

JANUARY 2026

# Public Policy & Global Affairs Review



MONTHLY EDITION



**PPGAR**  
Public Policy &  
Global Affairs  
Review

**STUDENT  
LEADERSHIP  
INITIATIVES**

**munk school**  
OF GLOBAL AFFAIRS & PUBLIC POLICY



UNIVERSITY OF  
**TORONTO**



Editors-in-Chief

**Nasreen Basheer**  
**Cathlyn Ngonge**  
**Krithik Sivabalan**  
**Erin Strachan**

Feature Editors

**Diego Alfonso Martinez Sepulveda**

**Maha Ali**

**Rose Barrett**

**Mehek Berry**

**Marek Brooking**

**Anissa Gandhi**

**Joanna Gorska**

**Sahana Gunaratnam**

**Ryan Holloway**

**Saarah Khan**

**Sofia Mellicovsky**

**Liam O'Brien**

**Pirinda Perazhakan**

**Kalaivani Rajalingam**

**Abdur (Mani) Rehman**

**Moaiad Saif**

**Shazma Saiyara Nafis**

**Luis Sanchez Diaz**

**Sam Sands**

**Fatima Saqib**

**Michael Unsworth**

**Sean Wieder**

# Public Policy & Global Affairs Review

[ppgareview.ca](http://ppgareview.ca)

Director of Communications

**Quinn Melenbacher**

Contributors

**Quinn Melenbacher**

**Krithik Sivabalan**

**Luis Sanchez Diaz**

**Cassandra Portelli**

**James Lautens**

**Mashaim Salman Mubarak**

**Fadeel Sheikh**

**Sonya Mungal**

**Rita Maragha**

**Arjun Kaul**

**Melanie Tanabe**

**Angel Liang**

**Sofia Mellicovsky**

**Arianne Joyce Padillo**

# Table of Contents

- 
- 01**    **PERFORMANCE, PRESTIGE, AND POWER: GLOBAL LEGITIMACY AND SOFT POWER IN ELITE FIGURE SKATING**  
By Quinn Melenbacher
- 
- 05**    **OPINION: CANADA SHOULD SAY NO TO NATO'S 5% DEFENCE FANTASY**  
By Krithik Sivabalan
- 
- 09**    **OP-ED – A TALE OF TWO "AMIGOS": CANADA AND MEXICO AT THE FOREFRONT OF NORTH AMERICA'S BATTLE FOR STABILITY**  
By Luis Sanchez Diaz
- 
- 13**    **WHEN AI DEFINES BEAUTY: EXPLORING RACISM THROUGH BEAUTY FILTERS**  
By Cassandra Portelli
- 
- 17**    **OP-ED: A SECOND COMING? CANADA AT THE FOREFRONT OF A NEW GLOBAL ORDER**  
By James Lautens
- 
- 20**    **CLEARING THE AIR: TOWARD A SMOG-FREE LAHORE**  
By Mashaim Salman Mubarak
- 
- 24**    **OP-ED: ONTARIO'S EDUCATION SYSTEM: PREPARING STUDENTS FOR 2016**  
By Fadeel Sheikh
- 
- 28**    **STATE NEUTRALITY: SHOULD THE PUBLIC CALENDAR BE LESS CULTURALLY SPECIFIC?**  
By Sonya Mungal
- 
- 32**    **OPINION: THE AFFORDABILITY CRISIS OUR METRICS DON'T SEE**  
By Rita Maragha
- 
- 35**    **THE CANADIAN BROADBAND LANDSCAPE IS OUT OF CONTROL. A PATHWAY TO A PUBLIC OPTION IS THE GOVERNMENT'S MORAL OBLIGATION**  
By Arjun Kaul
- 
- 39**    **COMBATTING ALERT AND INFORMATION FATIGUE WITHIN MISSING AND MURDERED INDIGENOUS WOMEN, GIRLS, AND TWO-SPIRIT PEOPLES IN ONTARIO**  
By Melanie Tanabe, Angel Liang, Sofia Mellicovsky, & Arianne Joyce Padillo
-

# Performance, Prestige, and Power: Global Legitimacy and Soft Power in Elite Figure Skating

BY QUINN MELENBACHER



# Performance, Prestige, and Power: Global Legitimacy and Soft Power in Elite Figure Skating

In the contemporary international system, power exists beyond military and economic force. Joseph Nye's concept of soft power refers to a nation's ability to influence others without coercion. Nations exercise soft power by projecting their cultures, values, and ideals abroad. International sport is a cultural arena where such influence emerges, and elite figure skating offers a revealing case. As one of the most popular winter Olympic sports, figure skating translates visible athletic performances into influence and prestige. As competitive results depend on recognition by international governing bodies and audiences, figure skating can reflect how global soft power is produced, shaped, and contested beyond formal diplomacy.

## Athletes as Non-State Agents of Soft Power

Through performing in global arenas such as the Olympic Games, athletes represent different nations and act as non-state agents of influence. Figure skating success can foster ideas about excellence and discipline, positive values that audiences may associate with the skaters' countries. Athletes, including Yuna Kim of South Korea and Yuzuru Hanyu of Japan, illustrate this dynamic.

After winning Olympic gold in 2010, Kim rose to global fame. She is not only a UNICEF Goodwill ambassador but has also appeared in magazines around the world to promote traditional Hanbok attire and the Korean wave. Having trained in Toronto under Canadian coach Brian Orser, Kim was also selected as an honorary ambassador to strengthen Canada-South Korea diplomacy in 2022.



Source: Author Quinn Melenbacher skating on an outdoor rink in Toronto. (Quinn Melenbacher)

Similarly, Hanyu, a two-time Olympic Champion (2014, 2018), built a large fan base that transcends national affiliation. The deep adoration of Hanyu's fans is not only for his skating but also for overcoming adversity after his hometown, Sendai, was hit by the 2011 Tohoku earthquake and tsunami. In this context, Hanyu's achievement of becoming the first Asian man to win an Olympic Gold Medal in Men's singles skating, despite adversity, helped showcase Japan's resilience globally in the wake of the disaster.

In both cases, Olympic figure skating achievements generated symbolic capital beyond athletic success. Kim and Hanyu's iconic performances enhanced their cultural influence by shaping how international audiences perceive the values and cultures of the nations they represent. The sport's popularity also shows how influence circulates across borders, reflecting globalization over state strategy. This visibility allows athletes like Kim and Hanyu to engage in advocacy and cultural promotion. Rather than stemming from political authority, their global influence emerged from prestige earned through international sporting success, amplified by media visibility across transnational audiences.



## Global Governance and the Shaping of Soft Power in Figure Skating

In sports, international institutions wield widespread influence, showing global audiences that structured norms shape legitimacy across borders.

The International Skating Union (ISU) is the global governing body for figure skating. The ISU organizes competitions, establishes the rules and ethical standards for skaters, coaches, choreographers, and judges, and promotes the sport's development. As ISU competitions are followed worldwide, their rulings, along with those of the World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA) and the International Olympic Committee (IOC), are highly visible. These rulings determine which performances, values, and nations are recognized as legitimate or penalized, giving sport a unique capacity to communicate ideas to global audiences about how the international system functions in ways that traditional politics often cannot. By shaping universal perceptions of fairness and inclusion, the ISU, WADA, and the IOC exercise the ability to shape norms without force, much like the World Health Organization and the International Labour Organization, which rely on compliance rather than state power.

Kamila Valieva's doping case at the 2022 Olympics demonstrates this governance in action. Despite pristine performances, including triple axels and quadruple jumps at only 15 years old, Valieva's results were disqualified for violating ISU, WADA, and IOC rules. Thus, access to major competitions and influence reflect international standards. Valieva's disqualification and the ban of Russian and Belarusian skaters following the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 show these norms in practice.

These cases demonstrate that compliance with institutional standards shapes global perceptions of trust, credibility, and legitimacy. Internationally recognized results suggest that influence depends on adherence to rules rather than technical skill alone. Figure skating's international governance thus reveals how authority and legitimacy operate beyond formal diplomacy.

## Conditional Legitimacy and the Durability of Influence

While institutional governance determines who can access platforms, such as figure skating, it also determines how long influence endures. Soft power is contingent on visibility and legitimacy within global spaces, rather than permanent.

From 2014 to 2022, Russian teenagers dominated women's singles skating, with champions such as Evgenia Medvedeva, Alina Zagitova, and Alexandra Trusova establishing themselves in the international skating community. Their performances were consistent and technically superior to the rest of the field, which, over time, influenced the judging trends and the routines of non-Russian competitors eager to keep up. For Russia, where the training of elite figure skaters is state-funded, this period helped generate international prestige as an important component of reasserting legitimacy after the collapse of the Soviet Union. However, Russia's history of state-sponsored doping schemes since 2014, culminating with Valieva's doping case in 2022, altered how international audiences viewed prior Russian dominance.



Valieva's doping scandal fuelled skepticism around Russia's dominance and integrity in women's figure skating. Along with the suspension of Russian and Belarusian skaters, this case illustrates how prestige depends on compliance with international rules – a visible dynamic in figure skating.

### **Conclusion: Soft Power Beyond Diplomacy**

Figure skating is not merely an athletic or cultural phenomenon. It is a case study of global influence in practice—how individuals generate this influence, how institutions regulate it, and how soft power is produced and withdrawn within cultural systems. A longtime powerhouse in the sport, Russia illustrates this: technical dominance and visibility cannot generate soft power without recognition from governing bodies and global audiences. Examining these elements of elite figure skating reveals that soft power, depending on the interplay of top achievement, institutional validation, and conditional legitimacy, can rival traditional diplomatic tools. With the Milano-Cortina 2026 Olympics approaching in February, figure skating will again reveal how athletic excellence, audience perception, and institutional recognition merge to shape transnational soft power.

# Opinion: Canada should say no to NATO's 5% defence fantasy

BY KRITHIK SIVABALAN



# Opinion: Canada should say no to NATO's 5% defence fantasy



At the [2025 NATO summit in The Hague](#), Prime Minister Mark Carney pledged that Canada will meet the alliance's new defence spending target of 5% of GDP by 2035. In other words, 3.5% for military spending and another 1.5% for defence-related industrial and infrastructure investments. He estimated that will mean a [defence budget of roughly \\$150 billion a year](#) by the mid-2030s.

That number is politically impressive... but fiscally reckless.

Today, Canada spends about [1.37% of GDP on defence](#), or roughly \$40 billion. [The Parliamentary Budget Officer](#) estimated that reaching just 2% by 2032-33 would require annual military spending to climb to \$81.9 billion, which would push the federal deficit above the government's goal of keeping it under 1% of GDP in the early 2030s.

The new 5% pledge more than doubles that ambition. Even if some of the investment component is re-labelled as infrastructure or critical minerals spending, most would still be new expenditures. It would mean significant tax hikes, program cuts and higher debt. In effect, the 5% path would crowd out room for other long-term priorities such as climate adaptation, housing and health care.

