

Historic Breaks in Canadian Welfare as Expressions of Internal Crisis and Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's Efforts to Address Them

*Quiebres históricos en el bienestar canadiense
como expresiones de crisis interna y gestiones
del primer ministro Justin Trudeau para encararlos*

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ABSTRACT

This article aims to analyze the gradual decomposition that Canada's traditional social bastions—education, health and housing, which made the country an international moral power in the 20th century and a paradigm of social justice—have undergone over the previous decades. It emphasizes that this dismantling of the welfare state's pillars has occurred under the administration of both conservative and liberal governments without partisan distinction. Since the Covid-19 pandemic, its effects have been unavoidable for the federal government of the liberal Justin Trudeau, who was forced to face the crisis to seek emerging solutions. However, the seriousness of the situation reinforces our hypothesis that this crisis represents a historic break in Canada, which has been brewing since at least the mid-eighties when the state decided to reduce resources to redirect them to other productive sectors and thus stimulate the arrival of private investment in strategic social areas.

RESUMEN

Este artículo tiene como objetivo analizar la descomposición gradual que han venido sufriendo los tradicionales bastiones sociales canadienses a lo largo de décadas previas: educación, salud y vivienda, los cuales hicieron de Canadá una potencia moral internacional en el siglo xx y un paradigma de justicia social. Aquí se enfatizará que esta desarticulación de los pilares del Estado benefactor se ha dado bajo la administración de gobiernos conservadores y liberales sin distinción partidista, y en la actualidad, a partir de la pandemia de la Covid-19, los efectos de dicha descomposición resultaron ineludibles para el gobierno federal del liberal Justin Trudeau, quien se vio obligado a enfrentar la crisis para buscar salidas emergentes. Sin embargo, la gravedad de la situación refuerza nuestra hipótesis de que esta crisis representa un quiebre histórico en Canadá, mismo que vino gestándose desde, al menos, mediados de los años ochenta, cuando el Estado decidió disminuir los recursos para redirigirlos a

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Hence, some social costs derived from these decisions will be exposed.

otras áreas productivas y así estimular la llegada de inversión privada en áreas sociales estratégicas. De esta manera, se expondrán algunos de los costos sociales derivados de estas decisiones.

Keywords: education; healthcare system; housing; federal government; Justin Trudeau.

Palabras clave: educación; sistema de salud; vivienda; gobierno federal; Justin Trudeau.

Introduction

Over several decades, successive Canadian governments have established a collective international image of Canada as a peaceful, safe, politically stable, and tolerant country with an equitable society, an efficient and fair healthcare system, enviable natural landscapes, and a global stance on human rights and environmental protection, among many other virtues. Given its geographical conditions, this construction of a modern and just nation with virtually unlimited potential was ideologically underpinned by the substantial public resources that the country's governments allocated, especially in the 1960s and 1970s, to provide high-quality education, health, and housing services to its society.

The Canadian welfare state model originated in the province of Saskatchewan when, in the mid-1940s, the Cooperative Commonwealth Federation (CCF)—a political organization with socialist and working-class foundations—governed under Premier Tommy Douglas. Despite significant challenges, Douglas implemented a series of programs aimed at socializing healthcare, education, and housing. However, his most notable success was the Medicare health program (Brown & Taylor, 2012: 2-3), which, from 1962 onward, removed the economic gains of healthcare provision from the local private sector.

The positive outcomes of offering high-quality public services in Saskatchewan soon encouraged the federal government, led by Liberal Prime Minister Lester B. Pearson (1963-1968), to implement a universal healthcare system inspired precisely by the CCF's experiment. Simultaneously, this administration launched a new support system for post-secondary students and a reformed pension plan. The expansion of social programs for the entire population gained renewed momentum during the tenure of another liberal Prime Minister, Pierre Elliott Trudeau,¹ who—from the late 1960s to nearly the mid-1980s—enacted a series of constitutional amendments and substantial public investments to create a more equitable society. An example of this effort was his political program known as the *Just So-*

¹ Pierre Elliott Trudeau served as Prime Minister of Canada for five legislative terms (1968 to 1979 and 1980 to 1984), serving as Head of Parliament during the 27th, 28th, 29th, 30th and 32nd legislatures.

ciety, through which he envisioned Canada as a fair country that reaffirmed its democratic sovereignty and guaranteed human rights for all its citizens. A means of achieving this was by providing dignified housing, quality education, and healthcare without economic discrimination while safeguarding minority rights against intolerant majorities (Trudeau & Graham, 1998: 16-19).

To make these transformative projects possible, beyond reorganizing public finances, Pierre Elliott Trudeau's government had to secure sufficient economic resources to bolster Canadian social capital. To that end, at a historic moment when the oil boom seemed an inexhaustible source for countries with proven crude reserves, Trudeau's administration, in 1975—in partnership with the New Democratic Party (NDP) under the leadership of Tommy Douglas—officially nationalized the Canadian oil industry, which had previously been controlled by U.S. companies. The new state-owned company, Petro-Canada, aimed to serve as an economic vehicle for Canadian development, and as Tommy Douglas himself emphasized, Parliament was to receive an annual report on its operations, given that the company would operate for the benefit of the people, funded by Canadian public investment (Douglas, 1975).²

Another significant reform during Pierre Elliott Trudeau's administration was the 1970s amendment to the National Housing Act, which promoted the construction of new homes and the renovation of existing ones, thereby improving and ensuring the quality of life for Canadians. This housing policy, initiated in the 1970s, also provided low-interest loans specifically for low-income individuals and families, facilitated by nonprofit housing cooperatives that helped workers gain membership. Subsequently, homeownership for the working class was facilitated through affordable financing options.

