

Cardus Briefing Memo

To: Cardus Stakeholders
From: Ray Pennings, Co-Founder/ Executive Vice-President
Date: December 2020
RE: Ten Policy Considerations in the Context of a Post-Pandemic Reset¹

Setting the Context:

Some “big picture” themes to pay attention to as we enter 2021.

Reframing Common Good: The past decade has seen a reframe of what is generally understood as “the common good.” “Peace, order and good government” ([POGG- the Canadian constitutional aspiration](#)) or “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness” ([the US one](#)) are understood differently. Power – imposing whatever you are able to, without great regard for negatively impacted minorities - has succeeded justice as the prevailing political norm. Conflate this with high-profile incidents of racial, sexual, and economic inequalities which reflect a significant change from the modern individualistic assumptions of the democratic order to “identity” politics, the prevalence of which is such that it must be dealt with in the political, economic, and social spheres. I’ll be watching for how “desired outcomes” outweighs data in framing the public discourse.

Who Does What? The pandemic has introduced new categories and priorities, the implications of which are still being figured out. [Government resilience is being celebrated](#) for sustaining a society in which many live from pay-cheque to pay-cheque but the whole story is not being told. It could be argued that COVID is reaffirming the family as the foundational unit of society. Schools and daycares closed and families had to carry the load, regardless of their circumstances. The larger the institution, the more arbitrary it seems that rules are applied even as the principle of subsidiarity – downloading the decisions to those closest to the front line – was mostly neglected. This manifested itself differently within core urban, suburban and rural communities. Arbitrary and inconsistent definitions of “essential” and “non-essential” reflect widespread differences regarding the roles and priorities for different institutions.

Reframing Debt: The last nine months have seen the largest government spending and increase in public debt in our lifetime. Not only are the raw numbers a concern; there is also the context of public debate in which some are suggesting that since the government can print money,

¹ N.B. This memo is intended to stimulate discussion with Cardus Stakeholders. It is not intended to reflect official Cardus research-backed positions on every issue. As a think-tank and registered charity, Cardus focuses on educating and shaping the public conversation to equip others (including government, business, non-profit and religious leaders) in the exercise of their responsibilities.

government debt should not be thought of as regular debt that needs to be repaid. ([Stephanie Kelton's *The Deficit Myth*](#) is the most articulate presentation of Modern Monetary Theory which is gaining increasing prominence).

Reframing Work: The focus of economics in the past nine months has been income support rather than production. Employment is considered almost exclusively in terms of the income it provides (rather than the goods and services it produces, especially for those considered non-essential) with little attention paid to the [non-economic factors of work](#). The immediate context provides new life to an [ongoing discussion](#) that Canadians should restructure its array of social programs in order to provide a universal basic income (UBI) in the same manner as we provide universal health care and universal old age programs.

Reframing Workplaces: The advance of technology, the success of work-at-home, and the costs of high-density offices and workplaces is prompting [a significant rethink](#) of how we organize work. Less discussed are the implications for creativity and mentorship. Apart from the implications for work, the economic repercussions for commercial real estate, the travel and hospitality industry, as well as overall real estate (with less pressure to have all employees commuting daily and hence free to prioritize other factors in choosing where to live) will see significant shifts in the economy.

Refreshing Institutions: The post-modern decline of trust in authority and institutions has been with us for a few decades but the next decade will continue to see its impact reforming our existing institutions. BREXIT and WEXIT, the roles of the G20 and NATO (and who pays the freight), the place of our political parties (think the current flirtation with independent Senators in Canada) and the legitimacy of electoral systems (electoral reform movements in Canada and griping by the losers in each of the last two US elections that the results were not fair) – the impact of changed understandings of authority, legitimacy, and what due process means (or not) will impact all institutions. Do we have the collective prudence to understand and embrace change that will result in refreshed institutions for a new era without “throwing out the baby with the bathwater?”

Performative Polarization: With traditional media shrinking and changing and an as-yet-immature social media creating impossible-to-manage news cycles of seeming immediacy, headlines and brand seem to have an upper-hand over content and substance. An increasing number recognize the corrosiveness and unsustainability of our present methods of discourse but while they continue to undergo change, hyper-partisanship and unnuanced “good versus evil” narratives maintain the upper hand. Difficult issues (e.g. environment, indigenous issues) are dealt with through obligatory talking points and frameworks but little real action or considered debate.

Humans and Rights: Philosophy (new understandings of identity, gender and sexuality) is combining with science (artificial intelligence, brain transplants, gender transitions, etc.) to challenge any social consensus regarding what it means to be humans. Processes once considered only in the context of dealing with medical issues and overcoming disease are now being considered in the context of science’s ability to create the “perfect human being.” Issues of autonomy (assisted suicide), agency (mandatory vaccines?), privacy (surveillance/ data sharing) are only a few of the practical issues that emerge from a changing understanding of the foundational question, “What does it mean to be human?”

