# WE NEED TO TALK: CANADIAN IDENTITY AND REIMAGINING OUR TRADITION OF DIALOGUE

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We need to talk.

Canada is facing some major problems and we need to figure out how to deal with them.

High inflation, rising mortgage rates, financial insecurity, a crumbling healthcare system, and a seemingly intractable war in the Ukraine dominate the news as do disturbing reports of increasing crime in our urban centres. The idea of home ownership, once one of life's natural steppingstones, appears out of reach for many young people – a psychological hit that not all older Canadians fully appreciate.

The threat of climate change continues to grow, creating an underlying grimness about the future of our planet. Despite international agreements, government programs and targeted taxes, the climate change news never seems to be good.

Then there are national divisions based on geography, politics, race, ethnicity, and religion: regional tensions involving Quebec and Western Canada, particularly Alberta; increasingly shrill and hyper partisan political discourse; and louder calls for the greater inclusion of racialized Canadians in the mainstream and the dismantling of what many believe is systemic racism prevalent in our society.



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Many argue that Indigenous Reconciliation is proceeding at glacial speed while growing Antisemitism and Islamophobia should be a concern to us all.

The pandemic certainly didn't help matters. Fueled by what felt like a never-ending lockdown, tensions between those supportive of strict public health measures, including vaccine mandates, and their critics, reached a boiling point in early 2022. The so-called "Freedom Convoy" employed a decidedly unCanadian strategy of occupying Parliament Hill and its precincts, hardening positions on both sides of the issue further.

The trucker convoy, whose voices were amplified by both the mainstream and social media, demonstrated that there are certain elements of our society that are very angry. Although this white-hot rage doesn't seem to have extended beyond this vocal minority, that doesn't mean that most Canadians aren't frustrated and divided over the long list of challenges facing our nation.

Which brings us back to the need for dialogue. And the term dialogue is not used here as a synonym for armchair criticism or the lobbing of jeremiads at the "other side". It is about working to find a way for us to live together so that everyone succeeds.

To address grievances tied to regional and identity issues we need to better understand each other. To accept the sacrifices that need to be made to tackle major issues like climate change, we need to come to a full understanding of our common responsibilities. To find policy solutions to complex issues like income inequality, we need to hear the best ideas and accept the fact that no side has a monopoly on the truth.

Luckily, we are a nation of "talkers", and this is an important aspect of our common identity that we can draw upon. The history of Canada has been one of dialogue. Pre-Confederation saw efforts by English Protestants and French Catholics to engage in discussion about a nation where both groups could flourish. The religious nature of this ongoing dialogue lessened over the years and by the 60s, the focus of our national dialogue was on Francophone Quebec verses the "Rest of Canada" – a discussion that continued through several federal commissions, the election of separatist Governments in Quebec and two referendums.

The steady stream of non-European newcomers to Canada and the growing cultural diversity of our population led to a focus on multiculturalism starting in the late 1960s. Dialogue concentrated on how we could build a nation that welcomed diversity and accommodated cultural differences in a manner where once again, everyone succeeded.

Canada's Indigenous People were absent from much of this dialogue and it wasn't until the Oka crisis of the early 1990s that we saw efforts begin to include them in the conversation. The report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in 2015 and the subsequent discovery of unmarked graves at the site of former Residential Schools placed this dialogue much higher on the agenda and it continues to be a dominant area of concern for many Canadians even if progress seems to be very slow.

Yes, being Canadian has been all about dialogue and discussion. And the backdrop to all this talk has been nation building and we should be proud of the Canada that we have built, warts and all.

Yet, has this type of dialogue run its course?

Our public debate is becoming increasingly strident. Within the world of politics, the media and punditry there appears to be less room for understanding, compromise and a willingness to see a situation from other perspectives. Political strategy is increasingly about dividing the population with wedge issues to create a strategic coalition that will get you enough seats in the House of Commons or Legislature.

Even though most Canadians still hold middle of the road opinions, we are often quick to demonize those who don't share our views. Forgiveness is a word that is largely absent from our public discourse and the ease with which we label each other and our actions as "racist", "sexist" or a variety of other serious accusations is worrisome.

There is another problem with the traditional Canadian approach to dialogue. It has usually been led by elites who no longer appear open to meaningful exchanges with those who hold contrary views. These same elites have also lost their credibility in the eyes of many Canadians. Institutions like governments, universities, business, and faith communities are today viewed by many with a degree of cynicism and often seen as relics of colonialism, systemically racist and defenders of the status quo.