According to documents from the Canadian Parliament, it is noteworthy that by the late 1960s—before Pierre Elliott Trudeau took office—less than 5 % of government housing support programs were directed at low-income individuals. However, by the 1970s, federal assistance to this population segment had increased by over 40 %. By the mid-1980s, under the conservative government of Brian Mulroney, this support dropped to 8 % (Begin, 1999).

During the 1970s and the early 1980s, nearly all social housing management was the responsibility of provincial governments, while the federal government limited its role to providing operating funds, cost-sharing, and oversight to ensure compliance with Ottawa's guidelines. Consequently, during the period of housing expansion for low-income fam-

² *Petro-Canada* enjoyed a successful period until the mid-1980s, becoming one of the country's economic engines to support the welfare policy of the Liberal government of Pierre Elliot Trudeau. However, the arrival of the conservative Brian Mulroney in 1984, and the privatization tendencies that favored the free market in the 1980s, marked the beginning of the dismantling of this state-owned company, allowing the privatization of its assets. This process continued with its Liberal and Conservative successors, until in 2004, the federal government of the conservative Stephen Harper announced the sale of the company's last government assets.

ilies, the federal government required that provincial governments allocate resources to this program on the condition that low-income families be integrated into neighborhoods composed of middle-income families as a mechanism to overcome the social stratification inherited from the early century. Additionally, loans were guaranteed for the construction of student housing, hospitals, public schools, and universities, with the possibility of debt forgiveness if proven well-utilized (Minister of Justice, 2024).

However, the strengthening of neoliberal policies in Canada, initiated under Brian Mulroney's administration, particularly from the late 1980s onward and influenced by the U.S. neoconservative movement under Republican President Ronald Reagan,³ led to reductions, cuts, and overall precarization of many public services in Canada. By the 1990s, once Mulroney's Conservative government concluded and a new Liberal government led by Jean Chrétien came to power, federal administrations continued to reduce their financial involvement in many areas of provincial public investment, including mining, tourism, urban services, and, notably, housing, thereby opening the way for private sector investment in areas previously protected during Pierre Elliott Trudeau's era.⁴

Housing experts expressed frustration at the anticipated severe impact on the social housing sector. By 1992, the federal government officially withdrew its support for housing cooperatives, and in the following year, 1993, it froze all social housing expenditure (Begin, 1999), leaving emerging social sectors seeking decent housing to fend for themselves and condemning them to be permanent renters of properties they could no longer aspire to own. In this way, the policies pursued by subsequent federal governments favored new real estate companies, which certainly found an inexhaustible source of revenue and captive consumers in this sector.

Thus, from the 1990s onward, with the negligence and/or complicity of federal governments regardless of political affiliation, whether Liberal or Conservative, Canada has steadily lost its privileged position as a country with the highest human development standards. While in 1990 —when these indicators were first measured by the United Nations— Canada ranked third, by 2022 the country had dropped to fifteenth place, indicating a consistent decline in its rankings (Human Development Reports, n.d.).

³ Neoconservatism can be considered a political movement characterized by expressing a moral fanaticism that strives to defend Western democracies from the “communist” threat of the time, as well as promoting Christian and family values to confront the social emancipation movements of the 1960s and 1970s in the United States (Bloch, 1997: 60). These political-economic-intellectual expressions showed absolute faith in U.S. hegemony, and an expressed willingness to use force in the international arena. At the domestic Canadian level, conservative politicians —such as Brian Mulroney— were guided by this dogma and expressed a strong desire to show that Canada was the best possible ally of the United States (Ayala, 2021: 113).

⁴ It is known that during Chrétien's ten years in government, the General Auditor's Office sent reports to Parliament alleging bad practices in public spending, reports that were not addressed properly by the liberal government of Jean Chrétien (Dixon, 2004: 67), but also, it should be noted, by the opposition, beyond the political gain that represented criticizing the government in power to obtain an electoral benefit in the short term.

