



Imagine  Canada

# **CHARITY IMPACT BRIEF**

## Federal Election 2015

**MICHELLE GAUTHIER AND BILL SCHAPER**



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Michelle Gauthier and Bill Schaper

[www.imaginecanada.ca/election-2015](http://www.imaginecanada.ca/election-2015)

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## **SUMMARY**

Despite the challenges they face, charities and nonprofits are playing an active role in the federal election campaign. Whether it is raising issues and challenging the political parties to respond, providing background information to voters, or working to encourage people to vote, they are building on a long and proud tradition of public policy activism. While, to date, political parties have not made substantive commitments to help address the financial and regulatory challenges felt across the sector, they have made commitments on many issues that are of direct concern to charities and nonprofits in carrying out their missions.

We strongly believe that public policy is better when our sector is at the table, and so does the Canadian public. By compiling examples of charities' advocacy efforts and civic engagement strategies, we hope to inspire more sector-wide involvement both during and between future election campaigns.

# the sector's role in public policy



## INTRODUCTION

Charities and nonprofits affect almost every aspect of Canadian life. Health care and research, religious observance, immigrant settlement, affordable housing, literacy, arts and culture, amateur sport, postsecondary education, environmental conservation, independent living assistance for seniors, overseas assistance and development, youth programming, animal welfare, community development — these are just some of the areas in which we operate.

Charities and nonprofits have a long and proud tradition of helping to shape and define our country through significant and positive contributions to public policy. While nonprofits have few limitations on their activities, registered charities operate under a detailed regime overseen by the Canada Revenue Agency. In carrying out public policy activities and advocacy, charities must ensure that their efforts are:

- strictly non-partisan — that is, charities may not directly or indirectly endorse or oppose a political party or candidate for office;
- based on fact — charities must make reasoned arguments based on verifiable research and experience (a standard which is arguably higher than that to which any other sector is held);
- subordinate to the activities on which their charitable status is based — that is, charities may not forego other activities in order to focus solely on public policy. They can have an opinion on, and work towards a resolution of, root causes; but they must focus most of their efforts on addressing the ramifications of the status quo.

In part because charities are held to these standards, there is a great deal of public trust in the views of charities. Extensive public opinion research demonstrates that charity leaders are among the most trusted professionals in Canadian society. A large majority of Canadians believes that when charities speak out on an issue, they do so in the broad public interest, not merely from an organizational-benefit perspective. And more than nine-tenths of Canadians deem it acceptable or very acceptable for charities to speak out publicly on policy issues<sup>1</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> *Talking About Charities*, The Muttart Foundation, 2013

**The federal election  
provides an  
excellent opportunity  
for charities  
to raise issues  
that are critical  
to the future  
of our country.**

## **SPEAKING UP IS NOT WITHOUT ITS CHALLENGES**

While registered charities are prohibited from engaging in partisan activities at any time, election periods present a special set of issues. During an election period, there is even greater scrutiny by charity leaders, their boards of directors, regulators and the public of activities and statements that could be “directly or indirectly partisan.” As charities try to engage in legitimate public debate about issues that matter to the causes and communities they support, they have to be careful not to cross the line, even if that line is not always a clear one.

Political parties themselves may unwittingly put charities in difficult positions by, for example, wanting to announce a new policy proposal at a charity’s premises or with charity leaders alongside them. Media outlets can also make it challenging for charities when they expect organizations to declare their support for, or opposition to, promises and proposals made by various federal parties.

Despite these challenges, charities across Canada **are** speaking up and engaging in the election. They are setting forth a vision and challenging political parties to address issues that affect us all, but which might not otherwise be raised during the campaign. These charities (and the nonprofits speaking up alongside them) are a beacon to the rest of the sector. They demonstrate what can be done, and they set an example for future action by an even broader range of organizations.