Ten Policy Areas / What I'll be Watching:

1. Overcoming the Divides

- a. The impact of COVID has played out differently in rural and urban environments. Yet, public policy solutions have not been nuanced or tailored enough to [local realities](#). This is only one expression of a much larger and growing divide between rural and urban communities and cultures in Canada. This reinforces political divides that were already evident on political maps and undergird the growing populist impulse.
- b. Inequality – [The Universal Basic Income](#) is in the spotlight in the push to address poverty, but the full range of personal and societal problems caused by unemployment cannot be ignored. [Work is about much more than money](#). The discussion about transitioning from a resource-reliant economy has not factored in the employment and social impacts of this sector. When people have nothing to do, there are harms to mental health, family stability, the social order, and [more](#).
- c. Intergenerational Reckoning – As current public debt is transferred to the next generation and with stark differences regarding the expected retirement security of the current generation compared with future generations, significant questions about fairness. This will cut in various ways, including public versus private sector, salaried versus gig/ free-lance worker, and the nature of pension and health benefit entitlements.

What I'll be watching: The roll-out of the vaccine as well as the continuation of economic relief will expose differing perspectives on fairness and priorities. Issues about who decides and who provides will highlight differing senses of entitlements and responsibilities and expose divisions in our society.

2. Regional Disparity and Federalism

- a. Federal-Provincial arrangements and blurring of lines. In a conflict between the provinces and the federal government, who wins and why? Who has jurisdiction for what? [Reforms are needed](#) and [the lines are shifting](#). The federal government as a sovereign jurisdiction has different capacity to take on debt and has taken on the bulk of debt during the pandemic. [Critics accuse the federal government of leveraging this influence](#) to make decisions in areas of provincial jurisdiction, with the strings attached to the \$1 billion for long-term care announced November 30th as just the latest example.
- b. There is a strong and growing sense of regional inequity in both electoral and federal--provincial relations and policies. [A referendum](#) in Alberta is planned for 2021 to seek new leverage to reboot the relationship with Ottawa and address concerns regarding equalization payments and environmental policies.
- c. The impact of environmental and economic policies looks very different in various parts of Canada. Beyond the hard data and economic realities that will inform business and market choices, there is a symbolic element to these issues that will hugely impact social and political choices.

What I'll be Watching: Canadian federalism was challenged before COVID and the regional divides have only intensified. Peace, order and good government is not simply a technical constitutional division of powers but an approach to governing that accommodates diversity while maintaining

vision. Provincial governments are the key in resisting being “bought” by federal funds with strings attached.

3. Reshuffled Geo-Politics

- a. The US has lost standing in the world as a global leader in its reliance on power and strong-man politics over principle or diplomacy. [Vigilance and new approaches](#) can help Canada from being lost in the shuffle.
- b. [The future direction of China](#) is the big wild-card. Short-term the growth of the surveillance state and [crackdown on freedom and religion](#) is very alarming. But we should also pay attention to demographics and the rapid growth of Christianity in China.
- c. Watch the Great Reshuffle in global Christianity – southward and eastward. ([Philip Jenkins, 2002, The Next Christendom.](#)) For decades, trends have projected that by 2025 it will be Africa, Asia, and Latin America (and not US, Canada, or Europe) that will compete as those regions and populations that are [the new demographic centres](#) of Christianity. We are arriving there now.

What I'll be watching: The world order is changing. Existing trade and political alliances will morph as population, technology, and cultural/religious changes reframe natural affinities. It may be a good time to increase the attention that is being paid to what today might seem unconventional markets. What will the post-Brexit EU-British relationship look like? How will Hong Kong be resolved? How will China be dealt with at the next round of international summits, the first post-Trump?

4. Education

- a. The pandemic has exposed the cracks in education systems run by government monopolies. Independent schools generally responded [more flexibly and more effectively](#) to the pandemic's disruptions as a function of their greater accountability to parents.
- b. Ontario's independent schools were growing before COVID (20% increase from 2007-2019) with student safety, school culture, student character development, curriculum and teachers [driving parents' choices](#). There is opportunity for the sector to grow in more significant ways but [the infrastructure to support independent education growth](#) is largely not in place. (Cardus, [Who Chooses Independent Schools and Why?](#) 2019; Cardus, [Mapping School Associations in Canada](#), 2018.)

What I'll be Watching: A long-term strategy for cultural change will prioritize education. While the policy frameworks within which independent schools operate are important, the degree to which the landscape changes in meaningful ways will depend on the leadership of civil society, voting with their feet (higher enrollment percentages) and their pocketbooks.

5. Redefined Trade

- a. Border Differences – The previous decade's focus on [free trade and globalization](#) is shifting. COVID has exposed the [fragility of global supply chains](#). [Trump](#) was both a sign and catalyst of a bigger shift, speeding up changes in trade alliances, policies, and practices. We may have reached [peak globalization](#).

- b. Corporate Diversification: Smaller and bigger businesses will be rewarded for not targeting one narrow niche globally, given [emerging supply chain challenges](#). Diversification will be a good strategy at the corporate level, now that bigger may not necessarily be better. (See [COVID Supply Chain Risk brief](#)).
- c. While the focus is on “recovery,” governments will have political licence and incentive to stimulate the economy through more infrastructure investment but public spending only masks underlying economic realities for a period of time.