Supporters of the pledge might argue that Canada can "afford" this shift because it is starting from a relatively solid fiscal position. The [2024 Fall Economic Statement](#) puts the general government deficit at about 2% of GDP and adopts a federal anchor of gradually reducing the debt-to-GDP ratio while keeping future deficits below 1%. The [PBO's 2024 Fiscal Sustainability Report](#) goes further. Under current policy, Ottawa has about 1.5% of GDP in "fiscal room", roughly \$46 billion, that it could turn into ongoing new spending or permanent tax cuts without pushing its debt burden upward over time.

However, a 5% defence target would turn an otherwise sustainable fiscal trajectory into one where governments are forced to choose between higher taxes on workers and businesses, cuts to core programs like health care and income supports, or a rising debt burden that leaves Ottawa more vulnerable to the next shock. Canada's comparatively strong starting point gives it choices; it does not mean every large, permanent spending promise is suddenly affordable.

The new NATO standard is largely driven by deep [American frustration with allies' depending on U.S. NATO funding](#) and growing anxiety that an increasingly isolationist United States will steadily scale back its security guarantees. Pledging 5% is less about a sober assessment of Canada's defence needs than about signalling loyalty to NATO and heading off accusations that we are not pulling our weight. In that sense, it looks more like appeasement of American pressure than a costed national strategy. It is an eye-catching commitment that may bolster Canada's image today but is unlikely to withstand fiscal reality tomorrow.

However, there is also a real shift in the Atlantic security environment that pushed NATO toward a higher target. [Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine](#) has altered assumptions about European and North Atlantic security.

On January 9, 2026, just days after U.S. forces captured Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro, President Trump revived his fixation with Greenland by openly threatening to “take” the island from NATO-member Denmark and ordering commanders to examine military options, a move that alarmed NATO leaders and raised fresh doubts about the reliability of U.S. security guarantees. Furthermore, the rise of cyber attacks, disinformation campaigns and new forms of hybrid warfare have created a broader sense of urgency.

For Canada, these global shifts are most visible in the Arctic. A warming climate is accelerating permafrost thaw and opening up new Arctic shipping routes and resource opportunities. At the same time, Russia is expanding its military footprint in the region while China increases its commercial and scientific presence and eyes critical sea lanes and undersea infrastructure. Our North is no longer a remote, frozen buffer; it is becoming a theatre of strategic competition.

Canada's 2024 defence policy update, Our North, Strong and Free, acknowledges these risks. It highlights real capability gaps in Arctic surveillance, NORAD modernization, cyber defence and readiness. There is a strong case that Canada has under-invested in these areas for years and needs to catch up. But recognizing that reality does not require leaping to a 5% target that bears little relationship to our actual threat environment or to what our public finances can sustain.

Defenders of the pledge call it a necessary price for security and claim the 1.5% investment component will accelerate Canadian manufacturing and innovation. Defence spending does support jobs and can drive new technologies, especially when there are civilian applications.

Recent Canadian analysis by RBC economists Cynthia Leach and Salim Zanzana, for example, finds that defence services, mainly operating spending, have short-run GDP multipliers somewhat higher than the economy-wide average, and that defence capital spending can also deliver strong effects, but only if procurement limits import leakages and supports domestic industry.

Even in their work, however, the authors stress that these are short-run gains that do not account for opportunity costs: poorly designed defence expansions can still bleed money abroad and divert resources away from more productive sectors of the economy.

A large increase in defence spending risks diverting capital and skilled workers away from sectors that could generate higher long-term productivity gains. A significant share of the money will end up paying for imported equipment rather than building domestic capacity, especially given Canada's long history of procurement delays and reliance on foreign platforms. When fiscal space is limited, higher defence spending can also squeeze out private investment if it leads to higher borrowing costs or higher taxes on households and firms.

In that context, the question is not whether defence spending has some positive economic effects. The question is whether pushing Canada all the way to 5% of GDP on defence generates more economic and social value than alternative uses of the same fiscal room; accelerating the energy transition, expanding affordable housing supply, or stabilizing a health system already under strain from population aging would prove more socially beneficial. On that margin, the case for 5% is weak.



None of this means Canada can stay at 1.37% forever. Canada does need to do more on defence. Meeting the 2% NATO benchmark, or modestly exceeding it over time, is defensible. The PBO has shown that reaching 2% by 2032-33 is compatible with a declining federal debt ratio, albeit at the cost of a higher deficit than Ottawa's preferred path. A credible plan to reach 2-2.5% of GDP, focused on NORAD modernization, cybersecurity, rapidly deployable forces and Arctic defence, especially as permafrost thaw unlocks new shipping routes and access to natural resources and brings risks to sovereignty, would strengthen Canada's contribution without overwhelming its fiscal capacity.

None of this means Canada can stay at 1.37% forever. Canada does need to do more on defence. Meeting the 2% NATO benchmark, or modestly exceeding it over time, is defensible.

What Canada should not do is treat a 5% target as a binding promise. Ottawa should explicitly frame it as a scenario that might be considered only if threat perceptions and fiscal space both change significantly. In the meantime, Canada should push within NATO for more flexible burden-sharing that recognizes non-military contributions and emphasizes real capability over headline ratios.

For a country that already has the lowest net debt-to-GDP ratio in the G7 and borders which have not been attacked since 1812, recklessly sacrificing long-term fiscal prudence for an arbitrary 5% target is a poor trade. Canada should keep its promise to do more on defence, but it should also keep its promise to future taxpayers and future generations who will bear the cost.



# Op-ed – A tale of two “amigos”: Canada and Mexico at the forefront of North America’s battle for stability

BY LUIS SANCHEZ DIAZ



# Op-Ed – A tale of two “amigos”: Canada and Mexico at the forefront of North America’s battle for stability

Since his inauguration as the 47th president of the United States, Donald J. Trump and his administration have pursued a series of unpredictable and volatile actions—particularly in trade, migration, and multilateral cooperation—that have sent shock waves across the world. Collectively, these actions threaten to upend the Western liberal order that consolidated after World War II. As Trump underscored in his [inaugural address](#), such measures lie at the core of American Exceptionalism, intended to ensure the United States remains the “greatest, most powerful, most respected nation on earth.” Yet, one thing is clear: Trump’s “America First” agenda poses an existential challenge to North American stability and integration, with great ramifications for Canada and Mexico.

After the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) came into force in 1994, the three countries embarked on a three-decade journey of mutual economic and diplomatic cooperation aimed at strengthening regional development and promoting “[economic growth and rising standards of living](#).” This partnership has solidified Canada and Mexico as strategic partners in advancing economic integration and regional competitiveness in a region home to over [500 million people](#) and generating more than [USD \\$35 trillion](#) (2026 nominal). Nonetheless, the policy reorientation of the United States under Trump's second term is far more consequential, coercive, and dangerous than that observed during his first term, which resulted in the first cracks of the North American bloc.

Through a series of executive orders, the Trump administration has sought to reduce the U.S. trade deficit and increase domestic manufacturing activity by imposing a [baseline tariff of 10 percent](#) on all countries, to address illegal immigration and drug trafficking by declaring a [national emergency](#) at the U.S. southern border, and to reassert U.S. control over the Western Hemisphere by [reviving the Monroe Doctrine](#).



These actions reflect a broader institutional objective, as articulated in the [2025 National Security Strategy](#): to ensure the U.S. remains “the world’s strongest, richest, most powerful, and most successful country for decades to come” through strategic deployment of its military, cultural, and economic power.

In addition, Trump has for months advanced a narrative centred on annexing sovereign countries across the Americas, which now clearly forms part of his quest to assert total dominance in the Western hemisphere. This includes proposals to [annex Canada](#) as its 51st state and to purchase [Greenland](#), as well as [threats of military actions](#) against Mexico, Cuba and Colombia. Most alarmingly, this sovereignty-violating narrative materialized when the U.S. military conducted a [special operation](#) in Venezuela that resulted in the seizure of President Nicolas Maduro on charges of narco-terrorism and drug trafficking. The latest military action not only violated fundamental principles of international law, such as state sovereignty and territorial integrity, but also set a dangerous precedent that threatens both Canada and Mexico, pushing them to recalibrate their cooperation strategy with the United States.

The military incursion highlighted Trump’s objective of controlling natural resources and keeping other nations away from the hemisphere. This underscores why both Canada and Mexico hold strategic value, given their strategic location and vast deposits, essential for geopolitical advantage and economic growth.

The justification of Trump’s rhetorical attacks is that both ends of the continental United States’ borders are the point of entry for illicit drugs and unauthorized immigration. These claims are factually incorrect for Canada, as an [interim report](#) from Canada’s “Border Czar” noted that drug trafficking volume from Canada into the U.S. is “negligible”. In Mexico’s case, the claims are greatly decontextualized and incomplete. While the vast [majority of drugs](#) are indeed being smuggled into the United States, the framing does not present the full story of the drug trafficking issues. In particular, the U.S. argues that Mexico lacks institutional capacity to fight drug cartels (it has seen close to [500,000 homicides](#) since the War on Drugs began in 2006) and contain mass migration through its territory, without acknowledging its responsibility on the issue nor the longstanding security cooperation between both governments. Data from Mexican officials indicate that more than 75 per cent of all seized firearms are [American manufactured](#). Moreover, the United States is one of the largest drug consumers in the world, with an estimated overdose death toll of more than [1.15 million](#) people since 1999.

These aspects demonstrate that the U.S. is not only a victim but also an enabler, allowing drug cartels to sustain their illegal activities by providing two critical inputs: illegal weapons from gun sellers and money from consumers. The U.S. government must address the root causes of drug consumption among Americans and curtail the sale of weapons for civilian use. A U.S. military incursion into Mexico would be institutionally, politically, and economically devastating on both sides of the border. A failure of the Mexican state has the potential to intensify mass migration into the United States—the very action which Trump claims he wants to stop, repealing the incoherence of this strategy. Instead, the U.S. should strengthen security



coordination with Mexican officials through intelligence sharing to inform border protection and the training of security forces to tackle drug trafficking. Upholding Mexico’s sovereignty, along with regional economic development in Central America and the Caribbean, aimed at reducing economic migration, could diminish the power that drug cartel groups have over marginalized communities.

At the same time, Canada does not currently face direct military intervention by the United States to the same degree as Mexico, largely because of the long-standing partnership that exists between the two countries through institutions such as NORAD, NATO, and the G7, along with Canada’s closer alliances with Western nations. As a result, the United States instead relies on its economic power over the Canadian economy as leverage to extract concessions in key areas of interest such as natural resources, continental security, and trade. For example, more than [75 per cent of all Canadian exports](#) went to the United States in 2024, with energy products [representing the largest export sector](#). The trade relationship is valued at [C\\$3.6 billion](#) in daily Canada-U.S. trade, making Canada the [second-largest export market](#) of American products as of October 2025, and creating highly integrated supply chains. Canada must diversify its trade relationships toward the Asia-Pacific, the European Union, and Latin America to reduce the leverage the United States has on the Canadian economy, thereby protecting its sovereignty and preserving national interests.

