Canada in Existential Times

HOWARD RAMOS

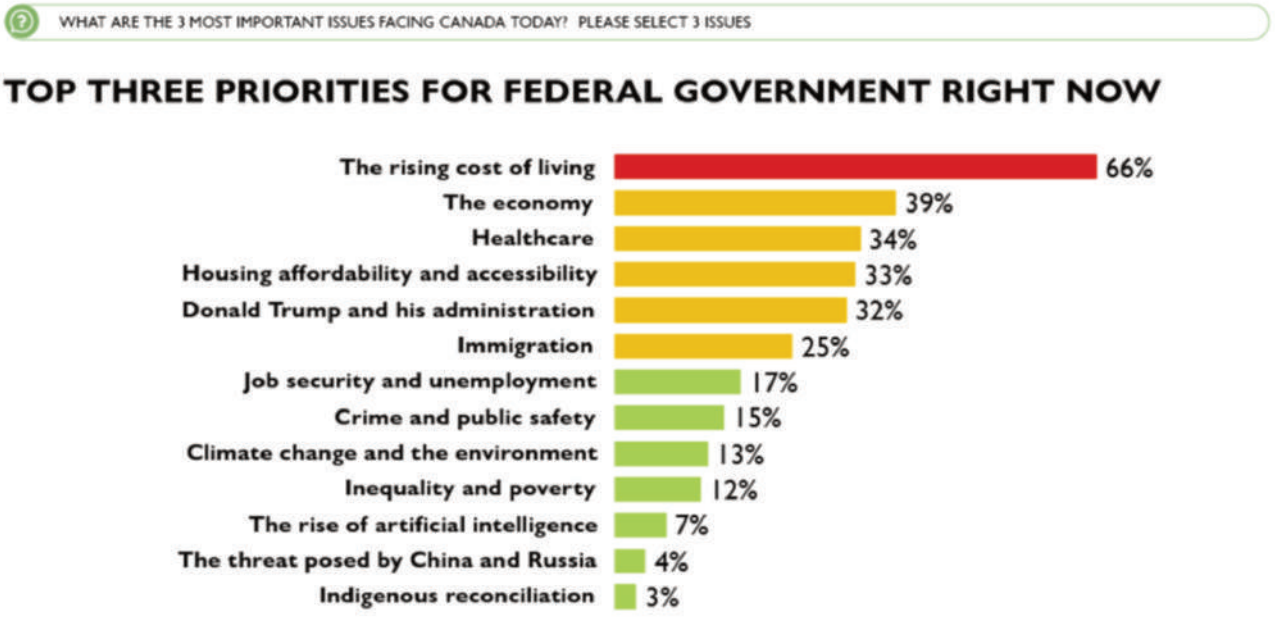
Canadian public debate increasingly frames pressing issues such as immigration, foreign interference, and Alberta and Quebec separatism as existential threats, a rhetoric that has surged in English-language media alongside Trump-era politics and the spread of Great Replacement Theory. Few of these concerns meet any credible definition of existential risk. Drawing on Terror Management Theory and work on moral reasoning, perceived symbolic threats can be defused by exposing contradictions within their own logic and converting them into tangible, solvable problems. Yet countering negative, oppositional identities also requires a positive vision: renewed nation building and investment in shared institutions that articulate Canada's value proposition and shift politics from fear toward hope.

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Existential rhetoric has ramped up in recent years with the term increasingly deployed (see Ramos 2025) to describe a whole host of issues. Canada's most pressing problems, for example, are increasingly framed as existential threats, such as AI, climate change, fertility, and even migration. At the same time, the country confronts challenges though rhetoric of annexation from American President Donald Trump and separatist movements in Alberta and Quebec.

Framing problems as "existential threats" implies urgency and a need to act quickly. The framing implies a need for new politics and new solutions to problems. It demands decisive actions and opens spaces to consider the unthinkable. It opens space for radical politics and conspiracy theory. This all has significant implications for mainstream politics and social change

Abacus Data polled Canadians in June 2026 and asked what are the three most important issues they face. Among the top concern is the cost of living and other economic issues, which feature prominently in the list. Also on the list are issues like climate change and AI as well as threats from outside regimes such a Trump, China or Russia. Crime and public safety as well as healthcare and immigration make the list too.