Table 1

Human Development Index

Countries ranked in the top 20 in 1990 and their position in 2022, weighted from 1st to 9th place, within the same group of the 20 best-positioned countries in the first measurement in 1990

Country	1990	1995	2000	2005	2010	2015	2020	2022
United States	(1°) 0.872	(1°) 0.885	(7°) 0.889	(8°) 0.901	0.906	0.919	0.921	0.921
Australia	(2°) 0.865	(2°) 0.882	(5°) 0.896	(4°) 0.911	(4°) 0.923	(7°) 0.933	(6°) 0.947	(4°) 0.951
Canada	(3°) 0.861	(4°) 0.876	(6°) 0.891	(6°) 0.903	0.909	0.926	0.931	0.934
Switzerland	(4°) 0.851	(7°) 0.865	(9°) 0.884	(5°) 0.905	(1°) 0.942	(1°) 0.954	(3°) 0.956	(1°) 0.962
Netherlands	(5°) 0.847	(3°) 0.878	(1°) 0.931	(9°) 0.899	(6°) 0.917	0.932	(8°) 0.939	(7°) 0.941
Japan	(6°) 0.845	(8°) 0.863	0.877	(9°) 0.889	0.898	0.918	0.927	0.925
Norway	(7°) 0.838	(5°) 0.871	(2°) 0.913	(1°) 0.931	(2°) 0.941	(2°) 0.953	(1°) 0.959	(2°) 0.961
Denmark	(8°) 0.834	0.854	0.876	(4°) 0.911	(7°) 0.912	(6°) 0.936	(4°) 0.949	(5°) 0.949
Germany	(9°) 0.829	(6°) 0.868	(4°) 0.901	(2°) 0.914	(3°) 0.926	(4°) 0.938	(5°) 0.944	(7°) 0.941
Austria	0.825	0.849	0.871	0.889	0.902	0.911	0.913	0.916
Belgium	0.816	0.858	(8°) 0.887	(7°) 0.902	(9°) 0.910	0.924	0.928	(9°) 0.937
Finland	0.814	0.847	(6°) 0.891	(5°) 0.905	(8°) 0.911	(9°) 0.931	(9°) 0.938	(8°) 0.940
Iceland	0.811	0.833	0.862	0.896	0.899	(3°) 0.945	(2°) 0.957	(3°) 0.959
Sweden	0.811	(9°) 0.861	(3°) 0.904	(7°) 0.902	(8°) 0.911	(5°) 0.937	(7°) 0.942	(6°) 0.947
New Zealand	0.806	0.853	(8°) 0.887	(3°) 0.912	(5°) 0.922	(8°) 0.932	0.936	(5°) 0.949
United Kingdom	0.804	0.828	0.862	0.895	0.906	0.921	0.924	0.929
France	0.791	0.833	0.841	0.858	0.877	0.892	0.898	0.903

Data from Human Development Reports (n.d.).

This is undoubtedly a reflection of the budget cuts in public services that Pierre Elliott Trudeau's government worked so fervently to establish over his nearly 15 and a half years in power in Ottawa. Thus, it is reasonable to consider that, given the solid structures built

for social and public benefit during Trudeau's tenure, it took several decades for the decomposition of the Canadian welfare state model to emerge. Today, this situation has drawn attention and stirred indignation among educated segments of society, who do not fall into the trap of attributing the current issues —particularly in healthcare and housing— to the mismanagement of any leader. Instead, they view it as part of a systemic breakdown perceived with disdain by the upper echelons of power across the country.

Interestingly, in his memoirs, former liberal Prime Minister Paul Martin openly admitted that he was aware of the impending changes in the global economy, how they would impact Canada, and the adjustments in public investment needed in the medium term, as early as the 1970s. He even mentions that, during dinners with future Conservative Prime Minister Brian Mulroney, they discussed this topic and the guidelines to follow (Martin, 2008: 72-73). Notably, despite belonging to ostensibly opposing political parties, both politicians shared a common vision of the economic future Canada would eventually have to embrace. In due course, each of these figures would go on to serve as prime minister, one as a Conservative and the other as a Liberal.

This deterioration in social services has reached such dimensions that even the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) estimates that Canada will be the worst-performing developed country in the current decade and the three subsequent decades. Therefore, it can be argued that the Canadian political class has not only neglected public welfare but may also have lost interest in enhancing workers' well-being, productivity, and real wage growth. In fact, the OECD projects that by 2030-2060, Canada will rank last in economic performance, with the Canadian workforce expected to face stagnation in real income for decades, leading to a quality of life overtaken by countries currently lagging (Williams, 2021). This situation, coupled with federal and provincial cuts to the public sector, does not bode well for the country's medium-term outlook. The motivations behind these strategies are varied, and their consequences, possibly underestimated, have already become a serious problem for Canada. Thus, this paper will analyze these consequences, from their origins to the present, concluding with an outlook on their impact on the current and future decades.

The crisis in the public education system, teacher exploitation and Justin Trudeau's efforts to mitigate it: the most strategic and least served sector

Before embarking on his public and political career, Justin Trudeau spent several years as a high school teacher in Vancouver, British Columbia, where he taught French and mathe-

matics⁵ after completing a second degree in Education at the University of British Columbia (UBC).⁶ Although the young Trudeau frequently insisted that he was not interested in politics, a series of missteps, internal party conflicts, and electoral setbacks within the Liberal Party⁷ —once led by his father— positioned Justin as the natural successor. For the first time in its history, the party fell to a third-place standing in Parliament following the federal elections of May 2011.

After a successful campaign that secured him the Liberal leadership in a single round of internal elections, Trudeau faced his first federal election, decisively defeating the incumbent Conservative Prime Minister, Stephen Harper. Harper, who had been in power for nearly a decade, was facing his fourth federal election amidst significant political wear and tear, largely due to a series of controversial policies and internal reforms. Despite being balanced and sound in economic and fiscal matters, these reforms were often seen as regressive in social areas, including education.

