

Commentary



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Government as enabler: Responding to Canada's rising social woes

How do we stem the growing epidemic of loneliness and social isolation? Build stronger neighbourhoods.

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Introduction

Canadians are facing rising loneliness and social isolation. More than two-fifths of Canadians feel lonely some or all the time (Dangerfield 2023), with roughly 25 percent saying that they are not satisfied with the number of friends they have (Canadian Mental Health Association 2024). The situation is worst among single people and those who live alone. Almost one-fifth of seniors, for example, say they lack companionship (Canadian Coalition for Seniors' Mental Health 2024). There has been a sharp reduction in volunteering and in being involved in groups as a participant or observer (Community Foundations of Canada 2023). Meanwhile, data shows a major decline in the mental health of Canadian women (Rausch and Haidt 2023), and a steady rise in drug overdoses (Sanmartin etc. 2021) (Gibbs et al. 2023). Canadians have become less trustful and more alienated (Community Foundations of Canada 2023)

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(Toronto Foundation 2023), feeding into declines in a sense of belonging and the polarization of politics.

Policymakers and civic leaders often consider these effects of disconnection in silos, rather than as natural products of how the deinstitutionalization of relationships yields fewer loving and supportive attachments – with repercussions across Canadian society.

The attachments that most satisfy our basic needs and build the trust, cooperation, and mutual interdependence that help everyone thrive are long-lasting; involve frequent, positive reciprocal interactions; provide people with meaning; and are structured in such a way as to encourage stability, care, and concern among us (Ben-Zeev 2014). These are best fostered not through meetings with your network or sporadic social gatherings but through place-based institutions such as marriage, interfamily networks, community schools, neighbourhoods, recurring voluntary activities, community markets, and local associations and businesses.

The “deinstitutionalization of relationships” occurs when our ties to institutions weaken to such an extent that the institutions themselves decay or become increasingly irrelevant to social lives. The population becomes increasingly isolated from one another as the social ties these institutions foster grow thin.

While a growing number of Canadians have few or no close friends, in countries like Greece and Portugal, over one-third of citizens say they see their friends daily (Camille 2023). In earlier generations, every person mattered in an obvious way because their contribution to a place mattered. Yet many Canadians today function as consumers with little connection to each other beyond a transactional value. Its developed economy may enable many more forms of connection through advanced technology, but these cannot replace the enduring, regular, in-person relationships that used to be a regular feature of everyone’s lives. As an advisory released by American Surgeon General Dr. Vivek Murthy last May stated, “Our epidemic of loneliness and isolation has been an underappreciated public health crisis that has harmed individual and societal health” (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) 2023).

Everything is more efficient, but also less effective at meeting some fundamental human needs. When citizens are disconnected from neighbours and institutions, living mostly unembodied and unembedded lives, they lack the sense of security and belonging that community brings, ending up anomic and alien-

ated instead. They are more likely to be lonely – and to seek zero-sum solutions in personal interactions and politics in a way that polarizes debates. As John McKnight and Peter Block write, “If we don’t know our neighbours, aren’t active in local community life, pay for others to raise our children and service our elders, and try to buy our way into a good life, we pay a large price. We produce, unintentionally as it might be, a weak family, a careless community, and a nation that tries hopelessly to revive itself from the top down” (McKnight and Block 2012).

While other developed countries are experiencing similar trajectories, Canadians may be especially vulnerable for several reasons. First, Canada is geographically the largest developed country (only Russia is bigger), with great distances between population centres and a heavy dependence on vehicles. Second, the extraordinarily high levels of legal immigration – proportionally four times higher than the United States (Anderson 2022) – may bring many economic benefits and yield strong ethnic communities, but it means Canada’s citizens are less rooted in particular places and less connected to other parts of the population. Third, the large number of Indigenous people mean that Canadians must work harder at integration than elsewhere. Fourth, the country, like all former British colonies, is highly individualistic, yielding socioeconomic dynamism but also atomization and weaker social ties. Lastly, sharp declines in religion have removed the strongest force in society likely to counter these atomizing trends.

“*Strengthening social relationships and institutions is not a natural role for government.*”

What occurred organically in the past must now be nurtured intentionally. Strengthening social relationships and institutions is not a natural role for government, and, in fact, many state actions designed to improve lives materially end up inadvertently hurting them socially. What can government bodies do effectively? They can create the enabling conditions that make place-based communities more likely to emerge.

Enabling conditions: why neighbourhoods and their institutions matter

Neighbourhoods sit upstream from many social ills, such as the steadily rising inequality, loneliness, and deaths of despair (e.g., suicide, unintentional drug overdose, and alcohol use and intoxication). Indicators show that everything from life expectancy to crime rates to student test scores to social mobility are not only correlated with each other but also with a physical location – and the nature of neighbourhood institutions, such as norms around marriage, interhousehold cooperation, and cross-class friendship, play a large role in this dynamic.

