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The Virtue of Small Charities

—Ray Pennings—

Of Canada's 161,000 incorporated non-profit and voluntary organizations . . .

- the top 1% account for 59% of revenues received;
- 42% of the charities have revenues of less than $30,000 and collectively account for just 1% of revenues;
- 40% of charities have no paid staff
- 37% have just 1-5 employees
- 64% of charities operate in local communities with local mandates

Most Canadian charities are pretty humble outfits.

Last week Cardus submitted a brief to the House of Commons Finance Committee regarding tax incentives for charitable giving. While preparing that brief, I came across the stats above from Statistics Canada data.

A short blog doesn't provide space to tell these charities' stories. A small board of four or five dedicated persons support the driving leadership of a couple of individuals. Their work, whether in focusing on some neighbourhood need or raising funds for a well in Africa, is supported by a community of a few hundred people who write cheques in response to appeals, who cry and pray when told of the hurt that needs healing, and who shed tears of joy when modest successes are realized. Many of these charities have no profile beyond the few hundred people in their network of support, or beyond the few thousand people who they may help over the lifetime of the charity.

In the context of Canadian public policy, charitable work amounts to a fraction of a decimal point of our collective efficacy, a rounding error. In the lives of those involved, though, whether in giving or receiving (and are they not sometimes indistinguishable?), the work of these charities can be definitive, life-altering.

Small charities are mostly overshadowed by high-profile campaigns, such as those by health, education, or international relief foundations. In making this point, I am neither denigrating the merits of high-profile campaigns nor agreeing with the too-easy criticism that charitable dollars raised by professional fundraising campaigns invalidates the worthiness of their cause. I don't doubt there are some "bad apples" among charities large and small, as there are in every sector. However if I need to take a side in arguing the value offered to society for any government line item, I would be quite prepared to argue that the tax expenditure line for charitable giving probably offers Canadians the greatest return on investment of any line in the government estimates.

There is more to my argument than the nostalgic "small is beautiful" argument. (When it comes to things like flying, car-making, or building office-towers, I am much more likely to prefer big over small organizations. Even in the charitable sector, there are many activities more effectively administered by big charities.) Still, let's not overlook the virtue and unique contribution of the small charity.

Smaller organizations can often leverage the commitment of volunteers and spend the greatest proportion of their resources directly on their mission in a way that accomplishes a great deal with very little. Because they are locally focused on a particular local manifestation of a problem, they are able to customize and focus their energies on responses that are best for the particular situation.

Smaller charities are also better able to accommodate diversity. With each focusing on the needs of their local communities, a particularly charity may be less diverse in its composition but the cumulative service of several small charities is likely to be more diverse and sensitive to local needs than would be the impact of a larger charity with the same reach.

The most compelling argument, however, is that of subsidiarity. Having charities closely connected to their grassroots provides accountability and an ownership that can rarely be matched in a larger charity. It reflects a healthier model of social architecture that is often overlooked in our drive for efficiency.

We need the contributions of charities, both large and small. As the Finance Committee considers how best to incentivize charities, they need to be particularly attentive to small charities, given the trends that are putting them at a particular disadvantage. They may be easily overlooked, but they punch above their weight in terms of impact and so should not be forgotten.

A Kid-Friendly Kingdom

—Kyle Bennett—

Skimming the table of contents of Nick Wolterstoff's recently published collection of essays entitled *Hearing the Call*, I found two articles leaping off the page at me: "Letter to a Young Theologian" and "Playing with Snakes: A Word to Seminary Graduates." I'll reserve my reflections to the latter.

One of Wolterstorff's exhortations in this "word" for seminary graduates is that they work with and care for children. Offering Isaiah 11:6-9 as a text for consideration, he argues that this passage should be a "formative image" for their ministry. A little child shall lie down with and lead wolves, lions, leopards, and play around vipers. "It is your calling to do what you can to be a voice for these voiceless ones. It is your calling to struggle to make the world a place in which their innocent, vulnerable playfulness is appropriate." As I read these words, a resounding "amen" slipped from my lips . . .

. . . followed by feelings of delight and terror.

I remember the first time I used a public restroom after I knew I was going to be father. There I was, using the toilet, and I became aware of an object on my right that was never before within my field of experience: a changing table. Parenthood—in more ways than one—changes your perspective. It reorients you. It gives you a new set of eyes, whether you use it or not. I never noticed changing tables in public restrooms before that night. Now I unsuccessfully try to ignore them.

The kingdom of God comes with a new set of eyes, too.

Jesus says that the kingdom of heaven belongs to a child (Matt. 19:14). We should take pause at that. It's figurative, but it's also literal. Jesus invited his disciples to have a heart and a mind like a child (Matt. 18:3), but he also attracted and kept children close by (Mark 10:13, 16). And woe to those who try to keep these little ones away from him (Matt. 18:6)! The kingdom of God revolves around children. In fact, as the apostle Paul makes clear, to become a *citizen* of this kingdom is to become a *child* of God (Gal. 3:26).

