program, build a new Canadian disability benefit, and “make the largest investment in Canadian history in training for workers.” Prime Minister Justin Trudeau reiterated the core themes in a speech to the nation last night.

For the non-profit and charitable sector, however, the speech was “a bit of a mixed bag,” according to Imagine Canada president and CEO Bruce MacDonald, who hoped there would be more “specific and customized interventions for the sector.”

“I’m disappointed that charities and non-profits weren’t named specifically,” said MacDonald, adding that he was unclear whether the sector was included in the term “social sector,” which some speculate could refer to the caring (or essential) economy.

MacDonald said Canadians have increasingly turned to the services offered by the non-profit sector in the pandemic-fuelled economic downturn. At the same time, donations have dropped

significantly: according to an Angus Reid survey, almost two out of five Canadian charitable donors said their giving has dropped since the pandemic began.

The wage subsidy has allowed many in the sector to stay operational, so its extension into next year is “welcome,” MacDonald added. But “the overall contribution and place of the sector, as a contributing part of a healthy economy and a protector of vulnerable community, has not yet been recognized by the Canadian government.”

The sector’s absence from the speech was also noted by Senator Ratna Omidvar, who co-chaired the Special Senate Committee on the Charitable Sector. “Charities were not mentioned in the plan for the recovery, but the promises will include the sector,” she said. “The sector will play a role in the delivery of this long list of promises.”

The only explicit mention of sector organizations came in the extension of the national housing strategy, which Payette said will require the government to partner with not-for-profits and co-ops over the mid- to long-term. The speech also pledged increasing investments in shelters and transition housing.

The speech contained other policy pledges that will likely involve sector organizations:

Childcare

In the speech, the government laid out its response to the “she-cession,” the term used to describe the disproportionate economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on women. The Liberals are promising to create an action force to tackle it.

“It has been nearly 50 years since the Royal Commission on the Status of Women outlined the necessity of childcare services for women’s social and economic equality,” Payette said. “The government will make a significant, long-term, sustained investment to create a Canada-wide early-learning and childcare system” that will be modelled after the one that exists in Quebec.

Economist Armine Yalnizyan is “appreciative” of the recognition the Liberals gave to the need for childcare, which she identified as “critical to macroeconomic recovery.”

Yet she is concerned about how, and when, this pledge will be implemented. “We’re moving the choke point of ‘she-covey,’ which is childcare and the reopening of school ... but I’m very nervous that by the time the task force gets established and stuff gets negotiated, the system on which we’re trying to build will have cratered,” she said. “The rhetoric is there, the framing is there, but the action will be too delayed to avoid what is avoidable. It’s not confidence-inducing that it will be timely, given all of the other priorities that were in that speech.”

Healthcare

Elisabeth Baugh, CEO of Ovarian Cancer Canada, noted that the speech did not include mention of health charities, which have been “devastated” by the pandemic. Some have lost some 50% of their fundraising revenue, which has affected their ability to provide approximately \$150 million annually for health research. Health charities have also struggled to meet the demand for equipment and offer supports to those who needed less-critical care. “It will take years to rebuild,” Baugh said.

According to Connie Côté, CEO of the Health Charities Coalition of Canada, the health sector “needs several measures” to avoid a financial crisis. Canadian health charities have [asked](#) the federal government for up to \$28 million a month to continue to offer services.

“We were pleased that there were many measures that are connecting health and economy,” Côté said, noting specifically the Liberal government’s promise to create national plans for pharmacare and disability benefits. “We look forward to see how this will actually roll out.”

Climate

The government promised to bring forward a plan to exceed its goal of reducing greenhouse gas emissions by 30% below 2005 levels by 2030. It pledged to legislate Canada’s goal of net-zero emissions by 2050. The speech also cited new investments in climate mitigation and green transit.

But those pledges aren’t new. “It’s a recommitment,” said Tim Gray, executive director of Environmental Defence. “I think they needed to have a clearly upfront articulation of a just recovery, a means for retooling the Canadian economy and giving people jobs, and a promise of a viable future.”

Reconciliation and Racism

The speech referenced ongoing reconciliation and anti-racism efforts, including a commitment to step up work on a national action plan to respond to the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls’ Calls for Justice and to implement the Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s calls to action.

International Development

While the speech didn’t dwell on Canada’s role in the world, the government did promise to increase its investments in international development to support developing countries. “I think the fact that they’re recognizing Canada has a role to play in global aid is good,” MacDonald said.