What I'll be Watching: COVID will cause the rethinking of supply chains and trade arrangements. Now it's riskier than ever to have all of your eggs in one basket. How companies, regions, and countries respond is worth paying attention to. Watching the restructuring of trade agreements internationally, the political will within Canada to focus on more interprovincial free trade, and the pace and location of private sector investment will be key.

6. Technology

- a. [Smart cities](#), [driverless vehicles](#), and even the seemingly successful development of a corona vaccine in record time is expanding the imagination of what is possible and how technology can transform the way “ordinary life” is lived.
- b. However, just as the smart phone has, for the most part without conscious reflection by the majority, changed life in so many ways beyond the immediate function of the tool, so new technology has significant potential to have many unintended consequences.
- c. From the morality embedded in algorithms, the challenge involving the sharing and utilization of both micro and big data along with the challenge of privacy in the context of easy surveillance, the advances of technology continue to propose social, ethical, and moral questions which we are generally not prepared to engage.

What I'll be watching: The extent to which moral, privacy and rights concerns are discussed and considered alongside the adoption and acceptance of new technologies. The particulars about the COVID vaccine provides an interesting test case given the sense of urgency and significance that is being attached to it. Might the [proposed COVID vaccine card](#) be an early case study?

7. People

- a. Following World War II, [the baby boom](#) propelled the growth of the Canadian population. We sought national productivity through natural fertility, child-rearing, and moral formation in the family.
- b. Today there is an increasing reliance on [immigration](#) by government policymaking and planning.
- c. Immigration has yielded economic benefits and enriched the job market, but it has also generated particular cultural and religious challenges as society has increasingly grown more diverse.

What I'll be Watching: Some faith communities need to be challenged to take on a more nuanced perspective regarding immigration. New Canadians will likely be at the forefront in defending family values, religious freedom, and protecting the space for freedom and entrepreneurship. While

integrating various cultures into a cohesive society will always be a challenge, it may be preferable to the proselytizing secularism that dominates current western liberal thinking.

8. Family

- a. The reality of demographics, including [increasing immigration](#) and newcomers in Canada, will propel progressives to use strategies to [socialize child rearing](#).
- b. Who “owns” the child will be the key question: [the government or parents?](#)
- c. Sites of future conflict will include: Court battles over “indoctrination” in families and the kinds of norms that will govern in child care arrangements and government-controlled education. Fostering, adoption, education (especially homeschooling) and childcare will be the early battlegrounds.

What I'll be Watching: Fund [“tots, not spots”](#) and continue strengthening parental benefit programs. We should be open to broadening our understanding of family to include more extended family, and not remain narrowly focused on the nuclear family, especially as it relates to early child care and end-of-life care arrangements.

9. Free Speech

- a. Threats to free speech, conscience rights, and religious freedom can come from both government and professional societies and associations.
- b. [Canada Summer Jobs](#). The Trudeau government sought to deny eligibility for participation in the Summer Jobs Program to applicants who refused to sign an attestation of liberal values. “The notion that people who disagree with the government on controversial moral issues such as abortion must either adopt the government’s view or be excluded is... not acceptable in Canada — a country that strives, in the words of the Charter, to be a ‘free and democratic society.’” - Brian Bird, [Policy Options](#).
- c. [Universities Canada](#) sought to license [discrimination against faith-based universities](#) in its official bylaws and policies if they refused to forego exemptions they were legally entitled to under current law.

What I'll be Watching: The “free speech” challenges need to be met with strategic legal and policy responses, but ultimately, they will be more influenced by the extent to which those concerned about genuine pluralism get involved on the boards of community and industry organizations. The main problem is social marginalization, as much as it is policy-focused, and the battleground will be civil society organizations as much as society-wide in scope.

10. Leveraging Local Influence

- a. Religion’s \$67.5 billion contribution to Canadian society takes into account a wide variety of religiously motivated behaviours and activities, including charity, community development, fighting poverty, addiction counselling, housing, child care, education, and health care, making it Canada’s [ninth largest economic sector](#). (Cardus, [The Hidden Economy](#), Sept. 21, 2020).
- b. \$1.23 billion is spent directly by religious communities on the [“invisible safety net”](#) (support for immigrants/refugees, food banks, housing support etc.) while \$32.2 billion is spent related to

schooling, health care systems, religious charity programs, as well as commercial sales of food (kosher/halal). See also the impact in your own community at: www.HaloProject.ca.

- c. The combined income of religiously affiliated Canadians is close to [one trillion dollars](#) and reflects a constituency that is well-positioned to exercise leadership in every aspect of society. ([The Hidden Economy](#), Cardus, September 2020).
- d. [Over half of Canadians](#) believe religion or faith should have “not much” or “no influence” on public life. ([Angus Reid Institute/Cardus poll](#))

What I'll be Watching: Involvement in community and business associations is a significant way for people of faith to leverage their impact. This requires people of faith to be more explicit about linking their core principles and fundamental beliefs to the common good policies that they produce in order to impact their neighbourhoods, regions, and the larger public narrative that shapes culture. New forms of community and organization (economic, social and political) may emerge with significant impact on the assumptions of how day-to-day life will be managed.

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