Simultaneously, failure to act would undermine Canada’s ability to defend and promote its territorial sovereignty and interests, particularly in the Arctic region, as global warming opens up navigation routes. In particular, the Canadian government must swiftly invest in the development of military infrastructure in our northernmost regions to counter American unilateralism and Sino-Russian control, even if it requires difficult fiscal choices. Moreover, it must increase multilateral security cooperation with Nordic states and the rest of Europe to counter the U.S. interest in acquiring Greenland and prevent Canada from being surrounded by competing powers. This would undermine Canada’s ability to assert itself in the Arctic, especially in protecting the Northwest Passage—which Americans do not recognize as internal Canadian waters but as “international” waters that allow free navigation—that will become a strategic trade corridor in the years to come.

Canada and Mexico are at the forefront of a generational battle for stability to preserve the Western liberal order. The Trump administration has fundamentally altered the diplomatic, economic, and political relationships between the “three amigos,” as dubbed by former Canadian Prime Minister Jean Chr tein. The historical partnership between our nations is over. Canada and Mexico must adapt to this changing geopolitical landscape by building resilience against American coercion, while promoting stability and preserving our territorial sovereignty. A prosperous North America is in the best interests of the U.S. to materialize its goals of continental security, and it cannot be achieved unless the current administration acknowledges that undermining its long-standing neighbours will destabilize the continent.

If Donald J. Trump is serious about being a “peacemaker and a unifier,” as declared in his inaugural address, he should change course by engaging in cooperation with both Canada and Mexico to preserve continental security and increase shared economic prosperity for all. However, we cannot afford to wait for a policy correction that might not happen. Even if a correction does come, the

dynamics will not be the same. Today, Canada and Mexico face an unpredictable, more volatile, and aggressive United States, and how we adapt to this new environment will determine our sovereignty and prosperity. For the long-term interests of the “two amigos,” it is imperative for both governments to jointly leverage their respective strengths to counter the power that the “elephant” next door possesses. While the future remains uncertain, failing to coordinate in the face of such instability would constitute a strategic mistake and undermine any future efforts to renew North American cooperation.

# When AI Defines Beauty: Exploring Racism Through Beauty Filters

BY CASSANDRA PORTELLI



# When AI Defines Beauty: Exploring Racism Through Beauty Filters

## Introduction

Beauty filters are often dismissed as harmless entertainment, yet they operate at an unprecedented scale while remaining largely unregulated. These filters are commonly built into social media platforms, where users are encouraged to modify their appearance when posting photos or videos, often in playful or seemingly trivial ways. You can scroll through Instagram, TikTok, or Snapchat, and the similarities are hard to miss: smoother skin, lighter complexions, narrow noses, enlarged eyes. These images are not simply the result of makeup, or lighting. They are increasingly shaped by AI-powered beauty filters, which use facial recognition and augmented reality to modify users' appearances in real time.

While often framed as playful or empowering tools of self-expression, these filters raise a deeper and more troubling question: Do AI beauty filters systematically encode racial hierarchies into digital self-representation?

I argue that AI beauty filters constitute a form of indirect and systemic discrimination. Although they rarely make race explicit, their design embeds Eurocentric beauty norms that disproportionately disadvantage people of colour. Drawing on academic research and international

human rights frameworks, this article will demonstrate how racial bias in beauty filters is structurally produced through data, design choices, and platform incentives.

## How AI Beauty Filters Encode Race

AI beauty filters rely on computer vision systems trained to detect and modify facial features such as skin tone, eye shape, nose width, and jaw structure. These systems are trained on large datasets that reflect existing social inequalities. As a result, racial bias often enters at the level of data selection and optimisation, rather than through overtly discriminatory intent.

This dynamic mirrors findings from broader research on facial analysis. In their influential study *Gender Shades*, Joy Buolamwini and Timnit Gebru demonstrated that commercial facial classification systems perform significantly worse on darker-skinned faces, particularly those of darker-skinned women. Their analysis reveals that widely used benchmark datasets overwhelmingly prioritize lighter-skinned subjects, with over 79% of images in datasets such as IJB-A and Adience featuring lighter skin tones.

While their research focused on gender classification, it provides crucial evidence that facial technologies are not racially neutral and systematically privilege lighter skin tones. Beauty filters build on the same technical infrastructure. When such systems are designed to "enhance" faces, the question becomes: enhance according to whose standards?

## Indirect Racial Discrimination and Human Rights

International human rights law recognizes that discrimination does not require explicit intent. Practices that appear neutral can still be discriminatory if they produce disproportionate racial effects. This principle is central to the UN Human Rights Council's report Racial Discrimination and Emerging Digital Technologies, which explains that emerging digital systems often reproduce existing inequalities through their design and deployment.



The report highlights that AI systems often function as “systems of discrimination” because they reproduce historical inequalities through biased datasets, proxy variables (variables that indirectly capture racial information, such as skin tone or phenotypic markers), and design choices that can embed racial hierarchies even in the absence of overtly racist intent. Importantly, this text explicitly warns against “colourblind” approaches to technology governance, arguing that ignoring race allows racial inequality to persist under the appearance of neutrality.

Applied to AI beauty filters, this framework clarifies why racial bias can exist even when filters do not explicitly classify users by race. If filters consistently lighten skin, narrow noses, or reshape facial features toward Eurocentric ideals, they create indirect racial discrimination in [Criado and Such](#)’s sense. Even when design choices seem neutral, they can still favour certain appearances, producing unequal racial outcomes without any intent to discriminate.

## Empirical Evidence of Racial Bias in Beauty Filters

To ground legal and human-rights concerns in observable outcomes, empirical evidence is essential, as frameworks such as indirect discrimination require proof of disproportionate impact. Recent academic research provides direct evidence that beauty filters encode racial hierarchies. In the study, *Mirror, Mirror, on the Wall, Who is the Whitest of All?*, Riccio and colleagues conduct a large-scale empirical analysis of social media beauty filters. Their findings show that [filters systematically lighten skin tone and modify facial features](#) toward Eurocentric standards, increasing facial homogeneity and reducing phenotypic diversity (i.e., diversity in racialised racial features).

The authors describe the “[Beautyverse](#)” as a set of aesthetic canons embedded in filters that normalise whiteness as the default. This is not simply a matter of representation but algorithmic standardisation (the transformation of diverse features into a uniform aesthetic through computational optimisation), where racialized features are treated as deviations to be corrected.

Laura Miller’s study [Build-A-Face](#) further illustrates how this operates in practice. By manually analysing 225 Instagram filters, Miller identifies a “digital beauty template” that selectively appropriates certain racialized features while erasing others. The result is a racially ambiguous but ultimately white-aligned aesthetic that reinforces proximity to whiteness as the ideal/norm.

## Digital Discrimination Without Intent

One reason racial bias in beauty filters is often overlooked is that discrimination emerges without explicit racist intent. As [Criado and Such](#) explain, algorithmic systems can produce discriminatory outcomes simply by optimising for engagement, efficiency, or popularity, without concern for fairness or equality.

Beauty filters are designed to maximise user interaction. Filters that align with dominant beauty norms are more likely to be shared, promoted, and rewarded by platform algorithms.

Over time, this creates feedback loops that reinforce racialized standards of attractiveness. Discrimination thus becomes a [structural outcome](#) of design priorities rather than an individual act of exclusion.

This challenges the common defence that filters merely reflect user preferences. Preferences themselves are shaped by algorithmic environments that reward conformity to racialized ideals, limiting meaningful user choice.

## Global Racial Inequality and Colorism

The racial impact of beauty filters is not confined to Western contexts. In [Manufacturing Beauty](#), Hussain, Aslam, and Imran examine how AI beauty filters affect young women in Pakistan. Their study finds that filter use is associated with increased preference for lighter skin and Eurocentric features, reinforcing existing practices of colorism rooted in colonial histories.

Crucially, participants were often aware that images were digitally altered, yet this awareness did not significantly reduce internalizing these racialized beauty norms. This suggests that racial bias in beauty filters operates at a [structural and psychological level](#), rather than through deception alone.

## Legal Blind Spots and Algorithmic Racialization

Despite growing evidence of racial harm, beauty filters fall into a legal grey area. Sandra Wachter's concept of artificial immutability helps explain why. Wachter argues that algorithmic systems create new forms of group-based disadvantage that are difficult to address under traditional anti-discrimination law because they do not map neatly onto existing protected characteristics.

Beauty filters classify and rank faces according to aesthetic criteria that users cannot meaningfully control. These classifications shape visibility, desirability, and social value, yet they are rarely recognised as racial discrimination because race is not explicitly named. This exposes a gap between how discrimination operates in AI systems and how it is currently regulated. As Wachter observes, "a clear gap thus exists between the fundamental aims and actual practice of the law."

## Conclusion

To conclude, AI beauty filters do more than alter appearances; they algorithmically reinforce racial hierarchies by embedding Eurocentric standards into everyday digital practices. Addressing these harms will ultimately require systemic accountability, which could involve regulatory oversight of platform design choices, transparency requirements for training datasets, anti-discrimination frameworks that recognise algorithmic racialisation, and legal reforms such as those suggested by Wachter regarding artificial immutability. At the same time, platforms could adopt alternative design principles that consciously avoid whitening or homogenising facial features, while individuals can engage more critically with these tools as broader governance mechanisms develop. Although framed as neutral or playful technologies, their design and effects produce indirect racial discrimination that aligns with long-standing patterns of exclusion and colorism. Given their massive reach through smartphones and social media, treating these filters as trivial obscures their serious social and human rights implications.

By focusing on race, this analysis highlights how emerging technologies can reproduce inequality even in low-stakes, cultural domains. Addressing these harms requires moving beyond individual choice toward systemic accountability, transparency, and a human rights-based approach to AI design.



# Op-ed: A Second Coming? Canada at the Forefront of a New Global Order

BY JAMES LAUTENS



# Op-ed: A Second Coming? Canada at the Forefront of a New Global Order

I have never seen the death of an empire.

I've certainly read about it. Studying history in my undergrad gave me front row, albeit retroactive seats, to the fall of some of the world's greatest empires: the Ottomans, Alexander's Greeks, the Romans, and countless others.

In our lifetime we are witnessing the death of the United States as we know it. The recent strikes against Venezuela along with the kidnapping of its President Nicolás Maduro by the current Trump administration crosses a line in international relations that cannot be uncrossed. Trump claims that President Maduro enabled and engaged in narco-terrorism that threatened the United States. Such talking points parallel Putin's reasons for invading Ukraine with his claims of Ukraine being a "Nazi" state threatening Russia. Critics and commentators were quick to point out that Trump also has his eyes on Venezuela's oil reserves, something of strategic interest to the U.S. If that weren't bad enough now Trump claims that the rest of the Western Hemisphere is now "in play" for further expansionist action.