As a result, many social problems are magnified when their concentration in specific locales creates a multiplier effect on everyone living there (Boozary 2013). In the more challenged places, children are significantly more likely to end up with poor coping skills, poor stress management, unhealthy lifestyles, mental illness, and chronic physical conditions. More broadly, strong neighbourhoods are incubators of civic habits and practices because they embed people in long-lasting relationships involving regular, in-person interactions. As Harvard economist Raj Chetty states, “Every extra year of childhood spent in a better neighbourhood seems to matter” (Leonhardt, Cox, and Miller 2015).

What is a *neighbourhood*? Neighbourhoods are specific geographies. Legal definitions may be suitable in some cases, but practical definitions are better. The area should reflect what residents themselves view as their neighbourhood and its boundaries – a place where there is some sense of collective identity and mutual responsibility, if not a shared feeling of common community (a much higher bar). In an urban setting, a neighbourhood should ideally correspond to the catchment area of a primary school, include a commercial centre that can provide everyday facilities and services, and contain physical assets and institutions that promote various forms of social capital (for example, parks, libraries, public transit, and community organizations). In a more rural setting, a neighbourhood may mean the whole county, with the county seat being the main point of congregation.

Institutions – some formal like families, churches, and schools; others informal like associations and study groups – play a crucial role in determining the nature of social interaction in any neighbourhood, bonding or dividing, bridging or isolating, and by molding norms and values. Institutions determine how safe a neighbourhood is, how likely neighbours are to support one another, what

kind of influences youth receive day in and day out, whether people come together to tackle common problems across class and political divides, and whether residents can influence government. While all institutions matter, some are more foundational – such as the family – with an outsized impact on neighbourhood dynamics and residents. When working well, these institutions build up social capital that simultaneously benefits individuals, groups, and neighbourhoods. Both local (internal) and interlocal (external) institutions and networks matter (Woolcock 1998).

Of course, institutions do not function in a vacuum. The physical landscape – its density, the thickness of its social infrastructure, whether it has a clearly identifiable centre and boundaries – can affect the nature of institutions.

Why goal-based approaches fall short

Many government – as well as philanthropic and nonprofit – initiatives and reforms have sought to heal Canada’s growing social ills, but the efforts have not produced the expected results. Though programs sometimes produce inspiring cases of individual success, most rarely make a dent in the overall picture.

Why? Efforts to help almost always try to tackle specific goals (for example, loneliness, depression, housing, health, and work), rather than promote conditions that nurture stronger relationships and institutions. The “goals” approach may be more direct and measurable, but it is siloed; it ignores the neighbourhood’s social dynamics that make interventions necessary in the first place and limit their effectiveness once undertaken.

Other obstacles that inhibit social and material investment in place-based change include:

- *Time*: Building a health clinic, for example, produces results more quickly than reconfiguring the physical landscape or housing mix.
- *Financing*: It is easier to finance quick tangibles, such as programs for mental illness, than the long-term intangibles, such as robust interfamily networks or strong place-based community schools.
- *Permanence*: There is the risk that people who are helped will move, whereas investment in neighbourhoods is fixed.

- *Values:* Leaders need to believe that it is worthwhile to invest in connectivity of the community, especially when it is ailing socioeconomically (Berube 2019).
- *Resources:* Nonprofits and local government agencies often lack the capacity to implement successful place-based policies. Staff limitations can thwart efforts to design and implement solutions, or to manage cross-sector stakeholders (The American Assembly, Columbia University 2018).
- *Rural communities:* These communities face unique challenges, including the difficulty of finding and training leadership, managing fundraising streams not set up for such work, developing a visionary plan without exposure to what has been done elsewhere, and advocating for funding with such small or low-density populations (relative to other locations) (Community Strategies Group 2019).

These obstacles can help us consider the nature of incentives. Complex, long-term problems require a sustained effort that targets foundational institutions – or the neighbourhood settings that influence these institutions – in a large enough way to create meaningful and lasting change.

“Politicians prefer projects that can be planned for, easily measured, and achieved in short time horizons.”

Meanwhile government officials and politicians – as well as philanthropists and nonprofits – are drawn to projects that target specific goals, like those listed earlier. They prefer projects that can be planned for, easily measured, and achieved in short time horizons. Initiatives that target intangibles – neighbourhood connectivity and the institutions supporting it – require an acute understanding of the local context, a long-term commitment, and the flexibility to adjust to changing circumstances – all of which do not have the same appeal. As a result, in some cases, these organizations implement programs that weaken a place by crowding out community initiatives and undermining local social resources or by implementing programs that are inappropriate to local conditions (for example, establishing low-income housing in a way that concentrates poverty, or instituting zoning or building roads that increase isolation).

