

Intersections and Innovations

Change for Canada's Voluntary and Nonprofit Sector



The Muttart Foundation



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Acknowledgements

For far too long, Canada has lacked a comprehensive resource examining Canada's charitable sector. That has now ended.

The Muttart Foundation has spent many years focusing on building the capacity of charities in this country. The publication of this collection is another contribution to that effort. By understanding more about itself, the sector can continue to develop and find new ways to serve Canadians and those in need outside our nation.

The authors of these essays bring different perspectives on the role and inner workings of Canada's charities. Collectively, they bring an unprecedented insight into the work of organizations whose diversity is exceeded only by their desire to serve.

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The work of all of these individuals has come together in this resource which we dedicate to all of those in, or interested in, Canada's charitable sector.

Malcolm Burrows, President

Bob Wyatt, Executive Director



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Part III Innovation and Intersections

Intersections with Governments: Services and Policy Engagement

Chapter 32

A Lever for Change: How Foundations Can Support Public Policy Advocacy



Marcel Lauzière
The Lawson Foundation

We live in a complex world that faces many intractable social, environmental, and cultural challenges. Addressing these is hard work, but sound public policy is a major lever for change and for improving circumstances and outcomes for individuals and communities. It is our governments (municipal, provincial, territorial, federal, Indigenous) that have the legitimacy to develop public policy in our democratic systems – and that is a good thing.

That being said, there is a growing realization that the development of public policy is strengthened by including voices with different knowledge and expertise, including from the charitable and nonprofit sector. Consultation approaches are moving from ineffective processes that breed cynicism to more engaging and porous methodologies that embrace inclusion and seek new and different ideas, knowledge, and data. In an ideal world of good public policy development, no stone should be left unturned, no source of relevant knowledge ignored.

Despite this, and while charities and nonprofits have participated in the public policy process for many years (and there are several examples of great successes in Canada), many charities and nonprofits are still hesitant to engage. Too often, as charities and nonprofits, we have shied away from public policy advocacy for fear that it is not permitted, that we do not have the legitimacy to participate, or that we lack the resources.

Consequently, society is not reaping the full benefits of hearing our voices. In my experience in the charitable and nonprofit sector and in the public service, I have seen that the fault for this lies with both the sector and government.

Where the nonprofit sector has participated in public policy, we have time and again played the game ineffectively. Too often, we have come to the table unprepared. And sometimes, we have been



too ideological and self-righteous. I can certainly admit to having been guilty of all of the above.

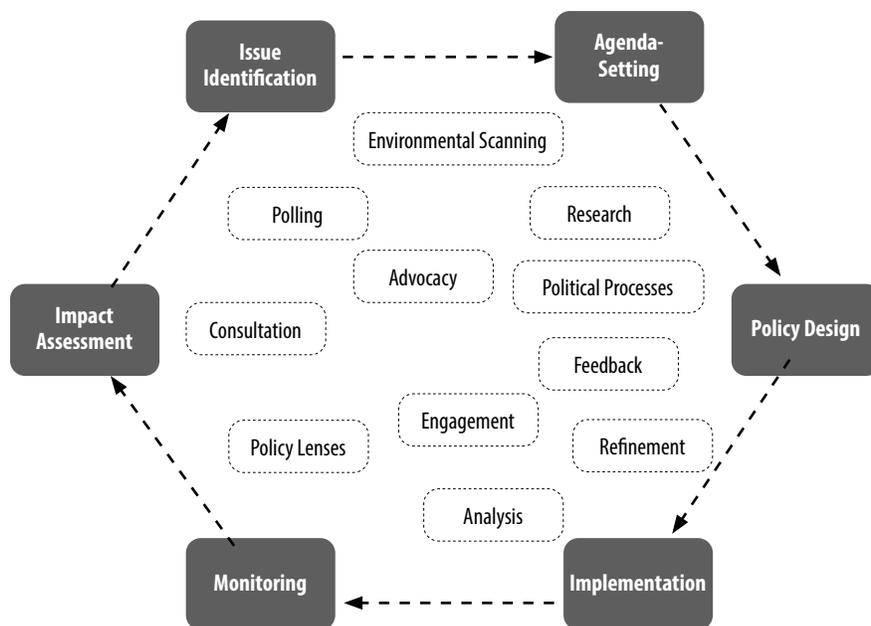
But the fault also lies with governments. As a senior public servant, I have witnessed how governments can be deeply unaware of the value that charities and nonprofits can bring to the table in public policy dialogue, particularly in terms of complementary data and knowledge that only they have. But I do believe that this can be remedied over time.