This brazen act gives Canada an opportunity to be a voice of reason against the death throes of the rules-based, liberal international order. While the Government of Canada is walking a fine line, neither condemning nor condoning the U.S. and its actions in Venezuela, it has the chance to speak out against this violation of international law and bring bilateralism, as well as multilateralism, back to the forefront of international relations. Canada has a long history of acting as an international peacekeeper and advocate for



multilateralism. One of the most prominent examples of this history is Canada acting as one of the central figures in the creation of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. This makes Canada well-positioned to inspire a response to the U.S. and its defiance of the rules-based international order. Yet the Government of Canada is instead taking the more measured approach in spite of the United States threatening to make Canada the 51st state.

But with Prime Minister Mark Carney going to France to participate in the Coalition of the Willing supporting Ukraine, Canada is showing the world that it is willing to still work with others to further a new liberal order. Canada has already helped Ukraine with its military funding by providing \$6.5 billion dollars in military aid so that Ukraine can defend itself against Russian aggression, but Canada could be doing so much more globally. Prime Minister Carney's current budget saw a cut of \$2.7 billion dollars to foreign aid which severely diminishes Canada's presence as a soft power on the international stage. Not only must international presence be considered, but the moral implications of such an action as well.

The shutdown of an organization like USAID saw the deaths of hundreds of thousands of people relying on its aid. While the budget of USAID is **much larger** than Canadian foreign aid expenditure, its absence on the international stage provides Canada with an opportunity to help developing countries and increase its own global reputation. By filling the gap, possibly by providing vaccines for the developing world, Canada will not only have the chance to make meaningful change but also improve its own image.

Similarly, Canada has the opportunity to expand its security commitments to become a more reliable ally than the U.S.

Referring back to the war in Ukraine, the U.S.'s stance on Ukrainian-Russian peace talks, which has been shifting constantly, has now finally taken a concrete form. Similarly, Trump's rhetoric around NATO, being dismissive and ornery, leaves serious questions if other countries can rely on the U.S. as a global peacekeeper. Trump's re-invoking of the Monroe Doctrine, an old piece of U.S. foreign policy that demands the U.S. stop interference in the western hemisphere to ensure its own hegemony, is demonstrative of this. As such, Canada has an opportunity to assert and secure itself militarily.

While Canada could never hope to match the U.S.'s spending on the military, it can start to make efforts to show that it is willing to fill the void left by the United States on the international stage. Prime Minister Carney has already pledged to meet NATO's new 5% spending target, but even more can be done.

Canada could increase interoperability in Operation REASSURANCE. Canada already supports NATO groups in Eastern Europe through this operation, the largest overseas operation that the Canadian Armed Forces oversees, but more can be done. For example, Operation REASSURANCE sees Canada leading a brigade in Latvia but Canada should push to lead more brigades across Eastern Europe. Doing so would not only show Canada's strong commitment to NATO, but also demonstrate that Canada is willing to defend its allies from those that seek to threaten them.

With the U.S. questioning its international commitments and shifting towards isolationism, Canada must meet the moment through new security agreements, increased military spending, and increased foreign aid to show the Western world that it is willing to lead when others step back. Canada's well-established international reputation provides a good starting point for the pursuit of this venture. Showing the world that Canada can be a leader on the international stage can only improve our own prestige while also helping to stabilize a declining global order.

For who knows what rough, foreign policy beast slouches towards Washington waiting to be born?



# Clearing the Air: Toward a Smog-Free Lahore

BY MASHAIM SALMAN MUBARAK



# Clearing the Air: Toward a Smog-Free Lahore



Lahore is no longer a city only known for its rich cultural heritage, beautiful textiles, and yellow mangoes. It is now a city that also tops the list of the world's most polluted cities. For the last decade, 14 million residents of Lahore have struggled to breathe every winter. Even though the smog problem dates back decades, the last ten years have been exceptionally bad, to the point that Lahore's smog is now visible from space. To address this crisis, policymakers must adopt a phased approach: public-awareness campaigns, economic incentives for green-technology adoption, and long-term transboundary smog diplomacy with India.

Smog is a type of air pollution created by a combination of pollutants, including ground-level ozone and fine particulate matter. This toxic haze intensifies from late October through February, lasting so long that it is colloquially referred to as the 'fifth season' in Lahore. During these cooler months, temperature inversions trap pollutants near the ground, preventing dispersion and turning the city's air hazardous and stagnant. This pollution poses severe challenges to public health, agriculture, biodiversity, and overall environmental sustainability. In Lahore, several interlinked factors drive this formation,

including industrial emissions, fossil-fuel based energy production, diesel-powered transport, and large-scale burning of agricultural residue.

In particular, large-scale burning contributes approximately 20% of the total air pollutant emissions in Punjab. It is largely driven by the short turnaround time between harvesting rice and planting wheat. Although technologies like the "Happy Seeder" can manage this residue without burning, high cost remains a barrier for small-scale farmers. The lack of affordable technology to manage crop residue forces farmers to rapidly clear fields using the only cost-effective method available. This issue has been exacerbated by large-scale urbanization and weak environmental regulations over the last two decades. For instance, the number of registered vehicles in Pakistan has risen by over 450% for motorcycles and 650% for motorcars, demonstrating the scale of fossil-fuel dependence across major urban centres.

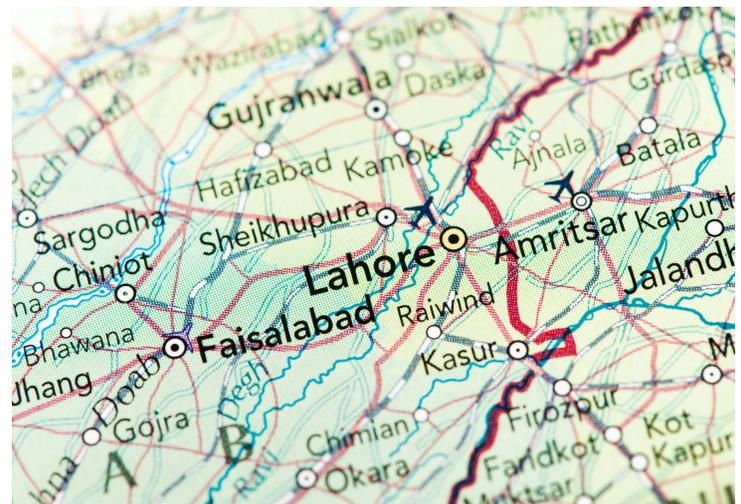
Smog is a clear example of anthropogenic interference (environmental change caused by humans), linking it directly to climate science. It disrupts social and economic systems and intensifies environmental injustice, where low-income communities bear the greatest burden due to limited access to respiratory protective equipment such as facemasks. The Lahore Air Quality Index (AQI) often exceeds 500, far above the hazardous threshold of 300, cutting the average life expectancy by up to seven years. At COP29 (Conference of the Parties), UNICEF (United Nations Children's Fund) warned that over eleven million children under five in Punjab face toxic air exposure, affecting the health and educational wellbeing of children given its impact on lung development and the temporary closure of education centres. At the same time, smog undermines Pakistan's economic development, as it is estimated pollution hinders GDP by five percent of its GDP annually. This illustrates the tragedy of the commons: the benefits of industrialization are privatized, while the costs are diffused across populations and borders.

To address a crisis of this magnitude, the government's immediate priority must be influencing public behaviour through public awareness and education as social learning and the language of engagement are key to supporting these efforts. . The Ministry of Climate Change and Environmental Coordination (MoCC) can coordinate this by launching awareness campaigns via radio, SMS and social media in Urdu and Punjabi across schools, social media, and community outreach to increase awareness about health impacts along with mitigation action such as wearing masks and carpooling s Lahore could adopt a similar approach to **China's 2013-2014** air quality transparency program, where real-time data led to a doubling of air purifier sales and a 7% reduction in pollution related mortality due to avoidance behaviours. Real-time AQI alerts in Urdu and Punjabi would make information accessible to all citizens, laying the foundation for effective mitigation.

While awareness addresses the immediate symptoms, the medium-term solution must align with Pakistan's international obligations. To meet the Paris Agreement and United Nations (UN) 2030 targets, Pakistan's NDC's (Nationally Determined Contributions) prioritize nature-based solutions like the "Ten Billion Tree Tsunami". However, afforestation alone cannot offset urban emissions; the provincial and federal governments must provide economic incentives to accelerate the transition to green-technology. Pakistan's 2019 EV Vehicles (EV) policy introduced tax incentives, yet adoption remains limited due to high upfront costs and inadequate infrastructure. Furthermore, the current market focuses heavily on luxury electric cars, ignoring the reality of the consumer market. The real challenge lies in electrifying the two- and three-wheelers that dominate the commute. Expanding these incentives through targeted subsidies and increasing charging stations across Lahore is critical. Simultaneously, the government must expand subsidies for agricultural machinery such as the "Happy Seeders," which make residue management affordable for small-scale farmers, and addresses the environmental damage caused by the agricultural sector, representing 20% of all emissions. Additionally, phasing out low-quality

fuel imports and enforcing stricter fuel standards would ensure sustained progress. Collectively, these measures would reduce the nitrogen oxides and sulfur oxides contributing to the smog while aligning with Pakistan's national climate goals.

However, domestic measures are not enough for Lahore's environmental crisis as it transcends national borders. Satellite imagery across South Asia shows how agricultural burning in India's Punjab mixes with Pakistan's urban and industrial emissions, creating shared air pollution that neither country can unilaterally solve. To address this, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), in collaboration with MoCC should pursue smog diplomacy with India. Pakistan needs a structured bilateral treaty with India, modelled after the 1991 U.S - Canada air quality agreement. The framework would establish joint air-quality monitoring, shared data platforms, and coordinated seasonal bans on stubble burning (one of the main contributors to winter smog). In addition, the International organizations such as UNEP (United Nations Environment Programme) and the World Bank could also provide financial support to facilitate this cooperation. Despite persistent political tensions, advancing smog diplomacy could facilitate regional collaboration to reduce air pollution, and address lost economic productivity, and health impacts. Transboundary climate challenges demand collective action, and strong international cooperation lays the groundwork for long-term air quality improvement.





Nonetheless, these interventions may seem idealistic to critics, given Pakistan's current economic and political constraints. Awareness campaigns may be insufficient when the majority of the target audience cannot afford the luxury of staying indoors. From a fiscal standpoint, the expansion of the EV subsidies program and agricultural machinery does present a high cost for a debt-ridden economy. Similarly, on the diplomatic front, pursuing a bilateral treaty with India may present challenges given a long history of deep mistrust between the two nations. However, these limitations must be weighed against the alternative of a perpetual health emergency that continues to impact the socio-economic fabric of the region. The cost of implementation is ultimately lower than the recurring cost of ecological collapse due to inaction.