## **A SUCCESSFUL HISTORY OF PUBLIC POLICY ENGAGEMENT**

While charities are required to remain non-partisan, they have long played a significant role in shaping public policy and debate. They were instrumental in advocating for smoke-free public spaces, reduced tobacco consumption, and curtailing acid rain. Advocacy by charities and nonprofits has also led to the creation of the Registered Disability Savings Plan, the Canadian Initiative for Maternal, Newborn and Child Health, the Treaty to End Land-Mines, and laws to combat child-trafficking and drunk driving. More recently, advocacy by charities led to the extension of Employment Insurance compassionate care provisions from six weeks to six months.

As a national umbrella organization for Canada's charities, Imagine Canada has worked to overcome what some have described in recent years as a “chill” in charities' public policy engagement. We believe that public policy is better when charities are at the table. Many charities are on the front line of service delivery and community engagement and are uniquely positioned to bring the perspectives of citizens and communities into public debates. They give voice to people who might otherwise not be heard and propose innovative solutions to some of our most challenging social, economic, environmental and cultural issues.

In this Brief, we highlight some of the issues that charities and nonprofits have raised so far during Election 2015, and the efforts that many are making to help inform voters about issues, encourage people to vote, and raise the level of civic engagement across the country more generally. These activities range from the local to the national, from single-charity initiatives to national coalitions; and from single-issue campaigns to cross-sectoral ones. We also highlight how political parties are responding to the issues raised directly by sector organizations,

and some of the ways in which the priorities of the charitable and nonprofit sector form an important part of all parties' appeals to the electorate.

The summary we provide of charities' and nonprofits' election-related activities is illustrative, not comprehensive. Imagine Canada plans to build upon this Charity Impact Brief in subsequent federal elections to gauge how charities' involvement in election periods grows or wanes. We trust that from election to election, we will see an even greater number of charities and nonprofits working to ensure that their voices and the voices of the communities they support, both here at home and around the world, are heard. And we trust that we will see candidates for office and political parties taking even greater note of what charities and nonprofits have to contribute.

## INFLUENCING THE POLICY AGENDA

Charities and nonprofits have a wealth of research, on the ground experience, and ideas when it comes to public policy. An election campaign, with the accompanying heightened media and public interest in issues, and political parties' need to differentiate themselves from each other, provides an unparalleled opportunity for charities and nonprofits to gain attention and support for their priorities.

As a service to charities and nonprofits across the country, Imagine Canada routinely monitors organizations' engagement in federal public policy. As we become aware of their engagement in the federal election, and of parties' commitments in relevant policy areas, we are making this information public on our Election Hub ([imaginecanada.ca/election-2015](http://imaginecanada.ca/election-2015)). Our monitoring to date suggests that a broad range of charities and nonprofits are issuing public calls for political parties to adopt policies on a wide array of issues of importance to Canadians.

- Barrier-Free Canada, CNIB, the March of Dimes, the Canadian Hearing Society, Accessible Media Inc., and the Multiple Sclerosis Society of Canada have released a set of principles and recommendations to improve federal protection for persons with disabilities.
- The Boys and Girls Clubs of Canada have developed a youth-focussed election platform, with policy recommendations on youth engagement, mental health, and youth employment.
- The Canadian Cancer Society has made a set of recommendations regarding tobacco regulations, research, and palliative care.
- The Canadian Council for International Cooperation is spearheading recommendations related to international development policies.

- The Canadian Diabetes Association and the Multiple Sclerosis Society have recommended policies, and have urged their supporters to contact candidates.
- Crohn's and Colitis Canada is asking federal election candidates for commitments on issues that are critical to the health and well-being of people living with inflammatory bowel disease. This organization is encouraging people to send letters to their candidates, attend the online advocacy webinar, and to read open letters sent to political parties and their responses.
- The David Suzuki Foundation's election blog provides voters with information about environmental issues, updates on parties' positions on environmental issues, information on how voters can get involved, and non-partisan analysis of leaders' debates.
- The Early Child Development Funders Working Group has called for an additional \$8 billion in public early childhood education, in order to bring Canada's investment level up to the OECD average.
- Food Secure Canada and Food Banks Canada have both launched campaigns in creation of a national food policy.
- A coalition of national organizations, including Imagine Canada, has made a series of recommendations on the regulatory framework and financial sustainability of charities and nonprofits.