In this chapter, I will address two things. First, I will look at why public policy advocacy by charities and nonprofits can be so valuable. I will argue that charities and nonprofits should consider engaging in effective advocacy and that foundations, private and public, should encourage such participation. Second, I will examine how foundations can support charities and nonprofits in engaging in this advocacy. For the purposes of this chapter, I take a broad view of public policy advocacy: it ranges from raising awareness about issues with elected officials and public servants to calls to action to effect real change.

Effective public policy advocacy is not simply about griping and moaning about things governments should do better. While criticizing government policies and programs is legitimate, public policy advocacy is also about finding ways to work with governments to achieve better outcomes by providing advice, information, data, and analysis to which they would not otherwise have access. And it can be about facilitating connections to individuals and communities that best understand the impacts of programs and services on the ground. And, of course, it can be about encouraging communities to take action.

And there are many points of entry. Advocacy can contribute at different stages of the whole public policy process, of which there are many. The following figure, prepared in 2002 for a document entitled *A Code of Good Practice on Policy Dialogue*, in the context of the Voluntary Sector Initiative, remains relevant and helpful in understanding the points of entry for public policy dialogue. It is a useful reminder of where and when charities and nonprofits can be involved.

Diagram of the Public Policy Process



Why Should Charities and Nonprofits Engage in Public Policy Advocacy?

Charities and nonprofits can and should play an important role in the development of good public policy. Five reasons make the case for this.

An Opportunity to Spur Transformational Change

For any organization wishing to fundamentally shift things to improve outcomes for individuals or communities, whether through systemic change or changes to parts of a system, public policy, including legislation, can be a necessary lever. For example, while awareness campaigns about the dangers of smoking and of second-hand smoke were important in the 1980s and 1990s, they were not sufficient to fundamentally change societal behaviours. Extensive advocacy by charities and nonprofits led to public policy changes that banned smoking from public spaces and improved health outcomes. Awareness alone would not have achieved the same outcomes. Legislation enacted because of effective advocacy was a key factor. The same can be said about drinking and driving in Canada.

In many cases, if organizations want to fully deliver on their missions and work toward meaningful and transformational change, public policy advocacy is the only way to go.

Complementary Knowledge and Insights for Better Policy

If we believe that the challenges that we face today are complex and intractable, whether it be child poverty, chronic disease, income inequality, or environmental degradation, then it follows that as a society we must bring the best minds and the best knowledge into play. Because of how closely the sector works with individuals and communities, some of the best knowledge resides in the charitable and nonprofit sector. The unique knowledge of charities and nonprofits comes from working at the “coal face” of difficult issues, delivering programs and services, evaluating the effectiveness of their interventions, and hearing the needs and aspirations of beneficiaries and communities. This knowledge provides a different kind of understanding, one that is complementary to the knowledge and information governments have, and it is critical to the development of sound public policy.

Moreover, in the last 25 years or so, various levels of government have shed much of their internal policy capacity. Governments have increasingly turned to consultants, academics, and think tanks for the knowledge they need. But for the reasons listed above, charities and nonprofits also have invaluable insights and intelligence to bring to the table.

Who Do Elected Officials Really Want to Hear From?

In my experience, elected officials, whether federal, provincial, or municipal, want to hear from the organizations that have direct and close relationships with communities and know how policies are playing out in the real world. While the data and analysis provided by public



servants, academics, and think tanks are essential to their understanding of the issues, elected officials want to understand the impact of their policies on real people and communities. Organizations working directly with individuals and communities can share real people's perspectives with politicians, providing an emotional and human understanding of issues. This is knowledge they thrive on. For many decision-makers, it is not all about data and academic analysis.