Ultimately, a complex transboundary issue such as smog cannot be solved through a single or unilateral intervention. It requires a phased, coordinated approach which combines short, medium, and long-term measures. Implementation will require addressing fiscal limits, limited climate awareness, and political tensions that may hinder cross-border cooperation. To mitigate these risks, Pakistan should prioritize low-cost awareness programs first, leverage international financing (e.g. UNEP, World Bank), and frame collaboration with India as a shared health and economic priority. Beyond immediate health benefits, a cleaner Lahore promises a stronger economy and a rare diplomatic opportunity to collaborate with India, leveraging environmental interdependence to foster regional stability. A phased implementation strategy offers the best path toward a cleaner, brighter, and smog-free Lahore.

# Op-ed: Ontario's Education System: Preparing Students for 2016

BY FADEEL SHEIKH

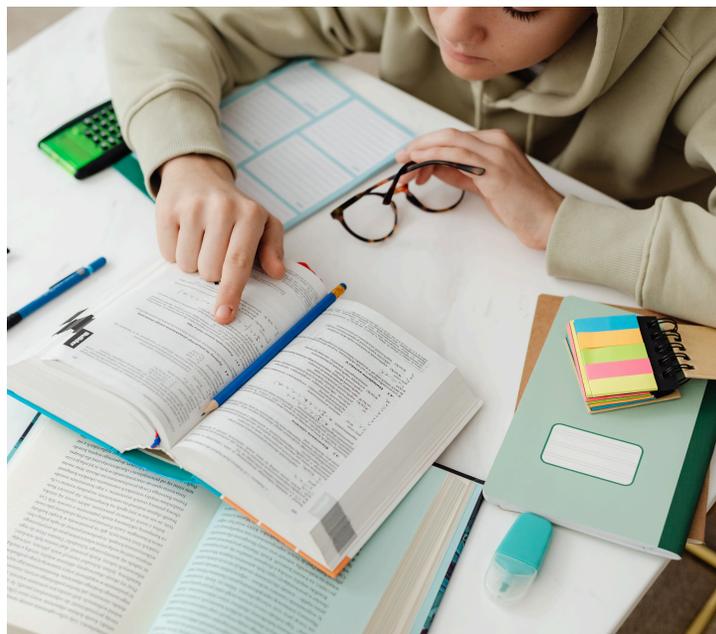


# Op-ed: Ontario's Education System: Preparing Students for 2016

The Ontario education system is lagging behind and in need of major reform. Students are struggling to keep pace with current standards, while industry and technology outpace the skills and education required for the future. Technology and data literacy - including data analysis, AI usage and blockchain - are major disruptors in the labour market today and in years to come, yet the education system remains trapped in the past, creating a vulnerable future generation at risk of major job loss. Underscoring all of this is Canada's ongoing productivity crisis and international threats to its economy, which risk future job potential and economic resilience. An outdated education system risks a generation falling further behind, blunting Canada's competitive edge and leaving the country trapped in the past.

In 2025, the World Economic Forum released a report analyzing some of the most important skills for the future of the work environment across the globe. From this, the fastest-growing skills include analytical skills (69%), technological literacy (51%), and AI and big data (45%). As more companies shift to greater AI use, understanding how to apply these tools to improve productivity is becoming less of a skill and rather a core competency and expectation with many jobs in the knowledge economy. So, if the goal of the education system is to prepare students for the real world, then why are technological literacy, AI, and emerging technologies still treated as a discretionary measure for educators?

In the current Ontario Education Curriculum, across all subject matters from Kindergarten to Grade 12, AI and its like-terms, as well as digital literacy are largely absent. Digital literacy is only referenced as part of curriculum resources under a transferable skills tab for educators to incorporate into lesson plans with no formal guidance or metric involved.



At present there are no formal guidelines for AI and technology use in classrooms at a provincial level, nor are there any consistent standards at the school board level. The Toronto District School Board's official website offers only a brief statement suggesting that responsible AI use should adhere to board policies, with no formal guidance or expectations outlined for educators. Even the Elementary Teachers Federation of Ontario advises educators to exercise caution in using AI, without discussing the potential advantages for workflows. All levels of government and educational actors are stricken with paralysis and fear over AI and its integration, while AI continues to take over businesses and their processes.

The answer is likely three-fold: the structure of the education system, government education policy, and the role of unions and teachers' colleges.

## The Structure of the Education System at Large

At present, the Ontario education system allows the province to create school boards capable of administering nearly 5000 public schools in Ontario. Each school and school board is government-run and follows a standardized provincial curriculum. At the same time, there is a parallel system with the private/independent school system that has seen steady growth approaching nearly 15% of the school

market in Ontario. In Ontario these schools develop their own curriculum to follow allowing for greater variance from the public system.

In basic economics, one of the main concerns for the existence of monopolies is the stifling of innovation. When a company lacks viable alternatives, there is no incentive to innovate. However, by introducing competition, each organization has an incentive to innovate in order to gain market share. I believe that the private sector in education is capable of disrupting the status quo in the education sector. The private sector runs on profit motive; by having good employment metrics and ensuring graduates have the skills needed to succeed, it will help their key performance metrics and attract a wider customer base. As such, there is an incentive to train and teach technological literacy, creating a stark contrast to the public system.

The 2026 training and re-skilling for teachers provides an illustrative example of the Ontario Government's surface level understanding of AI technology. Under the Ontario Federation of Independent Schools, there are extensive courses available to all faculty to learn about responsible use of AI, misinformation and the use of AI as a tool in the classroom and workforce. This allows teachers to learn and have a base understanding of how to teach students across the private/independent school system. Turning to the public school system in the 2025-2026 school year, all schools will have a professional activity day dedicated to AI. However, the description of what this training entails remains surface level. Where private and independent schools are already implementing training and digital literacy, Ontario continues to lag behind, threatening to leave a generation of students far behind in the skills needed to succeed in 2026.

### Government Education Policy

The government is stuck in the status quo, making small incremental changes to the curriculum every few years without major overhauls. With the wide-spread implementation of AI technology, however, small incremental changes are not enough.

With the wide-spread implementation of AI technology, however, small incremental changes are not enough. Without formal guidelines, educators cannot effectively integrate technology education and literacy into courses to teach the applications of using technology as a tool in a variety of contexts. The current Ontario education assessments are grouped around four main competencies: knowledge, communication, application and thinking. Each of these are skills that can integrate AI and technology to help support and supplement learning with technical skills required in the labour market, presenting massive opportunities for success.

### Unions and Teachers Colleges

A second cause involves the unions and the teachers' colleges who train teachers. To build an education system capable of building a workforce that has the necessary technical skills and aptitudes, we need a teaching force capable of explaining these as well. At present, due to the nature of AI and big data's explosive growth, it is difficult to ensure teachers are positioned to be able to teach technology literacy. Furthermore, teachers' colleges and academic institutions have failed to address the issue of technological re-skilling, creating a major gap in educators' skill sets compared to the needs of the future economy. Without educators who are themselves familiar with responsible AI usage as a tool in research and writing, it will be difficult to teach students how to use it without becoming overly reliant on it.



## A Solution

There is a solution that can increase pressure on the government to act quickly and update the curriculum to better prepare students and it comes from the expansion and leveraging the existing private/independent school network. Economic reasoning suggests when a viable alternative exists, competition can be formed to make all actors innovate in order to remain competitive. By presenting private and independent schools as a viable alternative to public education, there will be an added need for the government to take action in the face of failure to deliver core services. Alternatively, if they don't take action more students will choose to attend private schools with more emphasis on digital literacy. As a result, different schools will want to compete by continuing to innovate to better prepare students, raising the overall quality of education on aggregate.

The reason this does not currently exist is that many families currently cannot afford private schools, limiting its growth potential. However, there is a solution. Modeling after OSAP or the \$10-a-day day care programs which offer families direct subsidies, a similar provincial program could help alleviate the financial burden, creating a new demand for private education. In turn, this would expand the private sector's capacity through potentially new profit motives, increasing affordability and creating a more competitive market for education and establishing an alternative separate from the government monopoly on education in Ontario.

This is by no means a perfect solution as it likely would continue to deepen inequalities in poor communities and may not in fact create the perfect competition outcomes in the market. However, it is a blueprint for a potential avenue to explore. Something needs to change to better equip Ontario students with the skills of the future or risk a generation left behind in the new age of rapid technological growth.

It is a win-win strategy where either the government backs out of public education in favour of subsidized private education, or the government faces pressure to re-invent the curriculum to remain consistent and legitimate in the face of private education. Either way, students win!



# State Neutrality: Should the Public Calendar Be Less Culturally Specific?

BY SONYA MUNGAL



# State Neutrality: Should the Public Calendar Be Less Culturally Specific?

## Background

The inclusion of specific cultural, advocacy, and celebratory dates in Canada's public calendar has been an ongoing practice that reflects a particular set of values and culture operating under liberal democracy (Boucher & Caron, 2024, p. 58; Heath, 2020). Through its public calendar, the state grants public holidays, providing employees paid time off and shaping the broader public life through government, business, and school closures (Government of Canada, 2025). Historically, the state has prioritized Christian-Western values. Only Christian holidays such as Christmas, Easter, and Good Friday are religiously linked public holidays (Boucher & Caron, 2024, p. 62). As a result, non-Christians often need to secure special accommodations to request time off to observe religious or cultural days, even as Canada's population is becoming increasingly diverse (CHRH, 2023). Over 12.6 million people report they have no religious affiliation, and the population of religious non-Christian individuals (Hinduism, Judaism, Indigenous spiritualities, Muslims, Sikhs) is rising (CHRH, 2023; Statistics Canada, 2022a).



Although state-neutrality is not guaranteed, Canada's philosophy of law has favoured this approach to balance the needs of different religious groups while remaining neutral (Pelsmakher, 2017, p. 141). Given the changing religious and cultural demographic in Canada, the commitment to state neutrality and equal respect for all citizens has been called into question. Some argue that Christian and Western-based public holidays favour one faith's tradition over others in a multicultural society. Others believe that these religious and Western-focused holidays have become largely secular over time and do not favour one belief over another.

## Key Considerations

### Neutrality and Equality in a Diverse Society

A central question is how a liberal democratic state should treat religion in public life. Principles of liberal neutrality suggest that in a liberal democratic state, the state is not expected to be neutral about all aspects of its decisions (Heath, 2020). However, the state should be able to justify its laws and policies without relying on specific moral or religious concepts of what constitutes a 'good life' (Heath, 2020). In this view, shared justification is key. The government should focus on policies that everyone could reasonably accept, rather than those based on particular religious or moral views (Heath, 2020, p. 118; Jones, 2018, p. 26). Maintaining holidays originating from one religion can conflict with neutrality, as it privileges Christianity (Boucher & Caron, 2024a, p. 58). Not favouring one specific religion or set of Western values over another strengthens the state's liberal neutrality (Boucher & Caron, 2024a, p. 58; CHRC, p. 3, 2023). However, if religious public holidays such as Christmas and Easter were reformed into secular public holidays aimed at neutrality, they would still inherently favour certain lifestyles and unfairly hinder others (Balint, 2015).