Government as enabler: nurturing neighbourhood-based communities

Canada's challenges are not a question of politics or policy per se, but of how people regularly behave at the local level. Government assistance (a tool of the left) and more efficient markets (as favoured by the right) both have their purposes but are not the kind of tools needed now – and in fact, the places that have benefited most from these are those that have robust social institutions in place. Economic vitality matters, but it doesn't insulate against social problems. We might keep in mind how social impoverishment can affect even well-off neighbourhoods.

Too often, government prioritizes treatment over prevention, often creating an incentive for more treatment rather than less. Efforts depend on establishing a high-profile government office or program, developing a national plan, improving education and awareness, and supporting more research. These prescriptions have little connection to the underlying problem – the nature of our relationships – and they rarely if ever mention how important local institutions and place are to social flourishing.

Policymakers and civil servants might carefully consider unintended consequences of government policies, especially at the federal level. For example, government tends to encourage the development of what sociologist Elisabeth Clemens calls “large hierarchical organizations.” These organizations often distribute funding simply to meet top-down goals or to satisfy complex rules and contractual requirements. These organizations and funds may help alleviate the acute suffering of many individuals in the short term, but in the long term they can do more harm than good. How? By disconnecting community organizations from the neighbourhoods they serve and by severing residents of those neighbourhoods from the institutions that once played a crucial role in nurturing the well-being of their community (Clemens 2020) (Lenkowsky 2020).

Social dynamics are inherently local, woven into particular places, people, and commitments. In most places, over the past half century, neighbourhood social bonds have weakened, with severe implications for Canadian social fabric, political life, and individual well-being. Scale is essential to enhancing social dynamics, but the arena must be a human scale. Although national and regional initiatives are necessary, change inevitably requires concentrated efforts, locale by locale.

How could the Canadian government pivot to a neighbourhood-centric approach as it seeks to address growing social problems? It could: 1) rethink how government is structured, and its performance measured; 2) revisit how planning and zoning shapes the physical and institutional landscape; and 3) reconsider how resources can be distributed so as to nurture place-based social ties rather than weaken them.

Personnel and metrics

As a start, Canada needs to re-envision how government functions; namely, how legislation, federal government structures, and local authorities organize the state's interaction with society. Instead of dividing money and mandates into functional silos, which maximizes sector-specific expertise, all levels of government could be organized to support the success of particular geographies – one or more neighbourhoods. This means **building teams of place-specific experts** with a wide range of skills who work on specific locales for an extended period and restructuring higher levels of government to support them. Ministries and programs would be altered such that accountability depended on neighbourhood-wide results place by place across Canada rather than total units disbursed – as is typically the case today.

“ *Local public servants would see their roles as facilitators rather than deciders.* ”

Local public servants would see their roles as facilitators rather than deciders, using their intimate knowledge of streets, businesses, and residents in their specific places to nurture change rather than impose it from far away in a one-size-fits-all style. Their intimate knowledge of businesses and residents in their specific neighbourhoods would yield a greater focus on facilitating social vitality rather than simply distributing financial resources. In Atlanta, Georgia, the new mayor is strategically re-engineering city institutions in a way that catalyzes cross-sector collaboration on neighbourhood strategy and ensures each arm of government develops plans that complement and

reinforce what other arms are doing. There is also a plan to establish an independent association to help foster cooperation across non-profits at the neighbourhood level, locale by locale, creating a second mechanism to bolster these places.

How would they measure success? Meta data points – such as relative property values, transiency rates, family stability, and social capital – are especially important markers. Drawing up a scorecard of the most important information and publicly committing to improving results in a fashion that everyone can judge might substantially shift the media narrative – and accountability – on government performance.

Planning and gathering

As part of this shift, public leaders could **re-envision our urban, suburban, and rural landscapes around clearly demarcated neighbourhoods**, with a renewed emphasis on bolstering in-person exchange and the development of the wealth of “organizational life.” Locales with strong brand names or identities (for example, Downtown Montreal), bounded edges, institutions that lubricate social exchange, and places where people regularly congregate are more likely to flourish socially. This means ensuring urban planning functions are directed to centre the landscape around neighbourhoods and all government institutions rework their districting so they are in parallel and centred on actual neighbourhoods, reporting where possible to the geographical teams. Instead of just emphasizing efficiency, urban planning and architecture would focus on nurturing social vitality in the physical landscape. Every neighbourhood, across socioeconomic strata, would feature green spaces, commercial roads, community schools, well-endowed public areas, neighbourhood hubs, beautiful street landscaping, and municipal buildings. The federal government could incentivize all the above by how it distributes resources, redirecting funds where necessary and offering additional resources on condition of this approach.