It is essential to clarify that the sectors addressing education, health, and housing needs are administratively managed by provincial governments. However, the financial resources for these sectors are sourced from the federal government in Ottawa, which, after political negotiations with other parties or decisions made by a majority government in the federal Parliament, determines the allocation or reduction of funds for these and other areas of national interest.

Upon assuming federal office in 2015, despite claiming that with President Obama's support and his father's legacy, he would redefine what it means to be Canadian (Malcolm, 2016: 85), Justin Trudeau began his tenure in a nation polarized across various aspects of public life. The education and scientific sectors were no exception, particularly after his predecessor, bolstered by his majority government, enacted a series of budget cuts and adjustments in these areas. These measures included the closure of public libraries, the cancellation of scientific programs, and even prohibiting scientists and academics from publicly sharing their research findings (Turner, 2013: 126) under threat of dismissal. This led to claims that Harper's government had launched a "war on science" to suppress federally funded scientific research, particularly in areas critical of government policies, such as climate change and environmental pollution (Joyce, 2013).

These challenges in the higher education and scientific sectors coincided with persistent neglect in the primary education system, exacerbated by decades of underfunding by various

⁵ During his years as a high school teacher, Trudeau taught most of his time at the elite private school West Point Grey, although he also taught at the public Winston Churchill High School in Oak. In fact, Justin Trudeau is known to have lied about having taught more time in public schools, which was not true (Strauss, 2015).

⁶ Justin Trudeau previously graduated with a degree in Literature from McGill University.

⁷ For a detailed review of the different moments in the internal life of the Liberal Party from 1980 to 2011, and an early analysis of the figure of Justin Trudeau in Canadian Liberal politics from 2012 to 2013, see Santín (2014).

provincial governments. The most severe effects are evident today, with a limited number of overburdened teachers facing overwhelming workloads and working conditions that hinder their ability to achieve clear educational objectives with children and adolescents nationwide. This situation has led to increasing mental health issues and burnout among teachers, pushing the educational sector to the brink of crisis (Previl, 2023).

One notable example of this crisis is the series of strikes and protests by education professionals demanding better salaries and greater sensitivity from authorities to what they perceive as overwork and exploitation under the current system. Although the system guarantees free education for native and newly arrived children and adolescents, it does not provide the necessary tools to achieve these goals; instead, it overloads teachers in their daily tasks and makes it challenging to meet the quality standards set by provincial and federal authorities.

The first significant incident was in Halifax, Nova Scotia, in 2023, when educational support staff went on strike for more than five weeks starting on May 10, protesting low wages and the high cost of living in the province. The union, CUPE 5047 (*Halifax Regional Center for Education Support Staff*), showed strength against a provincial government that had no intention of modifying its original offer of a 6.5 % salary increase over four years (Lombard & Tsicos, 2023). This 2023 strike followed a precedent set by the first-ever teachers' strike in Nova Scotia in 2017 when thousands of public school teachers protested against a legislative proposal that imposed four-year contracts on nearly 10 000 unionized teachers across the province (Gorman, 2017). These legislative proposals, which affected and threatened the teaching profession, were considered inadmissible by the union, which by that time felt that its efforts were overwhelmed by the sheer amount of work and responsibilities inherent in their professional duties. These go beyond the mere daily preparation of lessons, including weekly personalized reports for each student across all their classes, additional support and tutoring for newly arrived students who do not understand the language, ongoing training in new educational models, and regular provincial evaluations of their personal performance and the performance of their educational communities. In addition to these challenges, it is common for teachers to face overcrowded classrooms, frequent cases of school abuse requiring intervention with limited resources, as well as the need to provide emotional support to students from households experiencing neglect due to parents working overtime to survive. All these factors contribute to the critical situation faced within the classrooms (Tutton, 2017).

Similarly, in Quebec on November 23, 2023, a historic strike saw 66 000 primary and secondary school teachers shut down 800 schools, impacting approximately 370 000 students. The unions demanded better salaries and increased funding for public schools, arguing that teaching and support staff were insufficient for the student population. Their demands in-

cluded reducing the student-to-teacher ratio (Laframboise, 2023), involving shorter work hours and/or creating new teaching positions with fair wages.

In response, provincial authorities offered a 10 % salary increase over five years and a one-time payment of \$ 1 000 per worker. This offer was rejected and deemed insulting by the unions (Wang, 2023), who, after a vote, decided to extend the strike for the remainder of the year. This eventually led to the provincial government increasing its offer to a 17.4 % salary increase over five years and a \$33 million investment to improve classroom conditions (Rubertucci, 2024). While this agreement ended the strike, it did not resolve the deeper issues, leaving many educators considering leaving the profession due to ongoing concerns about exhaustion and poor working conditions (Lowrie, 2024).