Different types of neutrality should be taken into consideration. Negative neutrality focuses on non-interference, where the state avoids favouring one group, but does not find it necessary to correct previous unequal treatments between different groups (Jones, 2018, p. 19; O'Halloran, 2021, p. 29).

Positive neutrality argues that the government should intervene to remove advantages that benefit certain groups over others to offset any unequal treatment (Jones, 2018, p. 19; O'Halloran, 2021, p. 29). Within this context, making the public calendar less culturally specific reflects a positive neutrality approach, and refraining from intervention reflects the principles of negative neutrality. In a society that values multiculturalism, echoed by a Statistics Canada survey highlighting that 92% of Canadians agree that religious and cultural diversity is a Canadian value, positive neutrality aligns more closely with Canada's broader commitment to inclusion (Statistics Canada, 2022b). This suggests that policymakers should seek more balanced recognition of different religious and cultural beliefs.

### Risks of Public Perception

Currently, Canadian citizens have become accustomed to the implemented Christian-centred public holidays despite being non-Christians or immigrating from non-Western regions. These long-standing holidays have been an important part of nation-building, where a sense of shared community and identity is built, despite these days often reflecting a particular religious belief (Boucher, 2024b). Many non-Christians dedicate this time off to reconnect with family, focus on relaxation and well-being, and enjoy a break from working life. However, the current system limits the benefits of these public holidays to one religious tradition, still excluding other holy days observed by many.

Additionally, Canada's 2021 census indicated that, although the country has become more diverse, Christians still represent over half of the Canadian population (19.3 million people) (Statistics Canada, 2022a). Due to this religious majority, removing or secularizing holidays such as Easter, Christmas, and Good Friday will likely create tensions between Christian individuals, non-Christians who observe these holidays, and the government.

### Economic Impacts

Public holidays in Canada continue to support the local economies with special events, cultural festivals, and activities (Government of Alberta, 2011). During most cultural and religious days, such as Diwali, Christmas, or Eid, it is expected that food, services, gifts, vendors and

more contribute to the celebrations felt by diverse communities (Government of Alberta, 2011). For example, during the holiday season from November to December, many Canadians prepare by engaging in holiday shopping, which has contributed positively to the economy through increased consumer spending, retail and service support, and even job creation (Rosso & Wagner, 2021).

Although individuals may not be working on public holidays, during preparations for these culturally and religiously significant days, there is reinvestment into the economy. Although it is also apparent that empirical evidence suggests that while public holidays do contribute to increased GDP, they entail a small financial cost of 0.2% GDP decrease for each additional public holiday (Rosso & Wagner, 2021). However, these costs are partly offset and mitigated by reductions in workplace accidents, due to increased time for rest and recovery, increased consumer spending, and increases in short-term happiness during holidays (Rosso & Wagner, 2021).



## Recommendation and Justification

It is recommended that the Government of Canada maintain existing public holidays, such as Christmas and Easter, while introducing three to five paid ‘miscellaneous’ personal days per employee per year, which can be used for religious or cultural observations. Similar policies have been implemented in the Ontario Public Service, municipalities, and local school boards, demonstrating administrative feasibility and public acceptance (City of Toronto, 2019).

This approach aligns with positive liberal neutrality by addressing existing advantages for Christian traditions while maintaining holidays with broad cultural and social significance. It promotes inclusion, which all citizens could reasonably endorse, by allowing individuals of all faiths to observe their own significant days, without removing shared breaks that support community and well-being. Economically, the productivity impact of adding ‘miscellaneous’ personal days would be minimal (0.2% GDP reduction per additional day), and is mitigated by gains in happiness, workplace safety, and social cohesion. Introducing three to five days would imply a cumulative GDP impact of approximately 0.6-1%, a cost that is further offset by increased consumer spending during cultural and religious observances, as well as longer-term productivity gains from reduced absenteeism and workplace injury. Politically, it offers a balanced, feasible solution that avoids potential backlash associated with any efforts to secularize or eliminate longstanding public holidays and reinforces Canada’s multicultural and liberal democratic values.

---

## References

- Balint, P. (2015). Identity Claims: Why Liberal Neutrality is the Solution, Not the Problem. *Political Studies*, 63(2), 495-509. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9248.12086>.
- Boucher, F., & Caron, J.-F. (2024a). Liberalism, Separation, and Neutrality Toward Culture. *The Problem of Cultural Membership in Will Kymlicka’s Multicultural Citizenship*. Taylor & Francis Group.
- Boucher, F., & Caron, J.-F. (2024b). *Multicultural Citizenship: Legacy and Critique*. (1st ed.). Taylor & Francis Group.
- Canadian Human Rights Commission. (2023, October 23). Discussion paper on religious intolerance: Canadian human rights commission. Canadian Human Rights Commission. <https://www.chrc-ccdp.gc.ca/resources/publications/discussion-paper-religious-intolerance>.
- City of Toronto. (2019, June 12). Feasibility of Changing the City of Toronto’s Policy on Statutory Holidays. <https://www.toronto.ca/legdocs/mmis/2019/gl/bgrd/backgroundfile-134283.pdf>.
- Government of Alberta. (2011, June). Impacts of Community Events and Festivals on Rural Places. [https://www1.agric.gov.ab.ca/\\$Department/deptdocs.nsf/all/csi13702/\\$FILE/Community-events-and-festivals.pdf](https://www1.agric.gov.ab.ca/$Department/deptdocs.nsf/all/csi13702/$FILE/Community-events-and-festivals.pdf).
- Government of Canada. (2025, May 8). Statutory Holiday Pay. <https://www.canada.ca/en/public-services-procurement/services/pay-pension/pay-administration/access-update-pay-details/pay-changes-in-your-life/taking-leave/statutory-holiday-pay.html>.
- Heath, J. (2020). Liberalism: From Classical to Modern. In *The Machinery of Government*. Oxford University Press, Incorporated.
- Jones, P. (2018). The ideal of the neutral state. In *Liberal Neutrality* (pp. 17-46). Routledge.
- O’Halloran, K. (2021). State Neutrality: Background History, Concepts, Definitions and Principle. In *State Neutrality* (pp. 9-44). <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108674430.003>.
- Pelsmakher, S. (2017). State Neutrality in Religious Affairs Civil Servants Religious Dress. *Canada-United States Law Journal*, 41, 141.
- Rosso, L., & Wagner, R. A. (2021). Causal effect of public holidays on economic growth. Available at SSRN 3845129.
- Statistics Canada. (2022, November 14). Ethnocultural and Religious Diversity – 2021 Census Promotional Material. Government of Canada, Statistics Canada. <https://www.statcan.gc.ca/en/census/census-engagement/community-supporter/ethnocultural-and-religious-diversity>.
- Statistics Canada. (2022). The Daily – The Canadian census: A rich portrait of the country’s religious and ethnocultural diversity. Statcan.gc.ca. <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/221026/dq221026b-eng.htm>.

# Opinion: The Affordability Crisis Our Metrics Don't See

BY RITA MARAGHA



# Opinion: The Affordability Crisis Our Metrics Don't See

The Greater Toronto Hamilton Area (GTHA) is one of Canada's most economically productive regions, annually generating half of Ontario's GDP and one-fifth of Canada's. Concerningly, the workforce the GTHA's prosperity depends on is dwindling away, burdened by the cost of living and seeking affordability even if that means moving away from where they work.

Essential service workers such as educators, nurses and construction workers, earning between \$50,000 and \$104,000 a year, spend up to 60% of their income on housing in the GTHA, far exceeding the 30% threshold the Canadian Government deems affordable. Demonstrating a concerning gap in affordability among the region's middle-class that is largely overlooked by policy makers - the middle-income gap.

Consider a personal support worker earning \$60,000 a year, they live in Oshawa and work downtown Toronto.

On paper, they earn well above affordability thresholds, in practice more than half of their wage goes to housing. This is the reality of 920,000 workers across the GTHA, including nurses, teachers and construction workers all struggling to afford their homes. With these workers fueling the GTHA's economy, the issue at hand is not merely one of social welfare or housing supply but a structural economic failure rooted in how our government measures need.

In Canada, poverty is measured through income-based tools like the Market Basket Measure (MBM), which assumes that if a household's disposable income is above a certain threshold, they are not considered for welfare. The middle-income gap reveals that this assumption is false - as despite making income above that threshold they cannot afford necessities like food, utilities, transportation. Incorporating deprivation and access into poverty measurement would allow governments to more accurately identify need and design responses grounded in lived realities. This is because many factors outside of income impact a household's financial well-being.



Growing numbers of workers respond by relocating to more affordable municipalities on the urban fringe. CivicAction found that 67.7% of middle-income workers in the GTHA have considered changing jobs or moving in the past three years, and more than half a million residents have already relocated to less expensive parts of Ontario or other provinces over the past decade. These moves represent a search for affordability, but they disconnect the region's essential workforce from the places where their labour is most needed. For those who do move, the trade-off is rarely advantageous.

A 2018 CMHC study found that the cost of longer commutes frequently cancels out the financial savings of cheaper housing, with many workers ultimately paying more in transportation, time, and burnout. As commutes lengthen, fatigue accumulates, making it harder for workers to provide the level of care, attention, or service their roles demand. These are not just private inconveniences borne by individuals. Exhausted workers weaken the delivery of vital services across essential public sectors like health care and education, where staff turnover and shortages are at an all-time high.

At the upper end of the middle-income spectrum, where workers possess the financial means and flexibility to leave the region entirely, unaffordable housing accelerates migration. CivicAction reports that nearly 7 in 10 workers are considering relocation, and many have already done so, moving to more affordable regions outside the GTHA and taking their human capital with them. The Greater Toronto Hamilton Area's economic prosperity depends on these workers; when they cannot afford to stay, services become harder to maintain, and communities absorb the costs through longer wait times, reduced capacity, and weaker public outcomes.

Yet the scale of this housing affordability crisis is not fully captured by conventional policy or economic well-being metrics. Canada measures poverty and need primarily through income-based tools like the Market Basket Measure (MBM), which assume that households with stable wages are not experiencing deprivation.