It is important to note that this list is by no means exhaustive, and that it does not include policy work that organizations undertook prior to the election being called.

These examples are based primarily on those charities and nonprofits that have self-identified their activities to us. We anticipate that the full range of issues being raised with parties and individual candidates by charities and nonprofits in communities across the country is indeed much broader.



## PROMOTING CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

Charities and nonprofits are often in a unique position to reach out to and engage with underrepresented populations and to mobilize geographic and virtual communities for public good. Organizations play a vital role in promoting civic engagement during the campaign in three significant ways. They provide:

- non-partisan background information about important issues, so that voters interested in those issues have more resources available to them;
- information that helps smaller organizations, which often do not have access to public policy or legal expertise, get involved at the local level; and,
- information for vulnerable communities, about the election and how individuals can ensure their eligibility to vote.

Some of the organizations promoting civic engagement in these ways are:

- ABC Life Literacy Canada, which has worked with Elections Canada to create a workbook that helps literacy practitioners work with their clientele to improve electoral engagement.
- The Assembly of First Nations, which has launched a campaign to encourage First Nations people — possibly the most under-represented group in Canada when it comes to voter turnout — to vote. This includes information and resources to help First Nations people ensure that they are registered and able to vote.
- Barrier-Free Canada, which has produced an Election Action Kit providing an overview of issues facing persons with disabilities.

- The Canadian Arts Coalition, which is providing information and advice to help local organizations raise issues important to them.
- The Canadian Council for International Cooperation, whose We Can Do Better campaign includes background information about international development and assistance issues.
- The Council of Churches, whose 2015 Federal Election Resource provides information and questions for discussion on a broad range of economic and social issues.
- Community Development Halton and Social Planning Toronto, each of which has published a series of background documents on important local issues.
- Ducks Unlimited Canada is encouraging Canadians to raise wetlands conservation as an important issue with their federal candidates through the use of an online engagement platform.
- The Federation of Francophone and Acadian Communities (FCFA) of Canada has launched an election microsite to inform voters of party positions on the Francophonie and official languages.
- Nonprofits Step Up is a joint effort between the Ontario Nonprofit Network and Samara Canada to encourage nonprofits to engage in the election.

These are but a few of the examples of charities and nonprofits' efforts to promote civic engagement during the election period.

## HOW HAVE THE PARTIES RESPONDED?

To date, not all of the major national parties have issued comprehensive platform documents. Some have; and others have been releasing, on an ongoing basis, commitments on specific policy issues. By and large, parties are discussing issues that are of concern to charities and nonprofits, largely on specific social and economic issues, but also to a lesser extent policies that affect all organizations as employers, service deliverers, or contributors to prosperous, inclusive, vibrant and healthy communities.

Commitments already announced by the political parties include, among other promises, the following.



### **Aboriginal Affairs**

- new investments in postsecondary education funding
- new investments in primary and secondary education
- reforms to, and new investments, in child and family services
- an inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women



### **Arts and culture**

- a new endowment incentive fund, matching individual donations made to local museums
- doubling investment in the Canada Council for the Arts



## **Environment**

- new investments in green technologies and infrastructure
- enshrining environmental protection in the Constitution
- the creation of a Wildlife Conservation and Enhancement Program
- the expansion of protected marine and coastal habitats
- strengthened protection for national parks
- and reform to existing environmental assessment processes



## **Human rights**

to assist Canadians with disabilities, an expansion of the Registered Disability Savings Plan



## **Health**

- a 10-year renewal of the Mental Health Commission of Canada's mandate
- the development of supervised injection sites
- further extensions to Employment Insurance Compassionate Care Benefits
- investments towards universal prescription drug coverage
- the creation of a Mental Health Innovation Fund for Children and Youth
- investments in screening, diagnosis, support and research related to Alzheimer's disease
- investments in community health clinics across Canada



### **Affordable housing**

- new investments in social and affordable housing
- expanded access to RRSP savings for housing purchases
- a National Housing Strategy
- new investments in First Nations social housing



### **International development**

commitments to accelerate and expand Canada's efforts to accept and settle refugees from Syria