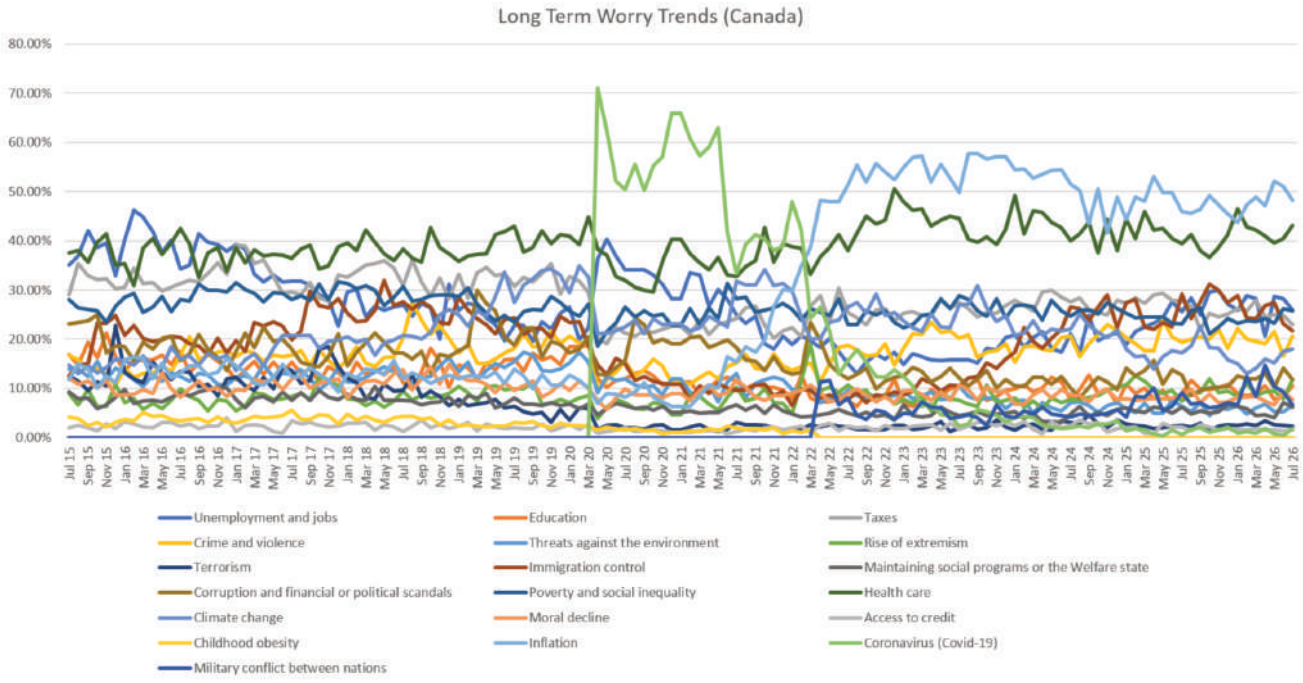


Source: Abacus Data -June 2, 2026 -Canadian Public Affairs Update
https://abacusdata.ca/climate-concern-remains-high-but-affordability-still-dominates-canadians-priorities/

Most, if not all, of problems people identified are not existential threats. In the most literal sense, to be an existential threat, the danger would have to be detrimental to humanity's long-term future (see Bostrom 2002; Ord 2020). Existential threats are ones that potentially lead to a collapse of civilization (culture, history, knowledge) and are triggered by catastrophic loss of population (Ord 2020). It is worth noting, however, among those estimating existential risk, most are skeptical of humanity losing its longterm potential. This is because people and policymakers can make changes that avert dangers. They can write new futures that avert dangers and pave positive paths forward. For this reason, few of the issues that people perceive as the most pressing even come close to meeting bar of being an existential threat.