Unfortunately, these voices are too seldom heard by elected officials. This is not simply a criticism of decision-makers who do not reach out sufficiently. It is also a criticism of charities and nonprofits that do not recognize that they have a role to play in public policy – and, I would add, a responsibility to participate wherever they can. They hold unique and invaluable perspectives and can be the voice, sometimes the only voice, of the individuals and communities they serve.

Business Is at the Table

The Canadian business sector is active in public policy advocacy on the many issues that concern them. Canadian businesses recognize that government will make decisions affecting their ability to compete and grow and that those decisions may not be in their interest. Hence, they see clearly the need to get involved in public policy advocacy. The Canadian Federation of Independent Business and the Business Council of Canada (representing chief executives of large corporations) are examples of organizations that advocate for businesses. It is also common for industry-specific organizations to lobby for policy changes, whether related to regulations, taxation, or other issues. These lobbying organizations (which are legally constituted as nonprofits) are generally much better resourced than charities and other nonprofits.

Corporate participation in public policy advocacy is entirely legitimate when done with transparency, and charities and nonprofits need to ensure that they are also at the table. When charities and nonprofits don't participate, the issues that they care about are often neglected.

Building Legitimacy, Credibility, and Engagement

Robust public policy advocacy can send a positive signal to organizations' members, donors, volunteers, and staff. While I have not seen any data on this per se, I know from personal experience that advocacy done well attracts interest in the work and the cause of a charity or nonprofit, if this advocacy is well integrated in the charity's narrative. Indeed, advocacy can be an important differentiator in a competitive environment: it can highlight an organization's commitment to transformational change and can be crucial to demonstrating legitimacy and credibility. In addition, it can help charities and nonprofits build membership and attract talented, engaged, and committed volunteers and staff, in particular in the case of millennials.

Moreover, it can support an organization's fundraising efforts. A few years ago, when the federal government of the time and some in the media were criticizing environmental organizations for their advocacy work, these same organizations reported increased donations and engagement by volunteers. These organizations got the message: their donors and the public expected them to make their voices heard on important public policy issues.



While I feel that these five reasons are valuable and help to make the case, for a fuller discussion on why engaging in public policy advocacy is a good idea, I would refer you to an excellent [article](#) by Roger Gibbins, a fellow at the Max Bell Foundation, in *The Philanthropist*.

How Can Foundations Build Sector Capacity to Engage in Advocacy and Public Policy?

If foundations believe in the benefits of public policy advocacy by the charities and nonprofits that they support, then they have a responsibility to look at ways to resource that work in a meaningful way. Yet while an increasing number of funders are doing this, and doing it well, many others are not.

Several foundations now want to be involved in systemic change on big intractable issues. These funders are no longer satisfied with simply providing grants to deliver programs. While one can debate the wisdom of this, the reality is that many large foundations are increasingly interested in funding what they believe will lead to transformational change.

As this is the direction that many foundations are taking, and if we agree that it will be difficult to achieve that kind of change without turning to public policy as a lever, then it follows that foundations should find ways to help build the capacity of charities and nonprofits to engage professionally, rigorously, and effectively. Support for public policy advocacy should, in my view, be increasingly part of a foundation's toolbox.

There are myriad tools in that toolbox for foundations to support individual organizations' public policy engagement. In some cases, foundations can provide funding, while in others they can open doors, or they can convene and support strategic conversations. In others still, they can provide advice on the art and craft of public policy advocacy.

Below, I present examples of what some foundations are doing, under seven broad categories, for other foundations to consider as they reflect on how best to support public policy advocacy. These cases can also provide charities and nonprofits with ideas about how to approach funders to secure funding for their own public policy work. These examples do not constitute an exhaustive list of what foundations are doing – not at all. They are selected simply for their innovation and relevance.

While there is sometimes a sense that Canadian foundations don't support public policy advocacy, the examples presented here tell another story. Things are changing.

The work of foundations is presented under the seven following categories:

- investing in collaboration and people;
- training for impact;
- gathering evidence and communicating it;
- creating connections for influence;



- unlocking the power of convening;
- normalizing multiyear and stable funding; and
- supporting infrastructure.

