
The Philanthropist Interview: Janice Stein

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This article is part of a [new occasional series](#) of interviews with a diverse range of Canadian thought-leaders, probing the challenges, risks and opportunities confronting the charitable/non-profit sector as it looks to rebuild and potentially re-position in response to the pandemic.

In a video posted to the YouTube channel of the Munk School of Global Affairs and Public Policy this July, Janice Stein says her goal is to shake up her students and up-end the way they think about decision-making. In our COVID-19 recovery questionnaire, she asks the same of the charitable and non-profit sector.

Stein was the founding director of the Munk School at the University of Toronto (1998 to 2014). She is currently the university's Belzberg Professor of Conflict Management in the Department of Political Science, a fellow of the Royal Society of Canada, and a member of the Order of Canada and the Order of Ontario.

The Canada Council awarded Stein the Molson Prize for an outstanding contribution by a social scientist to public debate. She is an honorary foreign member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences and she holds honorary doctorates from the University of Alberta, the University of Cape Breton, McMaster University, and the Hebrew University of Jerusalem.

What big questions should leaders in the charitable sector ask themselves now?

COVID-19 has ripped the Band-Aid off, exposing the glaring inequalities in income, job security, housing, access to technology, and access to justice in Canadian communities. These inequalities are structural, and not fixable by the philanthropic sector functioning with its established practices. The philanthropic sector risks becoming a provider of emergency supports while it fails to push leaders in the public and the private sectors to address the

fundamental challenges. These emergency supports can, under some circumstances, perpetuate rather than ameliorate these structural inequalities.

I would ask: How are the programs that we support providing breakout opportunities from deeply established and long-standing patterns of structural inequality? Who has voice in shaping these programs? How much agency do community members and leaders really have in making the critical decisions about what will work within their own communities?

Here, we must move beyond conventional concepts of “consultation,” where the power and authority to make decisions rests with the funder, to meaningful sharing of decision-making around priorities that are established by communities.

What challenges does COVID-19 recovery present? What about opportunities?

The opportunities for change are once-in-a lifetime. When established ways of working and living change, traditional models no longer work, and governments and communities are open to new ways of doing things because the established ways are no longer possible. Bureaucratic and established practices across so many sectors have crumbled as people adapted to new ways of living, eating, working, learning, and partnering.

Now is the moment to rethink the way we provide income security to growing numbers of people who do precarious work. Now is the moment to rethink how life-long education is delivered in an economy that is rapidly pivoting to those with good technological and communication skills.

Now is the moment to rethink what community means when people are suffering the physical and mental consequences of isolation.

Now is the moment to rethink how justice is experienced on the streets, how those in need can get access to legal help, and how courts can pivot in the same way as other institutions have to provide services in real time. Above all, now is the moment to make certain that those who are living with inequality can speak, define the problems, make the difficult trade-offs, and shape the solutions.

The philanthropic sector must move out of its offices – whether these are at home or in workplaces – and live among the communities they hope to serve.

What should be the federal government's top three policy-fix priorities for the charitable sector?

First, remove the suffocating restrictions on policy advocacy. That is exactly what the philanthropic sector should be doing – advocating publicly and privately for those they serve.

Second, significantly lengthen the funding timeline so that organizations are not trapped in an endless cycle of grant-writing and grant-reporting that drains the energy and the creativity from the sector and stills the voices that are important to hear.

Third, agree on evaluation criteria that reflect a shared commitment to long-term structural change.

Aside from revenue shortfalls, what is the most pressing structural issue currently facing the charitable sector?

The most pressing problem, for a large part of the sector, is dependence, directly or indirectly, upon government funding that supports overhead and enables growth. The language of “partnering” obscures a dysfunctional relationship that is corrosive of the capacity to provide critical feedback to government and puts the sector in the untenable position of intermediating between vulnerable citizens and their governments.

Overhead matters. Good staff, well-supported is as essential in this sector, as it is in the public and private sectors. But support for staff should not come from government grants and program funding.

Name a problem in the charitable sector that everyone knows about but no one wants to tackle. Why?

The failure of the sector to invest in systematic sharing across organizations of the lessons learned from the programming that they do. While other sectors are moving to build aggregators that diffuse knowledge, the philanthropic sector has no systematic way to aggregate knowledge, to compare across cases, and to share that knowledge. The failure to invest in strong analytics is the biggest obstacle in moving small successes to scale.

It goes without saying that investing in knowledge aggregation in this sector would require a change in culture.

(The transcript has been edited for length.)