Could anyone imagine a Royal Commission on the Future of Canada succeeding in the current climate?

The answer, it would appear, would be to have ordinary Canadians talk to ordinary Canadians without the involvement of mediating institutions that nobody trusts. But would that work?

Yes, there are major issues with "fake news" and our inability to establish an agreed upon set of facts to govern our discussions. But the problem runs deeper. As a colleague once privately asked me about an inter-faith dialogue event – a great example of ordinary people talking to ordinary people – what exactly are we going to "talk" about?

My colleague raised an important question. Beyond the logistical barriers of "regular folks" talking to "regular folks" what would they say to each other about their differences over the issues of the day? Anyone who has experienced a ruined Thanksgiving due to a dinner table debate between a "pro-vaxxer" and an "anti-vaxxer" can attest to the current difficulty of talking things through and finding common ground.

Locking ordinary people in a room and telling them that they can't leave until they have reached an understanding is often little more than a fantasy. Not only are issues often technically complex, but without an appreciation of each other as fellow human beings worthy of respect, each with a distinct biography, combined with some humility about ourselves and our opinions, little is going to happen.

Instead of talking through issues what if we worked through issues – together?

It may sound trite but how many of us haven't marveled at media stories of members of a Mosque and a Synagogue jointly coming together to help welcome a refugee family? How many involved

in a volunteer initiative haven't been struck by the cross section of individuals participating? No matter the differences of their backgrounds, economic standing, race, or religion they have plenty to talk about – the project underway. They come to learn and appreciate each other. They tend to put their grievances aside and are more open to building a common life together where each side flourishes.

Canada is a country of grass root community builders. Although international comparisons are always difficult, we appear to be a leading nation in terms of volunteer rates. According to Statistics Canada, nearly 8/10 Canadians over the age of 15 engage in some sort of formal or informal volunteering adding to up to billions of hours and making a significant contribution to our GDP.[1]

There are clouds on the horizon. Recent statistics show that Canada's non-profit sector is facing challenges when it comes to attracting and retaining volunteers with close to 2/3 of organizations facing a shortage.[2] Some of this decline is certainly tied to public health concerns, but it may also reflect a reluctance to engage in the wider community.

Should our political agenda involve a national strategy on volunteering? Are there other ways to call Canadians to action? What about empowering individuals and communities to get involved in direct decision making and giving them a role in implementing solutions? What about programs aimed at community development; increased national service opportunities; exchanges and other travel opportunities across Canada, particularly for young people? Would this provide a foundation for better understanding?

Some may argue that it is too reminiscent of the failed "Big Society" policy introduced by the Cameron government in the United Kingdom – a nation-wide effort to shift decision making to the local level, empower citizens and build community. There is no question that the "Big Society" failed to deliver, and the Cameron government quietly dropped the initiative. It's failure, however, was not because the idea of government trying to facilitate community building and encouraging its citizens to engage on problems was inherently bad. It failed because it became an excuse for the government of the day to cut spending and try to foist the costs on civil society and cheaper private sector delivery agents.[3]

No matter the specific form, we need to find a way to bring people together and focusing on projects, initiatives and community building appears to hold more promise than traditional top-down dialogue in our increasingly divided and polarized country.

Despite our problems and our inability to talk about them, let's not abandon hope. Canada's population

1 Hahmann, Tara. Volunteering counts: Formal and Informal contributions of Canadians in 2018. *Insights on Canadian Society*. Statistics Canada, April 23, 2021. https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/en/pub/75-006-x/2021001/article/00002-eng.pdf?st=adt5zOdv

2 "Critical Lack of volunteers putting Canadian non-profit services at risk: Volunteer Canada." CBC News. January 24, 2023. www.cbc.ca/news/canada/british-columbia/volunteer-shortage-caanada-1.6723348; Statistics Canada. Table 33-10-0617-01, *Volunteers and challenges businesses face in volunteer recruitment and retention, fourth quarter of 2022*. https://doi.org/10.25318/3310061701-eng

3 See for example, Hélène Balazard, Robert Fisher, Matt Scott, "The 'big society' in the United Kingdom: privatization or democratisation of public services", *Revue française d'administration publique* 2017/3 (No 163) p. 507–520.

still appears compassionate and caring. The last several years have been tough, however, and there are signs that things may be fraying around the edges. The future holds many serious challenges and maintaining and strengthening a sense of understanding and unity needs to be a national priority. Let's recognize that dialogue is still built into the Canadian DNA but acknowledge that it may need to be reimagined in these turbulent times.