Investing in Collaboration and People

Except in times of crisis (i.e. when something happens in the political or economic context that requires immediate and swift action), effective public policy advocacy is about the long game. It requires defining the problem, doing the background research, collecting the data, developing the right narrative, creating relationships, building partnerships, and very often waiting for the winning conditions to be present (i.e. waiting for the proverbial “window of opportunity” to open). Mostly, it requires patience. Influencing public policy to effect real change takes time. It is a long-term investment, and it is very difficult to do without stable funding to attract and retain the competent staff needed for this work.

There are many ways to do this. Foundations can provide dollars for salaries for public policy professionals in individual organizations or fund positions that could serve a group of organizations working in a specific area (the concept of a backbone organization in the collective impact model).

Foundations have supported or are supporting people and collaboration for public policy in several ways:

- Several years ago, the Montreal-based McConnell Foundation astutely recognized the need for environmental organizations to work together more effectively, with particular regard to public policy. Each organization did excellent work on its own, but they needed to break down silos to strengthen results and impact. The McConnell Foundation took it upon itself to help found the [Strathmere Group](#) and to create a rotating backbone organization to support the group. It continues to this day.
- In 2015, [A Way Home](#), a national coalition focused on the prevention and reduction of youth homelessness in Canada, was launched with support from the Toronto-based Catherine Donnelly, Laidlaw, and Maytree foundations, as well as the Home Depot Canada Foundation. The website of the collective reads, “We support all levels of government to recognize the role they have in shifting the response to youth homelessness through policy frameworks and the necessary funding to support strategies.” This coalition is shifting the policy focus from emergency response to prevention and helping young people who are homeless move into housing. The active collaboration of national partners brings to the table their complementary skills, attributes, and resources, thus limiting competition between organizations working toward similar goals.
- The National Housing Collaborative is one of the most successful approaches to public policy in the charitable and nonprofit world in many years. Similar to A Way Home, it brought together key housing organizations, supported by the United Way of Greater Toronto, to act as a solid backbone organization. After slowly developing a strong working relationship, the collaborative worked with the federal government to create the \$40-billion social housing strategy announced in 2018. Its work was funded and supported by the Maytree and Metcalf foundations in Toronto, the Vancity Community



Foundation in Vancouver, and the McConnell Foundation in Montreal, as well as by United Ways across the country. A good part of its success can be traced back to strong leadership and an effective and well-resourced backbone partner.

- A few years ago, the Edmonton-based Muttart Foundation and Imagine Canada discussed the idea of having a chief economist for the charitable and nonprofit sector – a completely new concept. The organizations recognized the need to strengthen the sector’s ability to engage on public policy issues and to engage on an equal footing with government experts. The Muttart Foundation was the initiator and the founding funder, with the Ontario Trillium Foundation and the Counselling Foundation of Canada following not long after. In 2013, Imagine Canada hired its first [chief economist](#).
- Another innovation was the Atkinson Foundation’s launch of a fellowship program in 2018. The work that the Atkinson [Fellow on the Future of Workers](#) will do in the next few years will make a substantial contribution to public policy and will strengthen the work many charities and nonprofits are doing to improve policies related to decent work. By selecting a high-profile and highly regarded thinker and communicator, the Atkinson Foundation is putting into place a powerful platform for public policy change, one that will contribute to the thinking and actions of many organizations.

Training for Impact

It’s one thing to engage in public policy advocacy, and it’s another to do it effectively and professionally. The sector has often done advocacy poorly because of the scarcity of financial and human resources to do it well. But a more important reason is that many charities and nonprofits don’t fully understand how public policy is done – and, perhaps more importantly, not done.

The public policy process is messy and complex. Yet many organizations seem to believe that passion and good ideas are all that are needed to influence government. How often have I heard people complain that they could not understand why government was dragging its feet or refusing to change things for the better when the solutions were so simple.

This is where funding for adequate training comes in. Any government worth its salt, regardless of its particular agenda, has robust mechanisms to test ideas, measure the possible impacts of proposed policies or programs, assess unintended consequences, undertake costing and forecasting, and much more. It follows that any organization wishing to influence public policy needs to be aware of this process and do the homework needed to engage in these discussions. So yes, dollars are needed, but first there needs to be a sound understanding of how to effectively engage in public policy advocacy.