In February 2024, with an openly political stance, Quebec's Premier François Legault demanded that Prime Minister Justin Trudeau impose visas on Mexican, Indian, and Haitian nationals, arguing that the influx of refugees was overwhelming Quebec's education system. In response, Trudeau expressed gratitude for Quebec's generosity in welcoming asylum seekers, noting that the federal government was allocating billions to the province to address these challenges. However, experts like Louis-Philippe Jannard from the *Au Service des Personnes Réfugiées et Immigrantes* (TCRI) argued that the education system's crisis was not caused by refugees but by decades of underfunding, with numerous reports indicating teachers were quitting due to poor working conditions (Cabrera, 2024).

Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, aware of the issues faced by the Quebec teaching profession, decided not to get involved in the matter and instead issued vague statements that did not genuinely commit him to any of the parties, especially after the media altercation he had in early 2023 with Quebec Premier François Legault. Trudeau had stated that his government was considering limiting the ability of provinces to override certain constitutional provisions through the courts —known in Canada as the *Notwithstanding Clause*—⁸ arguing that populist politicians could use this constitutional tool to gain electoral benefits from their voters, thereby challenging and rebelling against federal mandates and regulations. In response, Legault claimed that Trudeau's comments were an attack on democracy and on the people of Quebec (Amador, 2023).

Given these legal resources that allow provincial governments to limit or nullify certain federal constitutional provisions (*Notwithstanding Clause*), it should be noted that a significant power struggle took place almost simultaneously —in late 2022 and early 2023— between Ontario Premier Doug Ford and Prime Minister Justin Trudeau. This conflict arose when Ford invoked this non-binding clause to prevent a teachers' strike by violating the rights and freedoms enshrined in the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms.

⁸ Something that could be translated as “non-binding clauses”. These clauses are found in Section 33 of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms and grant provincial governments the ability to override certain laws for a period of five years.

The situation began when the majority government led by conservative Premier Doug Ford sent a proposal to his Assembly to unilaterally impose a new collective labor contract for all teachers and education support staff. This proposal included fines of 4 000 Canadian dollars per day for each teacher on strike and half a million dollars for each involved union. This came after the public sector union, representing about 55 000 education workers, including teachers, support staff, librarians, early childhood educators, and janitors, demanded a salary increase of 11.3 %. In response, Ford's government counter-offered a 2.5 % annual increase for the lowest-paid workers and 1.5 % for others (Cecco, 2022). These increases would be phased over a four-year period.

However, the firm refusal of the teaching union prompted Ford to retaliate by invoking the non-binding clause and proposing legislation to keep students in class while imposing collective contracts that would prevent future strikes or labor actions under the threat of financial penalties or job loss. In response, Justin Trudeau stated that using the Notwithstanding Clause to suspend workers' rights was wrong, arguing that it was meant to be used in exceptional cases, not as a tool for politicians to violate people's rights and freedoms (CBC News, 2022). Trudeau even offered to mediate to avoid escalation between the parties, applying additional pressure on Ontario's Premier.

Thus, despite Doug Ford's threats, thousands of education workers shut down schools on November 4 and 7, 2022, and took to the streets to protest while their union representatives and the Ford government continued negotiations. Ultimately, these negotiations led to Ford's promise to repeal the legislation, imposing a collective labor contract and fines for striking. At the same time, the provincial government also withdrew its invocation of the Notwithstanding Clause, preserving the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms. In exchange, Ford's government requested the union suspend the strike and return to school activities immediately.

Once this agreement was reached, the Ontario School Boards Council of Unions (OSBCU) called for a vote to determine the future direction of the provincial teaching movement. The result was that most school staff voted to accept a four-year contract, including an annual salary increase of 15.2 % to 17 %, according to the income scale. Similarly, the provincial government committed to negotiating separately with all teaching and education unions in a framework of mutual respect (Rushowy, 2022). By the end of 2023, an agreement was reached with secondary education teachers' unions to avoid strikes for the next three years, with disputes to be resolved through binding external arbitration, with both parties agreeing to abide by the decisions (Somos Toronto, 2023).

Like the previously described cases, the salary increases for school staff in Ontario offer a temporary solution to the tense situation currently faced by the public education sector. However, they do not address the deeper issues that have led the country's education system into a state of ongoing crisis, with an exhausted and frustrated teaching workforce. This

is especially concerning given the conflicts that have recently intensified the educational problems, where provincial governments demand greater autonomy from federal directives, which is likely to escalate as both local and federal elections approach. One example is the complaints of some provincial governments, including Alberta, Saskatchewan,⁹ and New Brunswick, regarding parents' right to educate and instill values in their children without federal intervention or coercion. This issue has not been overlooked by Conservative Party leader Pierre Polievre, who has accused Prime Minister Trudeau of attempting to impose his radical ideology on other people's children. As the opposition leader, Polievre has demanded that Trudeau allow parents to raise their children according to their own values and that provinces manage their schools without federal interference (Wherry, 2024).

The crisis of the public health system and Justin Trudeau's efforts to alleviate it: the most sensitive sector among the Canadian population

When discussing the crisis in the Canadian healthcare system, the focus often narrows to the global pandemic period, especially during the years 2020-2021, when the country presented an image of responsible management, solid planning, and impressive vaccination rates, with approximately 85 % of its population inoculated. This perspective, however, overlooks the pre-existing conditions faced by healthcare workers, including doctors, nurses, and technical assistants, in their daily routines. These challenges were marked by increasingly long wait times for surgeries and even just to secure an appointment or a family doctor, becoming a growing public concern over the years.