A focus on catalyzing neighbourhood social vitality would lead to a greater emphasis on **developing more local institutions and “third places”** – coffee shops, restaurants, gyms, hair salons, clubs, bars, libraries, churches, parks, main streets, after-school programs, and community centres that host regular, voluntary, informal gatherings of residents – where people can gather locally neighbourhood by neighbourhood. This would require rethinking zoning:

Whereas people once lived near such places, many residential areas today purposely exclude them by how they are designed and zoned.

Government can also be more proactive in nurturing this social vitality. Abundant Community Edmonton, an arm inside the city government, focuses on increasing the sense of belonging and inclusion by cultivating neighbour-to-neighbour relationships and a culture of care and connection through the development of a network of Block Connectors, Neighbourhood Connectors, and a support team that works across the city. Neighbours are, like family and friends, “relational nutrients to a healthy person,” says Howard Lawrence, of Abundant Community Edmonton.

Resources and capacity

Local government can create mechanisms for neighbourhood residents to join together to develop plans or projects for their areas that the government could subsequently support in some manner. Neighbourhood associations, for example, bring local leaders together to debate priorities, solve problems, establish a wide range of partnerships, and leverage resources that strengthen social ties and give residents more ownership of their places. In Cambridge, Ontario, every resident is part of one of 11 neighbourhood associations. Although the associations are funded by the City, it cedes significant power to residents to determine how the space is used. Rather than focusing on services to be delivered, these centres – like the one in the Greenway-Chaplin neighbourhood of Cambridge – invite residents to imagine and curate activities that matter to them.

In support of these efforts, government could **develop small-grant programs** to foster closer cooperation among residents, build confidence in a neighbourhood, and develop the relationships, institutions, and norms that can transform it over time. The Oswego Renaissance Association has created significant momentum for positive change (and achieved huge returns on investment) in Oswego, New York, by simply offering matching grants of up to US\$1000 per home as well as additional resources to city blocks where individuals want to cooperate to improve the look of their streets.

Conclusion

We should not underestimate the strength of the bonds that shared geography can create between people who might otherwise feel little connection to each other and be on opposite sides of class or race or political divides. As University of Chicago social scientist Emily Talen reminds us, “neighbourhoods are a ubiquitous condition of human settlement, found in all time periods, in all cultures, and in both rural and urban contexts. Even ancient cities have been described as clusters of neighbourhoods” (Talen 2019). Whether urban, suburban, or rural, neighbourhoods have, since time immemorial, anchored our relationships.

Canada will flourish when all its neighbourhoods do. What is needed is not more top-down action, but sideways action, neighbourhood by neighbourhood, that reaches the far corners of Canada’s vast land. Government can play an important role as enabler and nurturer if it takes a neighbourhood-centric approach and more judiciously aligns the way it functions and distributes resources. **MLI**

About the author



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Woolcock, Michael. 1998. “Social Capital and Economic Development: Toward a Theoretical Synthesis and Policy Framework.” *Theory and Society* 27, no. 2 (1998): 170–188. Available at <https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1006884930135>. As Michael Woolcock of the World Bank’s Development Research Group concludes, the economic prospects of any group of people depend not only on the policies of government, but also on the “relations within and between” that group and other parts of society.

constructive *important* *forward-thinking*
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The Right Honourable Paul Martin

I want to congratulate the **Macdonald-Laurier Institute** for 10 years of excellent service to Canada. The Institute's commitment to public policy innovation has put them on the cutting edge of many of the country's most pressing policy debates. The Institute works in a persistent and constructive way to present new and insightful ideas about how to best achieve Canada's potential and to produce a better and more just country. Canada is better for the forward-thinking, research-based perspectives that the **Macdonald-Laurier Institute** brings to our most critical issues.

The Honourable Jody Wilson-Raybould

The **Macdonald-Laurier Institute** has been active in the field of Indigenous public policy, building a fine tradition of working with Indigenous organizations, promoting Indigenous thinkers and encouraging innovative, Indigenous-led solutions to the challenges of 21st century Canada. I congratulate **MLI** on its 10 productive and constructive years and look forward to continuing to learn more about the Institute's fine work in the field.

The Honourable Irwin Cotler

May I congratulate **MLI** for a decade of exemplary leadership on national and international issues. Through high-quality research and analysis, **MLI** has made a significant contribution to Canadian public discourse and policy development. With the global resurgence of authoritarianism and illiberal populism, such work is as timely as it is important. I wish you continued success in the years to come.

The Honourable Pierre Poilievre

The **Macdonald-Laurier Institute** has produced countless works of scholarship that solve today's problems with the wisdom of our political ancestors. If we listen to the **Institute's** advice, we can fulfill Laurier's dream of a country where freedom is its nationality.

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