Rebuilding Trust in Government

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Introduction

Canadians are losing trust in most of our institutions. For the past twenty-five years, the Edelman Trust Barometer has documented our worries, with titles such as "The Fall of Government," "Crisis of Leadership," "The Battle for Truth," and, this year, "Trust and the Crisis of Grievance."[1] Canada is not unique; this decline is global. Trust in institutions rose briefly during the pandemic but then declined quickly. Parliament, the political parties, professions, businesses, the universities, and the schools are all trusted less than they were. Research from the University of Waterloo TRuST Scholarly network confirms that this trend has worsened since the pandemic.[2]

Why Has Trust Eroded?

One explanation focuses on mistakes made by the leaders of our institutions. The Edelman reports refer to "institutional failures." And indeed, our leaders certainly *have* made mistakes, often out of arrogance, with grievous results for society. Another explanation points to social media, which makes institutions more transparent, exposing their messiness, imperfections, and contradictions. Now, we all see their inner workings, flaws and all, exposed in real time.

A third theory highlights the role of deliberate misinformation. When malicious foreign actors lie to us to undermine our trust, they are easy to despise and their mendacity sometimes unifies us. But when domestic actors lie to us, the result is division at home and more distrust.

Each theory offers insight, but they may miss the broader picture. As historian Niall Ferguson argues in *The Square and the Tower*, this is not the first era to see traditional, centralized, and hierarchical institutions—what he calls "the towers"—face challenges from flat, decentralized networks—what he called "the squares."[3] Networks harness the advantages of decentralization and flat organization to gain influence in times of technological change and political upheaval. Those in the tower worry about the hidden influences of networks at work in the town square. Central authority is giving way to peer-to-peer relations. This trend is reflected in Edelman's observation that leaders connected to institutions, such as CEOs, journalists, and government leaders, are losing the battle for trust to messengers or spokespersons, such as scientists, teachers, and neighbours.

In this new world, institutions can no longer simply declare what's true or right. Individuals must decide for themselves whom we trust, and which voices deserve our attention. Trust is no

1 "2025 Edelman Trust Barometer," Edelman Trust Institute, https://www.edelman.com/trust/2025/trust-barometer.

2 J. Steinburg, "Trust in Canada: Recent Trends in Measures of Trust," Trust in Research Undertaken in Science and Technology (TRuST) Scholarly Network, 2024, https://uwaterloo.ca/trust-research-undertaken-science-technology-scholarly-network/sites/default/files/uploads/documents/trust-in-canada-recent-trends-in-measures-of-trust-april-2024.pdf.

3 N. Ferguson, *The Square and the Tower: Networks and Power, from the Freemasons to Facebook* (Penguin, 2019).

longer inherited from the past and institutionalized in the tower. It must be earned over and over again, through credibility and action, in peer-to-peer interactions. Where once institutions filtered knowledge,[4] enforced norms, and maintained order, now networks give everyone a voice. The power once held by institutions is weakening, and many of their functions are being taken over—or simply bypassed—by informal systems.

This phenomenon is not restricted to any one part of the political spectrum. On the right, who trusts institutions to tell us what is true about vaccines, gender transition, or the scale of climate change? No one on the political right accepts Harvard's word or some newspaper's op-ed page anymore. And on the left, who trusts institutions to define what we need in a social order, or the criminal law, or personal responsibility, or even in the definition of "man" and "woman"? No one on the political left simply accepts church teachings or police commission analysis anymore either.

This shift raises important questions about how we form character. The American political philosopher Yuval Levin worries that as institutions give way to networks, we lose the character-forming function of healthy institutions.[5] Properly functioning institutions form us into better people and help us form our children into better people. Instead, he argues, many have become mere platforms for performance and self-promotion, reinforcing the collapse of trust in institutions.

But Levin's worries are probably overdone. Networks form character, too, in their own ways. In the face-to-face, peer-level interactions of the town square, equal citizens confront each other's God-given equality in fundamental and personal ways. That cultivates humility and deeper understandings of others. If you meet people face to face, peer to peer, in the community square, you're forced to accept that their humanity is equal to your own. That, reinforced through the power of networks, is a character-forming trait on its own.