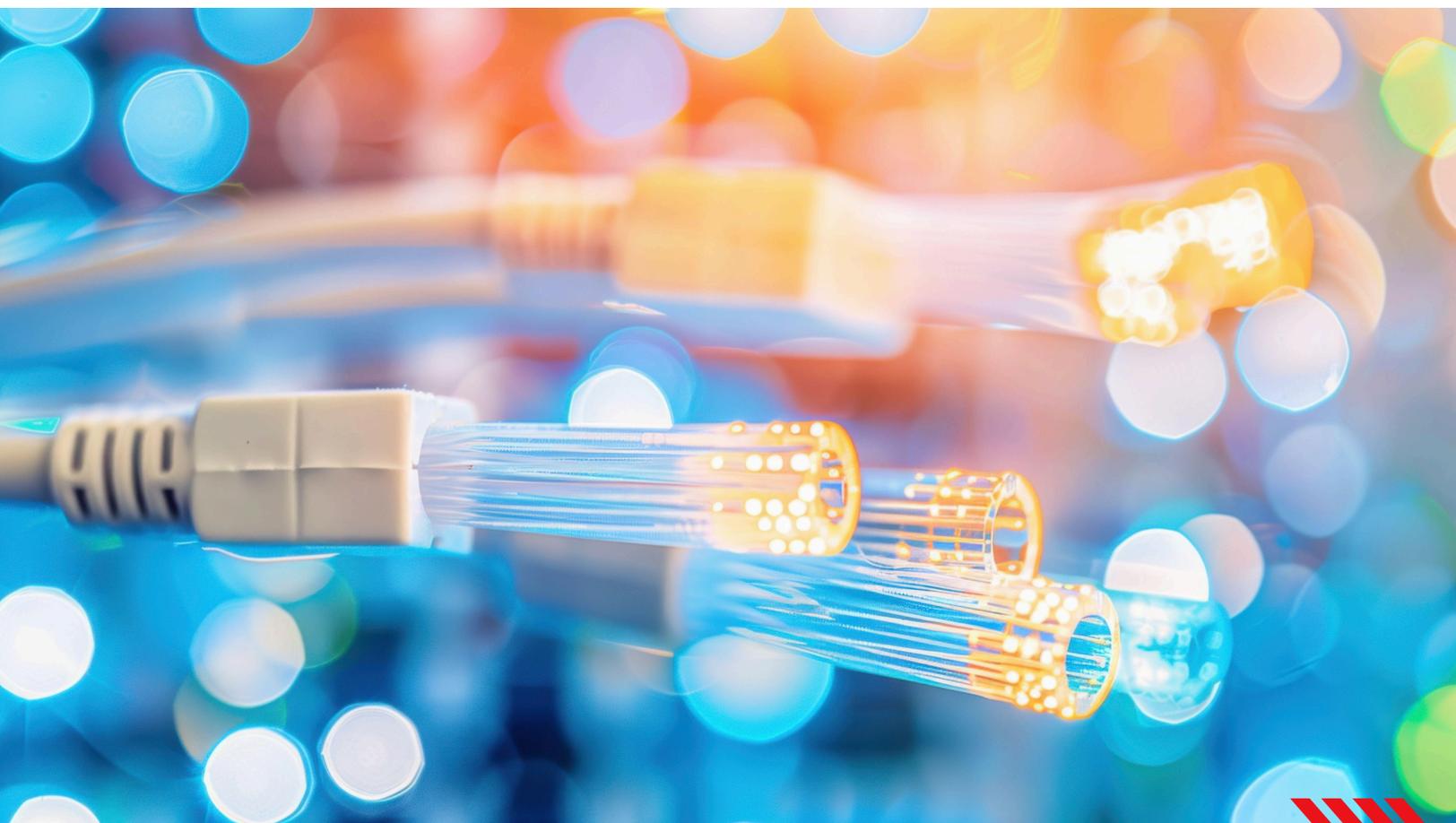
Although, research on material deprivation shows that this is rarely true. Hardship frequently emerges through access gaps, where workers meet income thresholds but cannot afford housing near work, childcare, utilities or other necessities. Within a deprivation framework, like the Material Deprivation Index (MDI), need is understood through what households cannot access rather than what they earn, showcasing lived realities. Incorporating a deprivation measurement, such as the MDI, would complement MBM affordability measures and provide policy makers with the tools to assess the extent and severity of need in these communities more accurately. Ultimately, enabling targeted interventions and supporting decision-makers anticipate and address risks like workforce shortages and deteriorating public services.

Governments cannot address what they cannot see, and the region's economic strength depends on the workers it is currently pushing out. Access-based tools would allow policymakers to detect where affordability barriers are becoming workforce shortages and intervene before services are compromised. The longer we mismeasure this crisis, the more costly it becomes for communities, for essential services, and for the GTHA's future prosperity. Addressing affordability begins not with housing supply alone, but with measuring need in ways that reflect lived realities.

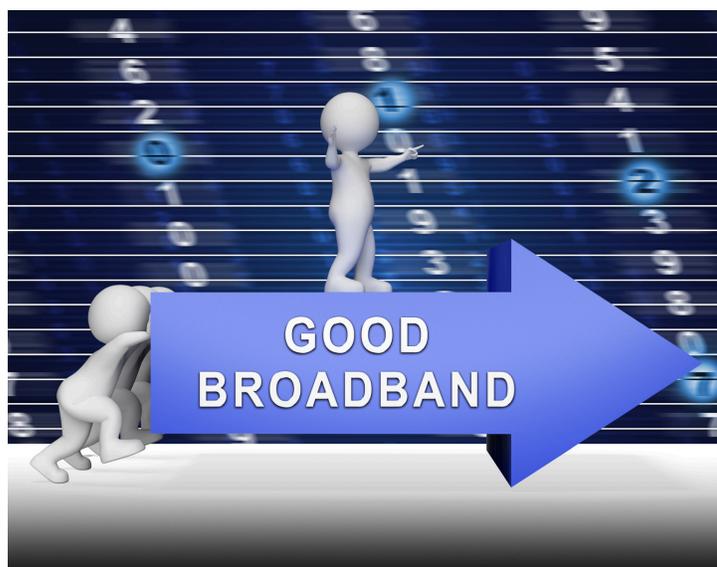


# The Canadian Broadband Landscape is Out of Control. A Pathway to a Public Option is the Government's Moral Obligation

BY ARJUN KAUL



# The Canadian Broadband Landscape is Out of Control. A Pathway to a Public Option is the Government's Moral Obligation



In 2016, the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission (CRTC) declared access to broadband internet a basic telecommunications service - one step closer to recognition of telecommunications networks as a public good. Previous basic telecommunications services, such as landline telephones or snail mail, have only occupied a small amount of our time and energy. In contrast, access to fixed and mobile broadband internet has become critical to areas as diverse as education, healthcare, and banking in a matter of years. Of course, while this is true around the world, the monopolistic market structure of Canadian telecommunications presents the federal government with a unique problem and opportunity: given its ubiquity and importance, public provision of broadband telecommunications is a goal to which federal and provincial governments should aspire.

## Why Do We Need Broadband Coverage?

Is there any moral imperative for a responsible government to even care about telecommunications? Predating even the internet,

telecommunications technology has long had the power to blur the lines between previously separate spheres of the public. Political theorists during the first half of the twentieth century recognized the importance of a neutral forum for discussion, and the role that nascent telecommunications companies played therein. Networks of telegraph and telephone lines, and eventually the internet, have been the most important development for creating this neutral forum through which otherwise-unconnected citizens share democratic concerns. Functioning telecommunications infrastructure is critical for deliberative democracy.

Even if governments should care more about the nuts and bolts of telecommunications, is broadband a service that responsible governments should even seek to provide? Setting aside, for now, the argument that the market should be able to fill this niche on its own, the argument that a responsible government should explore public provision of broadband rests on the conception of the state itself. Modern states are organizations with two distinct powers: compelling universal membership by default, and financial compulsion not granted to any other economic organization - powers that confer a distinct democratic and fiduciary responsibility. Access to broadband networks is critical to the internal operations of government but the importance of broadband to civic functioning does not end there. Broadband access facilitates many of the functions of the modern welfare state, even when not connected to or subsidized by the state. It's hard to argue against governmental inclusion of a private service when said service facilitates welfare state functions simply by making membership more universal.

Indeed, despite the inherent financial cost, continued broadband access as both a tool and an independent social space is critical in ensuring the development of, for example, LGBTQ+ activism and the development of

LGBTQ+ identity in an age where physical repression is common. Internet access is also crucial to modern disability-related community and mutual aid, with disabled people increasingly looking to internet-based mutual aid networks in lieu of governmental assistance. Crucially, when the burden is placed on governments, mutual aid can result in increasingly costly, and therefore coercive, bureaucracy for minority groups. Internet access allows for the building of robust mutual aid networks within distinct political spheres with minimal bureaucratic presence. This distributed mutual aid is often recognized, especially within disabled communities, as materially better than what the modern welfare state can provide on its own. Even for less marginalized communities, internet access is recognized as an essential social good, as the need to avoid social isolation is essential for human health. Access to telecommunications, then, by enabling mutually beneficial forms of cooperation and collective action, already performs many necessary functions of the "public goods" model of the welfare state, and allows for the qualification of universal membership more than any other privately administered for-profit program.

### **That's Great, But Don't Companies Already Cover That?**

Onto the elephant in the room with an invisible hand: if the quality of universal membership is already met by existing telecommunications networks, why should the state provide a public alternative? For one, the public goods model of the welfare state examines multiple cases where public intervention is better used to address problems of collective action, all of which are met in a Canadian telecommunications context. But, just as importantly, the government should act to stop market failure. The nature of the Canadian telecommunications market - dominated by 3 companies, providing over 80% of coverage, with high barriers to entry and with few suppliers able to meet its growing hardware demands - means that it is one of the most expensive for consumers in the developed world. For example, internal ISED data shows that by the time you use 2-4GB of mobile broadband data in Canada in a month, you are paying \$39.15, as opposed to \$18.35 in Germany. Many other countries, such as Australia, only offer base broadband rates at a higher data transfer standard, and they are still less than half the price of a Canadian 2-4GB/month plan.

Under any form that public provision of broadband could take, from hardware supply chain interventions to wholesale broadband coverage across provinces, the government has an incentive to act, even if only to reduce prices.

The market failure of high pricing is accompanied by one of coverage. The Canadian telecommunications oligopoly has neglected whole populations of Canadians. During the COVID-19 pandemic, poor internet access led to significant social, financial, and health barriers for young Canadians in rural areas. Even worse off than rural Canadians are First Nations peoples: connectivity rates for First Nations people in Ontario, for example, sit at a dismal 33%, even worse than the already-low 54% for rural Ontarians, and the story is only worse in more isolated provinces and territories. It's difficult to say that our country is digitally connected when outside of a city, it's more or less a coin toss. Given the federal government's significant investment in rural development, providing a public option for access to a broadband network, even in competition or in concert with the existing oligopoly, is in Canada's interest.

There are ways to predict that the Canadian market would have failed to provide responsible and inexpensive broadband coverage - for example, from the work of behavioural economists such as Joseph Stiglitz, whose work has yielded insight into how the clarity of the information provided by a private vendor can drastically affect outcomes if buyers are not given symmetrical information on the other side of the market. With the labyrinthine contract options available to Canadians to obtain broadband coverage, combined with the fact that all these options stem from only three large companies, it's hard to imagine a market with more asymmetric information than telecommunications in Canada. Stiglitz's work on asymmetric information in markets explains why the modern broadband landscape has produced market failures in Canada, and why its motives run counter to a neutral forum: diversification of options is central to the profit-earning motives of an oligopoly, but the informational asymmetry inherent to dividing the market produces poor incentives for all divisions, leading to a separating equilibrium.

