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## Spinning wheels: Why the sector's lobbying has come up empty

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According to early speculation, the federal budget that Liberal Finance Minister Chrystia Freeland will table later this spring is going to be one for the ages.

As Freeland herself [commented at a news conference](#) in late January, the budget “will be the most significant one of our lifetimes.” Growth, jobs, healing, the middle class – all themes, she said. “It is going to be about building a Canadian economy which is more innovative, more competitive, greener, more sustainable.”

Ottawa's pre-budget consultation process closes February 19, and there can be little doubt that the competition – among industries, civil society organizations, issue-focused groups, et cetera – to establish a beachhead in this expansive agenda is fierce, especially with hints like those.

[Imagine Canada has put out a call](#) reminding charities, non-profits, and social enterprises to tell Freeland that they require “direct investment to ensure communities remain strong and vibrant.”

No one in the sector should underestimate what's at stake at this juncture.

For much of the past year, charity organizations and non-profit networks have repeatedly surveyed their members about the impact of the pandemic – on revenues, volunteers, programming, and fundraising. With some exceptions, in sectors like food security, the news has been relentlessly grim, and many groups are facing the prospect of layoffs, program cuts, mergers, or insolvency.

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Neither the feds nor the provinces have been especially responsive. Some of the massive wage- and small-business-support programs unveiled early in the pandemic applied to charities and non-profits, but there has been almost nothing, policy- or spending-wise, that can be described as targeted, and this despite the far-reaching June 2019 [Senate report](#) on the future of the charitable sector.

Of the 42 recommendations, how many have been adopted? Hard to determine precisely, but it would be fair to say not many. As Peter Broder, executive director of the Pemsel Case Foundation, noted in *The Philanthropist* last summer, [many of the implementation issues raised by the Senate report are “difficult.”](#) But one should be quite straightforward, which is establishing some kind of secretariat within the federal government that is tasked with coordinating policies that affect the sector.

The fall [Speech from the Throne was silent](#) on the subject of the plight of charities and non-profits during the pandemic. A few of the ministerial mandate letters released this past January offered slightly more positive signals, but the details remain “unclear,” as [Imagine Canada observed in its statement](#).

So if the sector comes away empty-handed from the spring budget, will we be talking about a failure of policy or a failure of advocacy?

Given mounting anecdotal evidence that some private firms, including [giants like Bell Canada](#), transformed pandemic subsidies into dividends for shareholders, the answer to that question will be increasingly tough to ignore.

The non-profit sector wasn't always this far removed from both the circles of political influence and the mechanics of bureaucratic decision-making in Ottawa. As Peter Elson details in his 2007 essay, [“A Short History of Voluntary Sector–Government Relations in Canada,”](#) charities and non-profits found themselves drawn into the world of policy-making in the post-war decades with the expansion of the social welfare state and the establishment, in 1974, of the National Advisory Council on Voluntary Action. The council produced a report with lots of recommendations, most of which went nowhere, and the sector's engagement with federal policy-makers unravelled during the neo-liberalism of the 1990s and 2000s.

While Jean Chretien's Liberals changed the tax rules to allow donations of shares as a means of encouraging more philanthropy, Elson describes this reform, probably the most far-reaching of recent decades, as a “mixed blessing.” He notes that “as the right hand was making it easier for the sector to solicit donations, the left hand was downloading programs and services to the voluntary sector.”

Some other countries have managed to carve out a so-called home in government for their charitable sectors – a goal that remains weirdly elusive in Canada. For example, in progressive New Zealand, the Department of Internal Affairs oversees community and voluntary sector policy-making. It answers to a minister whose broad portfolio also includes diversity, inclusion, ethnic communities, youth, and social development. However, the comparison has limitations because New Zealand is small and has no provincial or state-level governments.

What will it take for our federal government to get to this kind of engagement? The answer, I'd argue, is a much more muscular form of lobbying and advocacy, delivered in a register that

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politicians can hear.

Evidently, the sector's top-line talking points – about the number of people employed, the aggregated contribution to GDP of Canada's 86,000 charities, the importance of official channels of communication – haven't exactly put the fear of god in the political classes.

The feds like to make common cause with the sector when it's expedient to do so – for example, with the [Canada Nature Fund's](#) Target 1 Challenge, which involves conservation foundations putting up huge sums to partner with Ottawa in acquiring sensitive lands. But it's difficult to imagine MPs lying awake at night fretting that the government hasn't budged on implementing the Senate report's complicated recommendations, no matter how worthy and carefully considered.

When I think about the sectoral or industry advocacy groups that can claim sustained policy victories, I recognize that they employ a wide range of tactics – but all are selling something that governments need or desire: voters (CARP, formerly the Canadian Association of Retired Persons), raw economic might (the building-industry lobby groups or, in the Stephen Harper years, the Canadian Association of Petroleum Producers), or the promise of burnish on reputational issues (arts or environmental organizations).

Another example: the Canadian Federation of Independent Business, which has long been one of the noisiest pressure groups in both national and provincial politics. Like the non-profit sector, it has a highly diverse membership base with no apparent common denominators besides organization size. Despite that constraint, the CFIB has always been smart about identifying cross-cutting policy issues, focusing on a few of them, and working hard to attract new members with not just resources and lobbying, but also practical enticements, like group plans.

The CFIB's voice, in particular, has been crucial to its success. The organization is not afraid of being strident, getting its spokespeople in front of the media, and making sure it can mobilize its members. CFIB spokespeople are stingy with their praise for governments; they know how to keep the pot boiling.

I'd point to a pair of details that attest to the CFIB's success: first, that politicians of all partisan stripes, including the NDP, are now assiduous in acknowledging the role of small business in Canadian society; and second, that the [federal Liberals eagerly sought out the CFIB](#), which is ideologically well to the right, in negotiating some of the emergency pandemic measures this spring. The CFIB was, obviously, more than happy to reciprocate. It got a seat at the proverbial table.

The culture of philanthropic advocacy – the earnest and discreet discourse of elites talking to officials – could scarcely be more different than the CFIB's, perhaps because of the long-standing – [but now legally obsolete](#) – restrictions on political activity.

The truth is that in the *realpolitik* world of lobbying, a few basic rules apply, among them that governments rarely get out ahead of issues and that there has to be an implicit political penalty for ignoring calls for change, even seemingly straightforward ones – like the sector's perennial request for a home in government.

Moral victories are important and necessary. Yet in the corridors of power, they're almost never

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sufficient.