The situation reached such critical levels that by the end of 2023, The College of Family Physicians of Canada (CFPC), an organization representing over 43 000 healthcare professionals across the country and responsible for accrediting medical studies from Canada's 17 medical faculties, issued an unprecedented statement warning that the healthcare system was on the brink of collapse, thereby putting everyone's health at risk. The organization held all levels of government —federal, provincial, and territorial— accountable, accusing them of failing to take necessary actions to resolve the crisis and, above all, of ignoring the pleas of healthcare workers calling for support (CFPC, 2023).

In response, the CFPC demanded urgent measures from governments, including fair compensation, reductions in the administrative burdens on medical staff, and support from additional technical personnel. This is particularly critical because healthcare pro-

⁹ Just to document one case, in December 2023, the provincial government of Saskatchewan mandated that public schools require parental consent for any student under the age of 16 to be allowed to change their pronouns or gender name. This was a media issue that generated a strong controversy between the provincial and federal governments.

professionals across Canada, regardless of province, work longer hours, treat more patients, and accumulate overwhelming administrative workloads. This has led to mental and physical exhaustion, early retirements, and, ultimately, a departure from the profession (CFPC, n.d.). As a result, as of February 2024, 6.5 million Canadians lack access to a family doctor, which represents 16.5 % of the country's population, leaving behind a trail of preventable death and suffering. The outlook remains grim, as many family doctors are nearing retirement age, being over 65 years old. In Ontario, one of the wealthiest provinces, it is estimated that if this trend continues, by 2026, one in four individuals will be without a family doctor from cradle to grave (Tasker, 2024), a scenario that seems implausible in a wealthy and developed nation like Canada.

Another contributing factor to this crisis, besides government neglect at all levels, is the reluctance of entities like The Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons of Canada, which oversees the evaluation, accreditation, and standardization of medical specialties, to facilitate the entry of foreign-trained medical professionals, including Canadians who, after being denied admission to domestic medical schools, choose to pursue their studies in countries like Australia, New Zealand, or the UK. The most concerning aspect is that after completing their studies, these Canadian doctors trained abroad are not welcomed back into their home country,¹⁰ as limited spots are primarily reserved for graduates from Canadian universities. For instance, in 2022, out of 1 661 specialist doctor applications, only 439 were accepted, roughly one-quarter of the total applicants. This happens despite data from the Royal Bank of Canada in 2022 showing a shortage of 17 000 doctors in the country, with projections indicating a deficit of 43 900 doctors, including 30 000 family physicians and general practitioners, by 2035 (Tasker, 2023).

Thus, it is not surprising that many immigrant doctors in Canada, trained in non-English-speaking countries, end up working in retail stores or as app-based taxi drivers. This represents a waste of highly skilled human resources, driven by professional gatekeeping and the lack of attention from both local and federal governments.

In recent decades, federal governments have shown a limited response capacity, further exacerbating the crisis through their lack of commitment to addressing the issue. The Covid-19 crisis merely accelerated a pre-existing deterioration in the healthcare sector, where healthcare workers were left exhausted and overwhelmed by a system that neglected Canada's social crown jewel, *Medicare*, which its founders had so diligently built in the 1960s. Alarming, this shortage of medical professionals and specialists is a common issue across all ten provinces and three territories. This situation led Prime Minister Justin Trudeau to negotiate with provincial authorities to mitigate the harmful effects of inadequate healthcare access for an ever-growing portion of the population. Thus, in February 2023, Trudeau's

¹⁰ It is estimated that only 5.5 % of applications for medical studies are accepted into Canada's 17 faculties.

federal government announced that it had agreed with the premiers of all ten provinces and three territories to reverse the declining healthcare situation. The federal government committed to a budget allocation of 196 billion Canadian dollars over ten years, including 46.2 billion for modernizing the family health, pediatric, maternity, mental health, and addiction sectors, among others, and improving support for healthcare professionals (Canada. Prime Minister of Canada Justin Trudeau, 2023). However, this optimism was tempered when it became clear that the federal government would require local governments to gather and share data with Ottawa to ensure resource transparency. Simultaneously, it urged the public to demand transparency in public finances from their provincial leaders, promoting standardized policies across the provinces and territories to use federal resources (Canada. Prime Minister of Canada Justin Trudeau, 2023).

These agreements clash with the provinces' right to manage their healthcare resources without federal intervention, leading to disputes with various premiers who claimed that Trudeau's offer fell far short of the emergency financial support needed by the provinces to fund the healthcare crisis (MacCharles, 2023). Additionally, the terms of the agreement required each premier to negotiate separately with Ottawa for federal fund transfers to their healthcare sector, leaving citizens in limbo as they continue to suffer from delays and lack of timely medical care.