Moreover, governments operate with many constraints, and understanding these can greatly help charities and nonprofits position policies in the right way and at the right time, as I learned through my later experience in government. Working in government was an eye-opener for someone who had for many years worked to influence public policy from the outside. I learned of the many constraints, including fiscal capacity, other competing government priorities, agreements made with other parties (in the case of a minority or coalition government), particular sensitivities of a minister, mandate letters, timing of the electoral process, attention to



particular constituencies, media attention, and polling results, to name but a few.

Public policy advocacy is not for the faint of heart. It takes proper data, research, and analysis, but it also takes a profound understanding of how government functions, its constraints and the context in which it works at any given time. Without this understanding, much energy can be spent in the wrong place, at the wrong time.

Foundations can build capacity in the sector by supporting the training of staff involved in public policy advocacy. Two Canadian foundations have recognized this need and have set aside resources to meet it:

- The Max Bell Foundation, based in Calgary, has been a leader in this area for a number of years with its highly successful [Public Policy Training Institute](#), which provides rigorous training to leaders in the charitable and nonprofit sector from all over Canada. Past students say: “This has been a superb learning experience for me that has already dramatically improved our organization’s performance in the policy change area,” and “I use the lessons I learned in this invaluable course almost daily. It’s changed how I structure campaigns and communications to be much more strategic and effective.”
- The Toronto-based Maytree Foundation has a [Policy School](#) that has earned a strong reputation in the sector. The school caters to charities and nonprofits that work in areas related to poverty reduction and human rights. On its website, Maytree indicates that it offers “a multi-disciplinary environment for participants to learn a range of skills that will help them influence policy,” and states, “When the non-profit sector engages in shaping public policy, we end up with better decisions, better laws, and better programs. However, it can be challenging for non-profit organizations to build the capacity to engage effectively in the public policy process.”

I am not suggesting that all foundations launch their own public policy institutes. Foundations wishing to build the capacity of the sector to effectively engage in public policy advocacy could financially support their grantees and stakeholders to participate in these existing programs. That would be immensely helpful in itself.

Moreover, there are other ways to build capacity:

- In 2018, the Laidlaw Foundation in Toronto hosted a workshop for grantees, community leaders, and organizations called Influencing Public Policy 101. The workshop provided advice on how to advocate for policy change, looked at best practices, and discussed how to get the attention of policy-makers, conduct follow-up activities, and much more. That the workshop had a full house clearly demonstrates the need for this kind of training.
- The Quebec-based [Lucie and André Chagnon Foundation](#) recognizes the importance of having community organizations influence public policy. It also recognizes that there are very strong actors at both the local and regional levels. To support their work, the foundation worked with the Léger polling firm to survey 1,500 individuals and organizations across Quebec to understand their approaches to influencing public policy and to determine their needs. From this research a new provincewide initiative called Pour Rallier (Communicate to Rally) has recently been launched to support those involved, or wanting to get involved, in public policy advocacy. It is a co-created



multimedia platform for knowledge mobilization that offers a variety of tools and resources and access to experts. The Chagnon Foundation is a major funder of this new initiative and, along with a variety of experts and practitioners, is a strong content contributor.

Gathering Evidence and Communicating It

A third way for foundations to support the capacity of the sector is through the gathering of evidence, whether by collecting and analyzing data (including polling data), conducting qualitative research, distributing reports, or staging speakers' series to make that knowledge easily accessible and digestible.

If we agree that charities and nonprofits need to be armed with the right evidence and data to successfully engage with government, then it follows that foundations can and should play a role in developing and disseminating that evidence.

The work of several Canadian foundations in contributing to the sector's ability to influence public policy through stronger evidence and data can inspire others to follow suit in their own ways.