The problem is that networks are not universal or very stable. When a sufficiently large group cannot stand their network, they break away and form their own. Hostility to Twitter/X begets Bluesky. So, the character formation that goes on in a network doesn't reach members in other networks. Gaining trust between networks is hard work. Another problem of networks is that we must decide for ourselves whom we trust and which authorities to follow. Trust is earned by network members who work hard to earn it, whether they pursue the truth or not. Leaders who rely on trust that was earned by someone else in the past, and preserved in an institution, are at a disadvantage. In a network, trust survives when it is renewed every day between peers.

This is not the first time that society has functioned through networks. The early church functioned as a network. The apostles spread the gospel by evangelizing—earning trust with their peers—and establishing networks. They worked in person or by writing epistles, building and relying on shared beliefs. The early church did not have a Vatican curia, but it still formed community, virtue, and identity, even in the face of martyrdom and persecution. Can we deny that the networks of the early church had a character-forming nature?

4 J. Rauch, *The Constitution of Knowledge: A Defense of Truth* (Brookings Institution, 2021).

5 Y. Levin, *A Time to Build: From Family and Community to Congress and the Campus, How Recommitting to Our Institutions Can Revive the American Dream* (Basic Books, 2020).

The key trait of life in the network, its key character trait, is not just accepting our human equality; it's accepting the humility that comes in accepting our equality. The primary character trait of the network is humility: mutual recognition of our mutual, fallen humanity. When we meet people in the square—in the network—we meet them in the fullness of their humanity. We see that they are frail, like us. Their human perceptions are frail, just like ours. And yet, we recognize nonetheless that we must form a life together.

Back to the topic of governing. Government by consent of the governed, the core precept of a liberal political order, is government by humility. When governors are forced to govern with the consent of the governed, they must recognize their fundamental equality with the governed. The corollary: You cannot approach the project of governing with arrogance in a society in which the consent of the governed is required. You cannot approach government with arrogance when governing a free society.

And this is why the decline of trust in institutions is something to worry about, but not with too much pessimism. An opportunity to learn a little bit of humility about institutions that we took for granted, and whose existence might have benefitted us personally, is good for us and for others. When we question institutions, that forces us to reconsider what we are about and where we stand in the world. A certain humility can lead us toward new ways of living and governing together.

Three Suggestions for Government

The first suggestion is to recognize that there is a limit to what government can correct in society. That is, not just the limit on what government *should* try to correct, but the more basic limit on how much government can accomplish in correcting society. Government in a free society cannot make us equal in wealth. It cannot make us equal in wisdom, or in performance, or in beauty, or in brains. No matter how hard the government tries, this is the fool's errand. That also happens to be a liberal truth and a truth of our common faiths.

At the centre of the town square, to go back to Ferguson's analogy, is the marketplace. The town square is the place for the artisans' market, the farmers' market, the place where people come to buy and sell their wares. The marketplace is not just a tool. It's where the physical necessities of life can be bought and sold at a price, and if it's organized properly, it enriches society along the way. But at the head of the town square is the church, or the mosque, or the synagogue, or a building that has filled two or three of those roles over time. While the shops of the market come and go, this building has been around a lot longer. To the side of the town square is a school. If it's the town square for a great town, there might be a university. The square is also where you go to court a potential mate. It is also full of married couples with children. The public square might be used for sport, because sport also has a civic role. So, my first lesson of governance in this world of collapsed institutions is humility in the promise of politics. Government will not make us perfect. There are other things in life than politics. At a certain point, we have to back away from partisanship, to live a private life that's fully human. We're not going to get that through the political world.

My second suggestion is humility in the operation of government. When governing, be spare with the public purse and with public resources. Focus on delivering the basics. I don't hold Elon Musk out to be a role model on most things, but his question has something to it: Explain to me five things you did last week while you were in the service of the public. If you can't, are you sure you were working in service of the public?