Among the issues Canadians say are the most pressing, IPSOS polling shows that some are long terms concerns such as the economy which have had consistent levels of concern, other long-term concerns have had fluctuating levels concern such as the environment, and yet others have seen increased concern over time such as immigration or popped into the list because of emerging political threats such as American annexation or referendums for Alberta and Quebec separation.

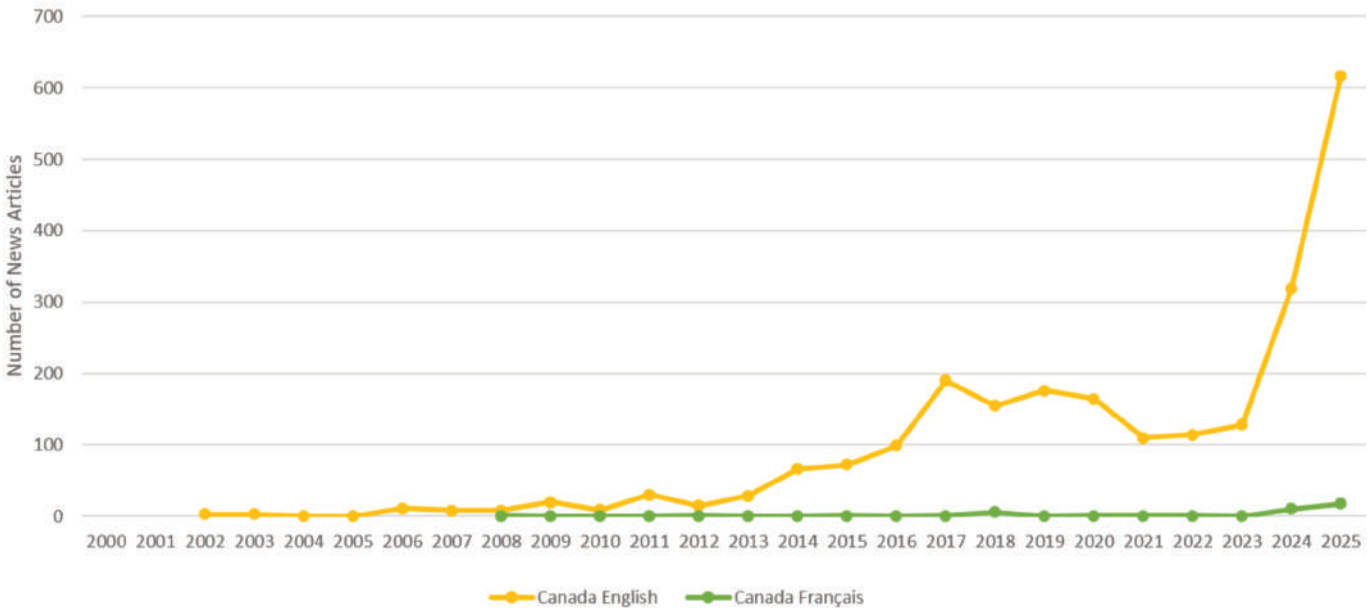
When we look at an issue that has gained increased attention, such as immigration, and look at how the term "existential threat" is deployed in conjunction with it, we see a significant increase in fears after the pandemic. A Nexis Uni search that looks at publications in news sources



Source: Ipsos -What Worries the World, Canada

focusing on Canada, for example, shows that in 2000 there were no mentions of immigration and existential threat in the articles covered by the database. By 2025 there were 617 mentions. When a search was done using the same keywords in French there were no mentions of them together until 2008 and by 2025 there were only 18 mentions of them together. It appears that this is an English-Canadian trend. The upswing in the mention of immigration and existential threat in English occurs around the time of the election Trump the first time in the mid 2010s and accelerated with his campaigning for the 2024 US election and start of his second term. This should be no surprise given, the Trump regime, through its State Department, literally warned allies that that mass migration is an existential threat to Westen civilization (Croucher and Gooding 2025).