Being a voice for children is the pastor's calling. Similarly, it's the calling of those combatting human trafficking in organizations like International Justice Mission. But it doesn't end there. It's also *our* calling—a calling for all citizens of God's kingdom.

As we sculpt, investigate plate tectonics, propose marketing strategies, coach tennis, or sit on city planning committees, we must do what we can do to give voice, space, and time for children. We must do what we can to create, discover, advance, encourage, and plan for them.

Educo Blocks

If we did, I think our day-to-day activities would be different. The substance of our work would change.

I would like to think that our bathrooms would have more changing tables. Our cities would have more gardens. Our neighborhoods would have more playgrounds. Our buildings would have more colour. Our offices would have more toys. Our books would have more pictures. Our briefcases would have more crayons. Our classrooms would have more free time. Our questions would have more wonder and vulnerability. Our relationships would have more devotion and joy. Our worship would have more recreation and movement.

Rome was built for adults, and it fell. The new Jerusalem is built for children, and it never will. Go. Do what you can to make this city of children flourish. And while you're at it, make sure to play a little.

Don't Let the Smallness Confuse You

—Robert Joustra—

The hamsters are whirring on Parliament Hill, quietly squeaking, softly padding . . . but peek inside a cage or two and you will see a busy bunch of bureaucrats and wonks scampering for what pundits suspect is the first, outright articulation of Prime Minister Harper's Canada.

And while panicked lobbies have been misreading last year's rotting leavings for an absent social agenda, quietly—incrementally—the Prime Minister has been outlining a smaller picture of Canadian federalism, both at home and abroad. It will come, as with all important things in our consumerist times, through the back door of the federal budget.

National, federally-administered programs are right out. The Conservative movement has made no secret of its desire to download priorities, financial and moral, to lower and lower levels of governance. Subsidiarity advocates might find this encouraging, but—of course—downloading can only be a successful social policy if a commensurate trail of money follows it. The structural reduction of federal capacities will undoubtedly accompany a clearer, closer elimination of the deficit. Federal taxes will not go up. That unhappy task will probably be left to the provinces, some already sagging under the enormous debt of squandered boom times, and municipalities, whose laughable powers of taxation might yet inspire a rash of urban "suicides," as some cities simply give up on life. Politics is about to become more local, but not therefore—as anyone who has ever debated a municipal by-law or speed bump at a town hall meeting knows—more civil.

Still, the Conservative maxim of reaping what you sow will focus the conversation: provinces like Alberta will be better for the autonomy, and those like Quebec will presumably enjoy the influx of sovereignty. And the spat between Federal Conservatives and Ontario Liberals will finally find resolution through an experiment of empowerment by neglect. Federal transfers to provinces will be less like the renewal of federalist covenant, and more like a divorce settlement. Alimony payments will be prompt, but further negotiation will be met with a cease-and-desist.

Foreign affairs will play by the same logic. Not unfairly, Carlo Dade at the University of Ottawa asked where all the conservatives in foreign policy are. Within days, Jack Granatstein, in the *National Post*, argued that Prime Minister Harper had made Canada a world player. Ironically, in the incremental-smallness-of-the-new-grand vision of Canada, both can be right.

Foreign affairs is one portfolio this government will not (cannot) download, and has demonstrated, via the shuffling in of Minister Baird, a strong potential for defining a new Canadian role in the world. But that role is narrower, with a focus on defense and on targeted, concentrated international aid with an eye to tangible deliverables via—as far as possible—non-governmental associations. Dade asks where the Conservative expertise on anything besides defense, America, Israel, and economics is. There is no accidental absence here: Canadian foreign policy as an extension of Canada's interests is becoming narrowly economic. Even a capable military is largely sold as pulling our weight with wealthy trade partners, while making the world safe for Canadians.

This is foreign policy, but it is not a sweeping moral vision. It's not even a strategy for wide scale global engagement. This government is getting itself—and perhaps by precedent future governments—out of that business.

The Peace Tower, Ottawa, Ontario

Values at home will be mirrored abroad, as Canada fashions itself a pragmatic, capable, dependable ally, making incremental contributions to a democratic, free market international system that's safe for Canadians and safe for its allies. Worse things have been proposed.

But don't let the smallness of that grand vision confuse: the devolution of more and more values and principles to lower levels of governance, and—ultimately—as far as possible to the individual, *is* a grand vision. Likewise, a foreign policy driven by national interest, and so-called shared Canadian values, also *is* a grand vision. It's just a vision that sneaks by dressed as common sense, which—as Robert Cox has long reminded us—is the greatest power of all.

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