- Every year, individual community foundations release the [Vital Signs](#) reports, which collect and mobilize data to foster conversations at the community level on important social and economic challenges. The data presented in these reports, which are produced in some 85 communities across Canada, is a powerful example of foundations coming together to provide tools and resources for civic engagement.
- The triennial [Early Childhood Education Report](#), first released in 2011 by the Atkinson Centre at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE), is funded by three Toronto-based organizations: the Margaret and Wallace McCain Family Foundation, the Atkinson Foundation, and the Lawson Foundation. The report provides accessible, user-friendly, and meaningful data and analysis on provincial and territorial early childhood education policies, including governance, funding, access, quality, and accountability mechanisms. The intent is that organizations can use the data in their own public policy engagements with their provincial and territorial governments, as well as with the federal government. A fourth report was released in 2020.
- The Ivey Foundation, based in Toronto, focuses on environmental issues. It was instrumental in the 2014 creation of the Montreal-based [Ecofiscal Commission](#), a unique and highly influential think tank in Canada. This is a powerful example of a foundation playing a key role in facilitating public policy discussions beyond the academic milieu. The knowledge and data stemming from the Ecofiscal Commission is credible and robust, and it is instrumental to any environmental charity or nonprofit seeking to impact public policy.
- In Quebec, the Chagnon Foundation incubated the [Observatoire des tout-petits](#), a first in the foundation world in Canada. The Observatoire seeks to put child development and well-being at the centre of Quebec's priorities and to foster public policy dialogue. It regularly reports on how young children are doing and on the environment in which children are growing up. The data and the reports are a huge resource for any child-focused organization looking to engage successfully in the public policy process.



- The Lyle S. Hallman Foundation, based in Kitchener-Waterloo, and the Lawson Foundation have worked together to support a major national knowledge initiative led by UNICEF Canada. [One Youth's](#) ambitious goal is to make Canada the best country for children by the year 2030. An important part of this work is public policy advocacy, which will be based in part on the first Canadian Index of Child and Youth Well-Being, one of the cornerstones of the initiative. This new data will be collected for many years to come, and it will be easily accessible to Canadians and organizations wishing to engage in public policy advocacy concerning the well-being of children in Canada.
- The Maytree Foundation is unique in Canada for recognizing the value of long-term funding for public policy in its creation and funding, over a 25-year period, of the Caledon Institute of [Social Policy](#). The Caledon Institute played a seminal role in the development of innovative social policy in Canada and was the go-to place for charities and nonprofits to access robust analysis and data for their own public policy advocacy. Funding for the institute ended in 2017, but its policy work can be found on the Maytree Foundation's website.
- A few foundations have made the data stemming from the work that they fund available to a broad public so that it can be used for better program development, as well as for effective engagement in public policy dialogue. This is a growing trend. A great example of this is the Vancouver Foundation's [Open Licensing Initiative](#).

Data and knowledge are key to effective public policy engagement and can ensure that governments view policy positions or options as robust and credible. While many organizations contribute in one way or another, two foundations come to mind for their strong ability to communicate data and knowledge.

For many years, the Metcalf Foundation has published seminal reports authored by foundation fellows on important policy issues, including the role of social finance in the arts, the implications of a basic income for Canadians, and the importance of decent work. The Metcalf [website](#) explains why they do this and how it helps advance public policy thinking and open up conversations. More than 40 such reports are accessible on the website at no cost, representing a major contribution to the ability of organizations to engage in public policy advocacy.

The Max Bell Foundation contributes to the critical thinking so necessary to good advocacy with its newly created annual speakers' series, [Policy Forward](#), which gives practitioners and policy-makers an opportunity to speak about emergent Canadian public policy issues. The audiences include charities and nonprofits, government, business, and engaged members of the public. Videos of the presentations are archived on the foundation's website, where they are accessible to all. These will become important sources of information and reflection for organizations wanting to engage in public policy advocacy in those areas of work.

Creating Connections for Influence

If charities and nonprofits are to successfully engage in public policy advocacy, they need adequate funding to do so. That is a *sine qua non* condition, and I have given examples of how this can best be done. But foundations can also think outside the box and use their more intangible assets, such as their personal connections, to facilitate access for charities and nonprofits.



While charities and nonprofits understand the issues in the areas in which they work and have ideas about how public policy could change things, many lack the necessary connections and access to government to make those changes happen.

This is where foundations, with their networks and points of entry, can come into play. They can open doors to elected and government officials, to business leaders, to other funders, and to colleagues outside Canada. They also have the ability to bring people together. (People rarely refuse invitations from foundations, particularly when the costs are covered!) These are important ways to support public policy advocacy, and this kind of support should not be underestimated.

