

To the Finance Committee

House of Commons, Ottawa, Canada

“Re-Imagining Canada”

As Canada begins to think about the recovery and rebuilding after the Covid crisis we are offered a rare opportunity to re-imagine our society in many aspects.

The crisis has highlighted some of our impressive strengths and our glaring weaknesses.

Our strengths are not new, but are deeply embedded in who we are as Canadians. We have a strong professional public service which designed and delivered a range of programs to help Canadians. They have been doing this for decades of course, but what was notable was their ability to design new programs appropriate to the crisis and deliver them in a nimble and efficient way in a matter of days instead of months and years. The federal government introduced fully 75 special programs and measures in the last four months.

Another strength, we have a good public health care system. While not perfect it was able to prepare and pivot to deal with Covid. The strong fundamentals were in place to allow for large scale testing that is improving with time.

We also have a cooperative society that has by and large accepted major government restrictions in many aspects of our lives. And we have a caring society where people help each other and we want to see our citizens well cared for.

So what are the things that need fixing? What can we re-imagine? Where can we improve?

A good place to start is the problem areas that were highlighted during the pandemic.

Income Inequality and Basic Income.

We have seen in glaring detail that some of the most important workers are paid very little (less than a living wage) and have little job security. Whether it's Personal Support Workers (PSWs) or other staff at homes for the elderly, or staff at grocery stores, and cleaning staff in many workplaces. Deep cleaning, deep cleaning, deep cleaning. They have been referred to as "super heroes", but we don't give them super hero wages or job security. Too many of these workers live in the gig economy, working part time in various places, and sometimes in different fields at the same time – just to make ends meet. Gig workers can be working in two seniors homes and providing care to a senior in their home. Or they might work in a home part time and in a coffee shop as well.

The majority are women and the majority are immigrants and newcomers, and we seem to have accepted this as normal. It should not be the new normal, it is the bad old normal.

The Canada Emergency Response Benefit (CERB) was the closest that Canada has had to a universal basic income or a guaranteed annual income, a mechanism which combats poverty and allows working people to be bold in their career choices, constantly develop their skills and aggressively contribute to the economy. This is a good time for us to be considering a basic income which is enforced through the tax system.

Seniors care:

Looking at care for Canadian seniors we need to look at three general forms of housing: seniors staying in their homes, retirement residences and long term care. Across all three, the issues of insufficient services exist across the country, and while such services are usually the purview of the provinces, there is a serious need for a national leadership and a national approach, national standards and a sharing of good and bad practices across the country.

Racism:

While the killing of George Floyd was an American tragedy, it had considerable effects on Canada. It brought into sharp focus that for certain people, life is not a whole lot better. There is a crisis in Police-Minority relations, there is a crisis of

systemic racism, where too many policies and practices are embedded in our systems that end up disadvantaging or excluding certain groups. Chief among them are Indigenous Peoples, Black People and People of Colour. The solutions require involvement of relevant communities, the public and private sectors, media, police services, education and academics. While the solutions exist with all levels of government, there is a need for national leadership, information sharing and coordination. The budget for combating racism needs to be a lot bigger than it presently is and the process of assessing applications a lot faster than has been the case. There is much hope that this time Canada will take this issue seriously.

Childcare:

As we prepare for economic recovery, the lack of adequate child care and early childhood education is a serious setback for families with young children, more so mothers with young children, since it is often women who have prime responsibility for child rearing and care. As such many workplaces could face serious shortages of their female workforce. While we have been debating a national childcare program for decades, the Covid crisis and the planning for recovery are highlighting the need in more stark relief. This the time for such a program recognizing that it is about meeting major social, economic and educational goals. There are concerns in the near term about social distancing and safety, but these concerns make the case for quality child care rather than not.

Pharmacare:

The Liberal government has justifiably promised to initiate a national pharmacare policy, the last missing piece of health care in Canada. Again, Covid has highlighted the need for a solid health care system, and while our system is better than most, it is the only public health care system does not cover the price of drugs. There has been enough study on the matter, the most recent being the Hoskins Report. 2021 is the year to introduce pharmacare.

Climate change:

While the Coronavirus crisis has gripped the world, the climate change crisis has not lessened. We are still missing our targets. As we approach recovery we need to return to the dialogue of climate change just as we can pay close attention to growing the green economy of the future

Indigenous peoples:

The journey of reconciliation has begun but has a long way to go. A useful way to proceed would be to publish a report on the implementation of calls to action from:

- The Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples
- The Truth and Reconciliation Commission
- The Inquiry on Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls.

Andrew Cardozo

President, The Pearson Centre