Trump's pronouncement and rising trend of linking immigration and existential threat follows the MAGA movement's adoption of Great Replacement Theory, which stems from Renaud Camus (2024 [2011]). He argued that that mass migration from non-White and non-Christian countries, promoted through multiculturalism, liberalism and globalism, at a time of low fertility and high intermarriage, is demographically replacing the dominant majority in immigrant receiving countries. It is an antisemitic conspiracy theory that argues replacement of the native-born population is orchestrated by so-called elites.



The theory has been promoted by far-right social media influencers, such as Nick Fuentes (Breland 2025) or Tucker Carlson (Bump 2022), it has become a buzzword of the global far-right (Kassam 2024), and became mainstream American politics through the Trump administration (Yousef and Chang 2025). The theory is linked to calls for remigration, which is forced or incentivized mass expulsion of immigrants and ethnic minorities. Arguably, Donald Trump's use of ICE (Immigrant and Customs Enforcement) to raid businesses and other institutions to enact mass deportations and detention are the manifestation of the policy.

Similarly threat of outside interference from other countries as well as separatist movements are framed in existential terms. The fear is that the country will cease to exist because of outside pressure or because of internal grievances. This can be seen with concerns over foreign intervention and interference from the MAGA movement as well as from other foreign regimes such as China, Russia or Iran. Often outside interference is linked to separatist movements and claims that foreign governments are amplifying the movements and other contention online.

The issue of separatist movements in Alberta and Canada intersects with fears of mass migration and foreign interference. In the case of Quebec, much like the MAGA movement, the province turned away from immigration. In March 2026, Quebec Immigration Minister Jean-François Roberge defended the province's tighter immigration limits and reductions in levels by stating, "We do not aim to become India, we aim to become Switzerland… We are better at being 9 million rich Quebecers than 15 million poor Quebecers" (Carabin 2026). Similar anti-immigration sentiments can be found in the Albertan separatist movement as well as other grievances such as vaccinations and masking, climate change policies, energy regulation or transfer payments to other provinces (Bridsell 2026). CSIS also warned that the movement is a potential target for foreign interference (French 2026).

How can we understand such grievances and the increased use of existential threat as a lens for framing social issues? What implications does this have for society and politics? There are both psychological and social factors that help explain why grievances and other issues are increasingly framed as existential threats. The Terror Management Theory (TMT) literature, for example, offers useful insights on how people navigate real and perceived threats and why societies disproportionately focus on perceived or imagined threat, over those that are most likely to harm them more concretely (see Pyszczynski et al., 2015).

The theory argues that people navigate tension between real and perceived threat and proximal and distal defenses triggered by threats. Real threats are ones that are immediate and have tangible (proximal) solutions. If you are going to be hit by a car, for example, get out of the way. In contrast, perceived threats are less clear cut, especially if they symbolically target the worldviews of a community. The perceived challenging of the identity of a community triggers a process of imagining community to preserve it. That is, symbolically defending the nation (see Anderson 1991; Taylor 2004). For instance, in the face of perceived threats from mass migration, as seen with Great Replacement Theory, the response is to "make America great again" or protecting "old stock Canadians" to offer a couple examples. When issues like migration are framed as an existential threat it is framed as a critical event that demands urgent, and potentially radical, action to preserve "the people," to save the nation.

Haidt (2012) and Boltanski and Thévenot (2006) offer important insights on how gaps and contradictions in logic can help people reframe problems. Haidt (2012) for instance, shows that most people make moral judgments intuitively and in a matter of nanoseconds. They then use reasoning, after the fact, to justify what they feel and their initial conclusions. Few are convinced to change their minds with facts outside their moral frameworks. This is similar line of thought to Boltanski and Thévenot (2006) who examine how people settle disputes. They find that people rely on "orders of worth" that shape people's moral values. When conflicts arise, people invoke their moral frameworks to justify their positions. Agreements are reached through finding equivalences with other people's orders of worth to co-create solutions. In other words, someone will not be convinced that migration is not an existential threat by appealing to contradicting moral values, but rather by looking for contradictions in the internal logics of arguments that they already value. Rather, spotting contradictions that can be acted upon or dismissed is the way to move past symbolic distal threats and realign people's threat assessment.