### **Seniors**

- an increase to the Guaranteed Income Supplement
- lowering OAS/GIS eligibility to age 65
- expanded support for home care
- a new Single Seniors Tax Credit for single and widowed seniors



### **Young Canadians**

- new investments to support physical activity for low-income and disadvantaged youth
- a doubling of matching grants provided to families through Registered Education Savings Plans

- protection for interns
- direct investments in youth employment (particularly in the environmental and community sectors)
- the creation of Child Advocacy Centres and Child and Youth Advocacy Centres;
- the abolition of tuition fees
- forgiveness of existing student debt in excess of \$10,000 per individual



## **Women**

a new action plan to combat violence against women



## **Sector-wide policy**

- proposals to reduce Employment Insurance premiums and change eligibility requirements
- red tape reductions for businesses (as many sector organizations engage in business activities to generate revenue)
- tax credits for individuals who pay membership fees to certain voluntary organizations
- paid internships and co-op placements to provide opportunities for young Canadians
- changes to and clarifications of the rules surrounding charities' engagement in public policy and advocacy

What the above shows, is that all political parties are making commitments on issues of importance to charities and nonprofits and the communities they serve. Far from being a policy-free environment, the election campaign has already seen all of the parties take positions and propose policies on a wide variety of issues that get at the heart of what charities and nonprofits do: serving communities, building communities, and enhancing the quality of life of people here at home and across the globe.

## CONCLUSION

Charities and nonprofits are speaking up on issues that matter to Canadians, and the political parties have a great deal to say about specific issues. This is encouraging to us.

One disappointment, though, is that there has been very limited discussion of the structural issues that face charities and nonprofits as a whole, such as financial sustainability and access to capital, greater support for donors, and regulatory barriers to income generation, and challenges recruiting and retaining highly-skilled staff. The charitable and nonprofit sector accounts for more than eight percent of GDP and more than two million jobs<sup>2</sup>. Political parties do not yet seem to have grasped that the sector does not sit apart from, but rather is a vital and increasingly important part of, the economy.

<sup>2</sup> CANSIM tables 388-002 and 380-0064, Statistics Canada.

Canadians take it for granted that party platforms will address economic sectors such as agriculture, small business, and natural resources by recognizing the common challenges that all participants in those sectors face, and proposing solutions that are broadly applicable. Thinking about the charitable and nonprofit sector *as a sector* has not yet matured to this point; serious discussions about Canada's economy require a change in this mindset<sup>3</sup>. We look forward to pursuing discussions with all parties after the election to ensure that eventually, it will be second nature to include more policies that address sector-wide challenges and concern in their future platforms.

<sup>3</sup> *Charities in Canada as an Economic Sector: Discussion Paper*, Imagine Canada, 2015.

We hope that charities and nonprofits, seeing the examples highlighted here, will be encouraged and inspired to publicly voice their own policy suggestions.

And we invite and encourage those charities and nonprofits that have been raising issues during this campaign, to go to our Election Hub and share their stories with colleagues from across Canada.

As charities and nonprofits become more confident in speaking up, and as they see the impact they can have on the public policy discussion, we anticipate a much more extensive list of examples in years to come. Charities and nonprofits have already made Canada a much better place, but there is much more that we can do.

## **ABOUT THE AUTHORS**

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Dr. Gauthier leads Imagine Canada's work to develop and implement a new strategic public policy agenda.

Prior to Imagine Canada, Michelle was the Director of the Research and Policy Analysis Division for Universities Canada. She worked with university presidents from across the country to document compelling universities' contributions and engaged in public policy dialogue with government and other stakeholders on a wide array of higher education and research issues. Previous positions include Principal Consultant for PricewaterhouseCoopers, and Executive Director for the Association of Translators and Interpreters of Ontario, where she gained valuable experience in professional association management. She is fluently bilingual and holds a Ph.D. from McGill University in Communications.

### **Bill Schaper**

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Prior to Imagine Canada, Bill Schaper was a political staffer on Parliament Hill, the senior policy advisor to a federal cabinet minister, a policy analyst and GR practitioner for Universities Canada, and a value-for-money auditor at the United Kingdom's National Audit Office.