- The Laidlaw Foundation set up a town hall that connected Ontario sector organizations with political party leaders during the 2018 provincial election campaign. This gave individuals and organizations across the province an opportunity to hear firsthand the parties' views on key issues facing youth in the province, and to ask party leaders questions. The event was a huge success, with thousands participating through Twitter and media amplifying the event.
- At the Lawson Foundation, we connected the executive director of the Ontario Nonprofit Network (ONN) and the executive director of the National Council of Nonprofits in Washington. That led to a strong relationship that included participation of the council's executive director in a session on public policy at the ONN's annual conference. It also led to members of the ONN attending meetings in Washington, including a policy day on Capitol Hill with their American counterparts. The two organizations are learning about public policy advocacy from each other, and that was exactly the point.
- In 2013, the Margaret and Wallace McCain Family Foundation supported the development of eight community early-years centres based in elementary schools. The foundation and the provincial government designed the evaluation framework that was implemented by researchers from Dalhousie University and Mount Saint Vincent University, including a post-doctoral fellow. The foundation worked with government partners to convene a series of meetings and symposiums to track progress. The post-doctoral researcher was supported by the foundation to apply for grants to further study the impact of early childhood policy aligned with public education and community. That researcher is now a Canada Research Chair and is establishing a network of key individuals inside and outside government to inform public policy. This is a great example of a foundation working to make meaningful connections between charities (in this case universities) and government.

Tapping the Power of Convening

To engage in public policy advocacy, convening is a complementary tool to traditional grants. In cases where public policy is going to be advanced through a partnership or a collaborative approach, it's critical that individuals and organizations gather around the same table to build relationships and trust and roll up their sleeves to design an effective engagement approach. Often, organizations wanting to partner on the same public policy issue find it difficult to set aside the time to build trust and ensure that the goals, objectives, and approaches are well aligned. They rarely have the resources necessary to invest in this work, and that can be detrimental to the whole exercise.



In some circumstances, foundations are particularly well positioned to play the role of a convener. Foundations can create safe and neutral spaces for conversations, and they can help cover the substantial costs that good convening may require. It is important to note that playing the role of a convener does not mean that the foundation is taking a leadership role. On the contrary, convening is about playing a complementary and supporting role.

There are interesting examples of foundations, or groups of foundations, recognizing the need for and the importance of convening for public policy. I will mention three from which we can learn.

- Community Foundations of Canada (CFC) and the McConnell Foundation have partnered with the Breuninger Foundation to use [Wasan Island](#) in the Muskoka region of Ontario as a premier location for convening. These events bring together organizations and individuals from different backgrounds and perspectives to spend a few days in nature while looking at ways of addressing challenging social issues. This example is a reminder to foundations that location and environment can play a big role in successful convening.
- For more than 20 years, the Muttart Foundation has been convening sector organizations and government through its consultations program to address complex regulatory issues that impact charities' ability to do their work effectively. An important factor in the success of these consultations is the care taken in choosing the right environment for the discussions. Muttart's unique convening approach has had a concrete impact on the regulatory environment for charities. Having participated in a few Muttart consultations, I can attest to the effect that they have on public policy, as well as to the lasting connections that they create among participants. The Muttart [website](#) lists a few key ingredients for success that can inform the work of other foundations:

Participants are asked to leave their agendas at home. These are not negotiation sessions, they are attempts to use problem-solving techniques to resolve a common issue. No one is asked to commit to any decision. The object of the consultations is to have a full discussion about the nature of an issue and alternatives to dealing with it. Participants spend two full days concentrating on the one issue, something one participant termed "an incredible gift."

- A third example of innovation in this space is the work that the Gordon Foundation has been doing in Canada's North. The foundation organizes [Northern Policy Hackathons](#) to bring together leaders in the North to discuss, and find real solutions to, public policy issues. In the words of the foundation, they develop "made-in-the-North solutions," or at least provide recommendations on important issues that affect northern communities. This is a unique model that speaks to the value of foundations supporting convening events to facilitate discussions that could probably never happen without that help. It is a powerful model that could be adapted by foundations wherever they are working in Canada.