The perceived threat of migration, for example, has many internal contradictions, but perhaps the most fundamental is one of logic. Existential threats are those which threaten the long-term future of humanity. Migration does not even come close meeting this threshold by any credible measure. It also does not meet the fears outlined in Great Replacement Theory. The vast majority of newcomers integrate into their new communities and adopt the values of the host country. Polling shows that immigrants are more likely to express attachment to Canadian identity than those born in Canada. Rather than threaten the dominant culture, they promote it. Most immigrants likewise have below replacement fertility, just like other Canadians (Teng et al. 2026). This means that immigrants remain a minority population in the country and are not even close to outnumbering the native born any time soon. The internal logic of existential framing of immigration does not hold up. Other issues framed as existential threats also break down under scrutiny, and spotting and naming such contradictions is a key resource for reframing and converting the threat into a tangible problem or even better not fearing it as a problem at all. It dials down the urgency associated with existential framing.

The perceived grievances by Alberta and Quebec separatist movements also break apart under scrutiny. As already noted, the dangers of immigration don't add up. Nor do fears of forced vaccinations and masking, climate change

policies, energy regulation, or transfer payments to other provinces. Take for example climate change, polling shows that a majority of oil workers support a move to a net-zero economy. Unprecedented forest fires across Northen Canada makes it abundantly clear that something needs to be done. At the same time overall opinion among Albertans about their province's treatment in the Canadian federation has been steadily improving. Change of Prime Minister and changes in federal policy have mitigated many of the grievances Albertans and Quebecers face. This is important to keep in mind; most threats can be averted with social and cultural change. Yet, critical masses in Alberta and Quebec still mobilize for separation. What people fear is how issues will affect their livelihoods and their communities.

Fearing perceived threats, and it is important to highlight that they are perceived, from migration, outside interference, or separatist movements, Canadians have been gravitating toward negative identities that are defined by what they are not rather than what they are. The rise of identity politics over the last couple decades has been shaped by what they are against, rather than what they are for.

Anti-immigration, anti-vaccination, anti-racism, de-colonialism, and separatist movements, to name but a few examples, all get performed through an oppositional register. They operate through negative, what others would call counter, politics that foster negative identities. Each of the examples has thrived online and become more siloed through social media. Spotting contradictions within their own orders of worth, and translating the problems they invoke into tangible, proximal solutions, is necessary but not sufficient. Also needed is an imagining of community, the nation, in a positive light that fills the symbolic void once threatened. Instead of trying to repair the imagined identity and return to one that pre-dates the threat, a so-called golden age, a positive framing creates a new identity that builds on the past without being bound to restoring it. It focuses on aspirations and looking forward. It focuses on nation building and inclusion. Almost all the problems people voice as concerns are shared across political and other demographic lines. To this end, it is time for politicians and advocates to not only think what they are not, but also what they are. That is, to re-imagine the value proposition of the country.

Since the defeat of the Meech Lake and Charlottetown Accords as well as the 1995 Quebec Referendum, Canadians have shied away from nation building and centralized federalism. It contributed to a politics of avoidance in which large questions about what the country is, and what it is for, were set aside as too costly to reopen. The country turned to an econocentric vision focused on cutting deficits and looking for efficiencies. Older narratives of multiculturalism were left aside for discourse of post-nationalism and anti-racism. This created a symbolic void that grievance has since filled.

Defining the value proposition of the country means naming what the nation delivers that no other country can offer and what the federation can do that no province or region could deliver alone. This includes offering the infrastructure for universal healthcare, interprovincial trade, and transportation links. But more importantly, it also means imagining the Canadian experience. To do that means re-investing in the infrastructure that creates Canadian identity, such as Heritage Canada, the National Film Board, and a nonpartisan national broadcasting system. It means creating shared moments and common symbols that transcend platforms and socio-demographic divisions to promote reconciliation and build the nation together. These are tangible commitments, and that is the point. They convert the perceived anxieties that circulate as existential threat into problems with addresses, budgets, and timelines. A country that can say what it is, and what it is building, has no need for enemies to define itself against. It rebalances how problems are perceived and what actions to take. It realigns politics from fear and threat to opportunity and hope.

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