I suggest that we apply Musk's simple question with humility as well. If somebody only accomplished one thing for the public last week, we could forgive them for not doing more. If they got only two things done, but they did them well, that's great. If they accomplished five things, but those five things were not very well done—well, a C effort is still a passing grade, not a cause for being fired. But there is nothing wrong with asking our public officials to list five things they did for the public good last week. I would only add one wrinkle to the Musk question: If you are working for the public good, tell me the five mistakes you made last week. Being blunt about mistakes is how you learn and forms part of the humility that is needed. Not every effort made to advance the public good works out.

My third suggestion is humility in speech. Governing is a verbal activity. People complain that politics is nothing but talk. But talk is all there is in governing. Legislation is talk. Cabinet orders are talk. Instructions to public servants, election campaigns, accountability in Question Period. It's all just talk, but talk is all we have. Thank goodness, it's just enough.

Governing in speech means using persuasive speech. It's ten times more important to be persuasive in the public square than it is in the world of the tower. In an institution, speech is pronouncement. Life in the network requires persuasion. If we're going to accept our fellow citizens as our equals in citizenship, we have to persuade them. We can't pronounce to them.

And that means investing time in relationships in which you establish a reputation for speaking truth and speaking with credibility. That is best accomplished by acknowledging mistakes. The dominant mode of government communication is communication by pronouncement. Transmitting or conveying messages, devised by thousands of communications professionals, and most of what they produce is garbage.

How many Canadians follow the Twitter account of a government department? Vanishingly few. For the most part, only people who are paid to do so follow government Twitter accounts. How many of them follow government Twitter accounts for information, help, guidance, advice, or even for authorized knowledge? If you see something on a government Twitter account, do you take it to the bank as true? No, of course not. Everyone who follows government Twitter knows that that's not the case.

How many times does government Twitter acknowledge that a mistake has been made? I must have read millions of government tweets in the last twenty years. I do not recall reading even one that acknowledged a mistake. In the world of government communications, everything is always a success.

Conclusion

Let me end on a very Cardus note. Governing in an age of collapsing confidence in institutions means acknowledging that we're fallen humans, and that we make mistakes. Honesty about the mistakes we have made is hard for humans, especially difficult for political leaders, and impossible for official government communications. We want our leaders to be gods. This human tendency was known in biblical times. It is why we are commanded not to erect false gods. It is why, after the resurrection, we were commanded not to follow false prophets. Biblical teaching reminds us over and over that there is something deep in our nature that needs to erect false gods, whose words we can accept as the truth so we can imbue them with enough authority that we need not think for ourselves.

If I have one fix to leave you with for governing in the era of decline of faith or confidence in institutions, it is that we have to start by allowing our political leaders to admit when they have made a mistake. They are reluctant to do that, because they fear our reaction. They worry that if they admit that something went wrong, that they spent a billion dollars and didn't get anything for it, or that they launched a legislative initiative and it fell flat, or that they tried to accomplish something and it backfired, we will condemn them for it. For the most part, they are right. We do condemn them. We see mistakes not as the inevitable product of our being human but as evidence of evil intent or a conspiracy—for example, the World Economic Forum at work in a nefarious effort. But of course, political leaders are like us, and they make mistakes. My advice to political leaders is to take up the opportunity of humility. Admit the mistake. In my experience, when political leaders do admit to having made a mistake, they survive it.

At the risk of making a partisan comment, I'll mention that I spent years trying to explain why I didn't think the carbon tax was a good idea. Lo and behold, the party that gave us the carbon tax realizes it was a mistake. They haven't described it as a mistake yet. Someday, at some point, we might get to that. If we get that acknowledgement, I promise not to condemn anyone for it.

Humility in the promise of politics, humanity in the practice of politics, and humility in speech about politics. Those three solutions could just give us the space to build some new trusted institutions. There is something to this argument that we can't survive without institutions. Networks have their uses, but they are not quite enough. But for the time being, they might give us the space to rebuild.