Normalizing Multiyear and Stable Funding

In this chapter, I have attempted to make the case that it is important for charities and nonprofits to engage in public policy advocacy. As nonprofits do this, they come to realize that policy change usually happens slowly. Successful policy advocacy is not just about developing the right evidence and the right connections; very often, it is also about waiting for the right conditions, the right environment, and for that important window of opportunity to open. Usually, if organizations are to have any success, they need the resources to be engaged for long periods of time.

As a result, funders can look at multiyear support, so organizations can count on stable funding and plan accordingly. Foundations often think of multiyear funding in frames of three or five years. Why not start thinking more ambitiously and look at funding periods of between five and 10 years?

Some foundations already do this.

- The Muttart Foundation has been supporting the work of Imagine Canada, including its public policy work, for more than a decade.
- Another example is the long-term support that the McConnell Foundation has provided to the Strathmere Group, as described earlier.
- And there is the 25-year funding that the Maytree Foundation provided to the Caledon Institute that I also described above.

These are, in my view, examples to be followed if foundations truly want to support organizations' public policy advocacy and have something to show for it.

Supporting Infrastructure

As we have seen, many foundations are considering how they can best assist the public policy advocacy of the organizations they support. However, there is less recognition of the need to provide support to infrastructure or umbrella organizations, be they local, regional, national, or sub-sectoral. And I believe that lack of funding for this hampers the ability of individual organizations to do their public policy work as effectively as they could.

The role of most infrastructure organizations includes working to create a conducive regulatory environment for charities and nonprofits to do their work in the public policy arena. A case in point is the work that Imagine Canada, Philanthropic Foundations Canada (PFC), the Ontario Nonprofit Network (ONN), the Canadian Environmental Grantmakers' Network (CEGN), and others have done to help convince the federal government to modernize its regulations on political activity.

These organizations also bring charities and nonprofits together so that they can learn from each other. The ONN annual conference consistently addresses issues related to public policy, as does the CEGN conference. Imagine Canada and PFC collect data on the broad charitable and nonprofit sector and provide important analysis that is useful to many organizations.

Moreover, local organizations such as the Pillar Nonprofit Network in London and the Calgary Chamber of Voluntary Organizations (CCVO) do similar work to reinforce the capacity of local



organizations to be more effective in their dealings with their local governments.

I have often heard from foundations that support for infrastructure organizations doesn't fall squarely into their areas of work; hence there is no funding available to them. I think this is a mistake.

If foundations believe in the need for better support for public policy advocacy and for capacity-building for the entire charitable and nonprofit sector, then it only makes sense to also think of infrastructure organizations when it comes to funding.

Conclusion

There is no denying the role that charities and nonprofits play in Canadian society and in communities across the country. What is perhaps less known is the potential power of their voices in the development of sound public policy in this country.

While many charities and nonprofits are already active (and many have been for a very long time), many are not. For some, the decision not to get involved is the result of a thorough review of their priorities and approaches. But for many others, it stems from a lack of recognition of the role that they can play, a fear that it is not their role, and a sense that they have little to bring to the table. I have enumerated five main reasons why I believe there is merit to exploring becoming more involved in public policy advocacy in the hope that more charities and nonprofits will reflect on their potential to positively impact public policy, and through this improve the outcomes of the communities that they serve.

This chapter has also sought to demonstrate that, contrary to popular belief, many foundations in Canada are actually very active on the public policy front, and through myriad different and complementary ways, including funding, convening, opening doors, sharing data, training, and so much more. Given the diversity of approaches, charities and nonprofits should not fear approaching foundations with ideas about how those foundations could support their public policy advocacy work.

I also hope that the examples provided here may help spur other foundations that may not be in the space yet to reflect on the impact that they can have through the support of public policy advocacy and learn from what other foundations are already doing.

And given the recent historic decision made by the federal government to move away from imposing excessive limits on what charities can do in the realm of public policy advocacy, charities and nonprofits, as well as foundations, should jump on the opportunity to reflect on how best to engage in public policy advocacy in Canada.



Biography

Marcel Lauzière, The Lawson Foundation

Marcel Lauzière is the CEO of The Lawson Foundation and board chair of YMCA Canada. He has led a number of national charities, including Imagine Canada, and has been a senior public servant in Canada and abroad. He believes deeply in the power of charities and nonprofits to influence public policy for transformational change, and in the ability of foundations to support this work across the country.