The first province to reach a phased agreement with the federal government in 2023 was British Columbia, followed by Prince Edward Island and Alberta. By early 2024, Nova Scotia became the fourth province to secure an agreement. However, these agreements generally only provide a few hundred million dollars over three years, usually allocated to extending healthcare hours in rural clinics and offering mobile health services (Jones, 2024). Meanwhile, the underlying issue of staffing shortages among doctors, nurses, and support personnel remains unaddressed, a problem that, due to its complexity, will take time to show improvement, assuming the 2023 agreement between the federal government and the provinces and territories overcomes internal challenges.

In Quebec, Premier François Legault narrowly averted a general doctors' strike at the end of 2023 amid widespread public dissatisfaction over healthcare conditions, like the rest of the country. Thus, while Justin Trudeau's government attempts to mitigate the severe healthcare crisis, it largely focuses on portraying to the public that his administration is actively trying to solve the issue by exerting political pressure on provincial and territorial governments. The healthcare sector shows no signs of substantial improvement and, instead, reveals only minimal progress, as in the case of Nova Scotia, where, since early November 2023, the provincial government decided to waive the Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons' validation to accept doctors from the UK, Australia, and New Zealand. However, the rigorous screening and interview processes remain challenging, as only 18 out of 199 applicants managed to pass the initial stages (CBC News, 2023b), ultimately leaving the

situation unchanged, given the professional associations' unwillingness to genuinely relax their stance, leaving the public at the mercy of the political will of their representatives and as hostages to the entrenched power and interests of long-standing professional bodies.

It's also important to note that while Justin Trudeau was working to secure agreements with provincial and territorial authorities, his main opponent, Conservative Party leader Pierre Poilievre, argued that the federal government had squandered resources by doubling public debt, without this being reflected in healthcare system improvements, which he claimed was already broken. Nevertheless, Poilievre was clear that if he came into power, he would honor the agreement Trudeau and the premiers reached, given the dire state of the Canadian healthcare system (CBC News, 2023a).

The housing crisis and Justin Trudeau's efforts to address it: the most emerging sector that hits the most vulnerable in the country

Having a decent place to live is widely regarded as one of the fundamental responsibilities that every state must provide to its citizens. But what happens when the state gradually deprioritizes this responsibility and is consistently channeled towards private corporate groups over several decades? Unfortunately, Canada stands as one of the clearest examples of this situation. Since the implementation of free-market policies across all state sectors starting in the early 1980s, the country has undergone profound changes in the paradigms of the welfare state. Among the most affected sectors, housing stands out as one of the most delicate and complex issues to resolve.

Since dismantling housing cooperatives in the early 1990s, the Canadian real estate market has primarily operated through private initiatives and bank mortgage loans, which have reshaped the market for buying, selling, and renting homes and apartments across all provinces. Already strained by the exorbitantly high costs of acquiring condominiums and homes, the Canadian real estate market faced an exacerbated crisis during the Covid-19 pandemic. This period accelerated a long-standing phenomenon where the high cost of renting condominiums and homes became a growing concern for the population as finding suitable rental housing became increasingly complicated and burdensome.

In fact, it is becoming more common to see homeless encampments in all major Canadian cities, not only among individuals struggling with drug issues or mental health conditions but also among the unemployed or, even more alarmingly, people working part-time who still cannot afford to rent a small living space. It is estimated that between 150 000 and 300 000 people are considered homeless in Canada, with around 30 000 sleeping outdoors each night (Blair, 2024). These figures indicate that the limited government-subsidized housing programs are insufficient. Perhaps most concerning is the possibility that many

more people are without a permanent home, as many hide from official counts by temporarily staying with friends or family. According to data from agencies responsible for such records, it is believed that up to 1.3 million Canadians have experienced insecure housing or homelessness at some point in their lives (Blair, 2024). The anecdotal evidence is vast, ranging from Canadian-born nursing assistants in Halifax living in their cars because their salaries do not cover rent (CTV News, 2023) to immigrant rideshare drivers in Vancouver living out of their vehicles while studying online for a better future (Shen, 2023), or entire families in Toronto forced to rent a garage to sleep in their cars because they cannot afford a small apartment (Wilford, 2024). Thousands of similar cases across Canada make it a human tragedy in a developed country.

On the other hand, for those with a place to live, the high cost of rent has become the most challenging issue to address, as the housing supply has not kept up with the vast demand for space. While the Covid-19 crisis triggered a sharp increase in rental prices nationwide, worsening the pre-existing situation, the market maintained this harmful trend even after the emergency ended. This issue has been further aggravated by steady population growth driven by immigration. Although immigration is not the root cause, it adds pressure to a market where supply is clearly insufficient. Even smaller cities are no longer exempt, as the pandemic led many families to relocate to smaller cities and suburban areas for more space and the option to work from home, fueled by low borrowing costs due to historically low interest rates during the health crisis. This surge significantly increased property values and rental prices (Wilson, 2022), and these costs have not returned to their previous levels.

The housing crisis in Canada is so severe that families face the highest housing costs among developed countries. Addressing the housing shortage would require at least tripling or quadrupling the current rate of urban densification to see improvements in the coming decades (Filipowicz, 2023). Even if the federal government decided to limit the number of immigrants arriving each year—an unlikely scenario given the country's need for a labor force—it would entail reorganizing the social fabric, possibly extending retirement ages to offset the urgent need for labor. Canadians generally empathize with the need to welcome immigrants and show concern about the lack of housing and high rental costs. However, when asked if they would support changes in their neighborhoods to accommodate new vertical condominium developments, 43 % of respondents indicated this would negatively impact their neighborhood (Filipowicz, 2023), reflecting the paradox of the Canadian saying *not in my neighborhood*, which reveals the double standards of many social sectors in the country.

To illustrate the gravity of the situation, surveys conducted in late 2023 estimated that during that year, 55 % of Canadians with mortgages or renting their homes expressed serious concerns about their ability to pay their mortgage or rent. This proportion rose to 66 % among those aged 18 to 34, the demographic with the least job security. The same survey

found that 95 % of homeowners considered the increase in rental costs and the lack of affordable housing a severe problem, with 66 % labeling it very severe. Additionally, 43 % blamed the federal government for the current situation (Leger, 2023).

In this context, the opposition leader in Parliament did not miss the opportunity to hold Prime Minister Trudeau accountable. In a widely circulated 15-minute documentary video released on his social media at the end of 2023, he claimed that the federal government had doubled housing costs in just 10 years, turning Trudeau's administration into a nightmare for the Canadian working class (CBC News: The National, 2023). This came despite Trudeau's early 2023 federal order to curb speculation in the housing market by banning foreigners from purchasing homes or condominiums for two years. This measure, which took immediate effect and excluded non-residents, was in response to reports that mainly Asian buyers were acquiring properties to sublet them, thus profiting from the booming rental market in Canada. Trudeau's government claimed that the goal was to dissuade investors from treating homes as commodities and to support Canadian citizens. While this measure may have seemed promising, it likely had minimal impact, as only 6 % of property owners in Canada are considered non-residents (BBC News, 2023). Notably, in early 2024, Trudeau's government extended this foreign property purchase ban by another two years, primarily as a political move to reduce criticism rather than to genuinely address a problem that has been brewing for decades under both Liberal and Conservative administrations.

It is also important to mention that, alongside this housing ban for foreigners, in December 2023, Trudeau's federal government introduced a strategy using pre-approved house designs from the 1950s to reduce the time and cost of constructing vertical housing units. The government also announced plans to repurpose federal properties into new housing units and to explore converting public buildings into low-cost housing. This program included repurposing abandoned multiplexes, underutilized low-rise buildings, student housing, and retirement residences (Shakil, 2023). These efforts form part of a broader Liberal government plan to address this severe issue, with tangible results not expected until the end of the third decade of the 21st century.

Public concern over this issue is so deep that housing shortages and high costs have become the second most pressing issue for voters, after healthcare. This has added layers of social and political uncertainty in a country increasingly swayed by popular emergent politicians like Pierre Polievre, who offers simple solutions to highly complex problems, solutions that a less informed public may believe to be feasible without fully understanding the broader picture or recognizing the true culprits of the current situation.

Final thoughts

The evidence presented in this article reflects four decades of the gradual transfer of Canadian state responsibilities to benefit national and foreign private initiatives. This wave of privatization, coupled with a disregard for maintaining adequate labor conditions in the country's strategic sectors, has gradually altered the face of Canada, a nation that, until recently, stood as one of the most tangible examples of social and labor justice in the world. However, this deterioration in the living conditions of the majority, to the advantage of a small, factional elite paradoxically sheltered by those in power, has dismantled what were once Canada's greatest prides: public education, the healthcare system, and housing programs, which during the 1960s, 1970s, and part of the 1980s, made Canada a beacon of possibility.

Among these social pillars, the one with perhaps the greatest potential to generate long-term inequalities is education. The fewer educated and well-trained individuals a society has, the lower the prospects for social mobility in a multicultural country that now more than ever needs to dismantle harmful professional monopolies, such as medical boards. These boards, protected by their small numbers, shared ethnic backgrounds, advanced ages, and predominantly male composition, have contributed to the near collapse of the healthcare system. They are backed and shielded by federal and provincial authorities who likely underestimated the consequences of their complacency, or worse, did so deliberately to pave the way for a gradual takeover by private entities seeking control of this sector in the medium term.

Thus, as people are deprived of the necessary and quality education to advance, teachers are misunderstood and overworked, and the healthcare system crumbles due to a lack of resources and overburdened medical staff, the conditions of the most disadvantaged worsen. This harmful cocktail is exacerbated by a third factor: the inability to acquire or even rent a decent place to live. These elements collectively fuel greater social polarization, with immigrants and ethnic minorities being scapegoated for the country's problems, such as the housing shortage, which could dangerously erode social cohesion and trust in the institutions of a nation that, despite everything, remains the most stable in the hemisphere.

Therefore, it is crucial for many aspects to change, starting with Canadians' self-perception so they can channel their frustrations constructively and find real, sustainable solutions in the medium term for the education, healthcare, and housing sectors. While the decline took decades, rebuilding these pillars will require several years, provided that the solutions come from responsible politicians rather than populist figures who place all the blame on the past. That approach has been applied in North America, and as we have seen, it does more to divide than to unite, a scenario that multicultural Canada simply cannot afford at this time.

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