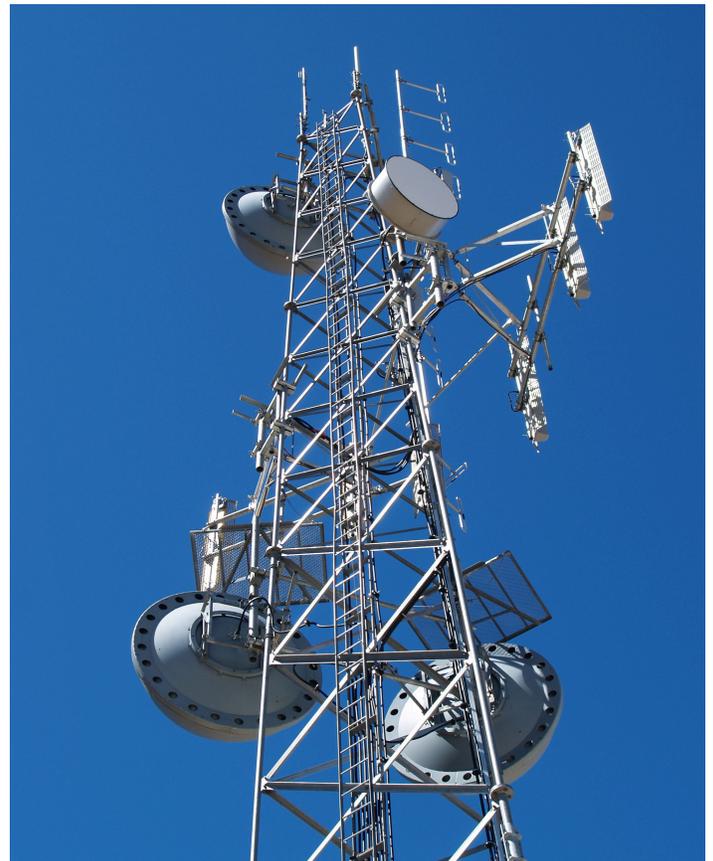
This produces an outcome in Canada wherein telecommunications are not even Pareto-efficient: while companies are provided with no meaningful financial incentive to innovate out of this because nobody else can enter the market, Canadians are paying an increasing amount and losing more over time for a service that is essential to the health of both the human and democracy.

### Has This Sort of Thing Even Been Done Before?

Given that internet access is an essential social good, its provision, whether public or private, is certainly part of the essential social safety net. While public failure and regulatory capture are risks for any shift towards public provision, there are several case studies of public provision of telecommunications that, scaled up, could meet the needs of Canadians. In fact, Canada already possesses a provincial example of successful public telecommunications provision: SaskTel. The ability of the Saskatchewan government to affect labour outcomes and rely on goals other than profit, such as provincial autonomy, make SaskTel a reliably popular option among users. Even when considering options for public provision that only subsidize a small portion of the telecommunications apparatus in a competitive market, a plan to which the Canadian broadband oligopoly may be more receptive, there are international case studies of such mixed markets remaining competitive; for example, Chattanooga, Tennessee's provision of a city-wide fibre-optic grid has generated profits six times that of its initial investment since 2011, and has been linked to 31% of total job growth in the county. If the market in Canada is failing on the scale at which it has been so far, public provision, even with pilot programs in one small rural town or isolated city at a time, is a competitive possibility that the Canadian government should not ignore.

### What Now?

The economic nature of telecommunications networks in Canada makes contending with the idea of public provision seem daunting. However, it is necessary for both the health of the population and for Canadian democracy for the public to have access to an option that exists outside the current oligopoly conditions, which will only lead to further market failures. The government of Canada would only be acting in its best interests, democratic and economic, by providing a public alternative for consumers to access any part of modern telecommunications infrastructure, whether that is a wholly public service or a public provision that can interact with profit-seeking markets for different goals. There are many places to look - updating the Privacy Act and expanding Shared Services Canada would be a great start - but ultimately, broadband access is something that the Canadian government needs to recognize as a priority today.



# Combating Alert and Information Fatigue within Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women, Girls, and Two-Spirit Peoples in Ontario

BY MELANIE TANABE, ANGEL LIANG,  
SOFIA MELLICOVSKY, & ARIANNE JOYCE PADILLO



# Combating Alert and Information Fatigue within Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women, Girls, and Two-Spirit Peoples in Ontario

---



## STUDENT ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

We acknowledge that we are non-Indigenous settlers engaging with Indigenous knowledge, symbols, values, and traditions. We approach the work with respect and an understanding that these ways of knowing originate from distinct histories, lived experiences, and cultural authority. It is not our intention to misrepresent, overstep, or misappropriate Indigenous teachings; we aim to reference them accurately and respectfully, while recognizing the ongoing responsibility to learn from and defer to Indigenous voices and expertise.

## LAND ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

We acknowledge that the University of Toronto operates on the traditional land of the Huron-Wendat, the Seneca, and the Mississaugas of the Credit. This meeting place is home to many Indigenous people from across Turtle Island, and we are grateful for the opportunity to work on this land.

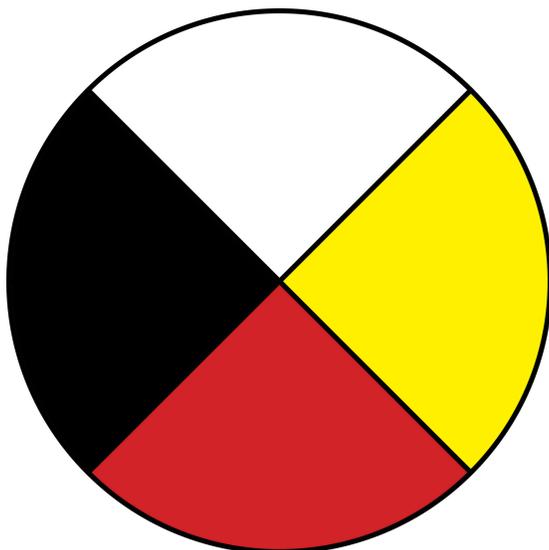
## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Ontario reports some of the highest numbers of cases of Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women, Girls, and Two-Spirit Peoples (MMIWG2S) in Canada. Ontario's current response to MMIWG2S is fragmented and lacks a culturally grounded, effective alert system—one that ensures timely, community-led intervention. Existing alert systems prove insufficient for Indigenous communities. This proposal recommends implementing Ontario's Red Dress Alert (RDA) pilot as part of an Indigenous-first framework that improves responsiveness while mitigating alert fatigue. We urge Ontario to adopt the "Combating Alert and Information Fatigue Framework" as a key component of its Pathways to Safety initiative. This framework establishes an intuitive, tiered model to drive short-term actions toward long-term outcomes through the four Rs: React, Revise, Redesign, and Rebuild. The framework is to be implemented in partnership with Indigenous leadership, which establishes the foundation needed to reach its full potential. Adopting the RDA system will reduce alert fatigue and lower the number of MMIWG2S cases within Ontario.

## Background

Ontario is considered a hotspot for MMIWG2S cases, ranking 3rd overall in Canada. The Final Report of the National Inquiry Into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls notes multiple pathways to violence, two of which are (1) social and economic marginalization and (2) maintaining the status quo and institutional lack of will.

Ontario's Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services' (MCCSS) response to the Final Report is the strategic and relational Pathways to Safety framework. It identified six pathways to safety for Indigenous women, girls, and Two-Spirit (IWG2S) individuals, survivors and families to live free from violence and exploitation: safety, justice, health, culture, responsibility and accountability, as well as combatting anti-Indigenous racism and Indigenous gender-based analysis. Although it increases social support for IWG2S individuals, there are no strategies for harm prevention and response. Furthermore, the fragmented approaches of the federal and provincial governments' focus on advancing reconciliation with Indigenous Peoples through economic partnerships. Though this may address the social and economic marginalization pathway of violence for MMIWG2S, the Ministry of Indigenous Affairs and First Nations Economic Reconciliation (IAFNER) has no harm reduction policies.



## Problem

Pelmorex operates the federal National Public Alerting System (NPAS) for Canada, issuing warnings of weather emergencies and AMBER Alerts. The Ontario Provincial Police (OPP) uses this system to distribute the latter.

The OPP's continued oversight sustains the harmful perpetuation of stereotypes, victim blaming, and systemic failures in crime detection and prevention. The ongoing colonial system of justice cannot provide closure and healing to families of victims and survivors. To operate a Red Dress Alert (RDA) system, intergovernmental collaboration is required to implement Indigenous-led solutions. Consequently, fragmentation in implementation is possible; Indigenous knowledge, values, and traditions need to be applied within a colonial system. The short-term focus is an Indigenous-inclusive approach, with the goal of an Indigenous-led solution.

California, Washington, Oklahoma, and Colorado established alerts for missing Indigenous people, but one major challenge is "alert fatigue," desensitization to too many alerts, which delays public reaction. For AMBER alerts, most respondents overestimated the number issued (Appendix A), indicating potential alert fatigue under an RDA. The Ontario Native Women's Association (ONWA) also highlighted the risk of RDA fatigue translating into anti-Indigenous racism.

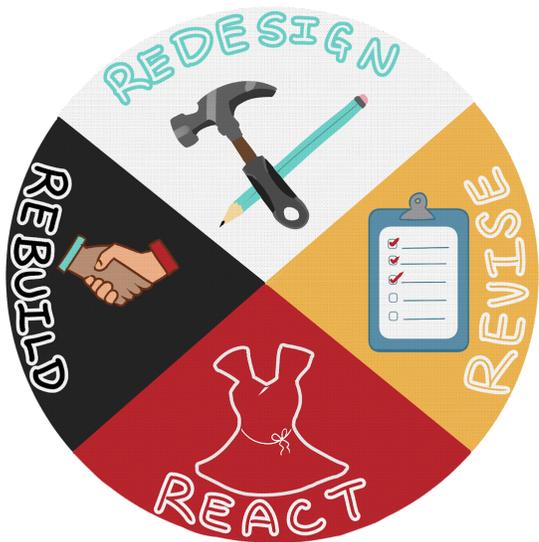
## Recommendation and Implementation

Addressing alert fatigue requires a comprehensive framework to ensure efficient responses to MMIWG2S. The Ontario government should implement the "Combating Alert and Information Fatigue Framework" as part of their Pathways to Safety strategy. The proposed framework uses four Rs: React, Revise, Redesign, and Rebuild, linking short-term action with institutional reform at the provincial level, while allowing collaboration with the federal government and Indigenous stakeholders.

Manitoba's Red Dress Alert allocated roughly \$1.3 million for the first stages of development from the federal government, highlighting the need for intergovernmental collaboration. We estimate that a

slightly higher amount is needed for Ontario due to its larger population and lower connectivity on First Nations reserves. However, alert programs can be implemented at a low cost.

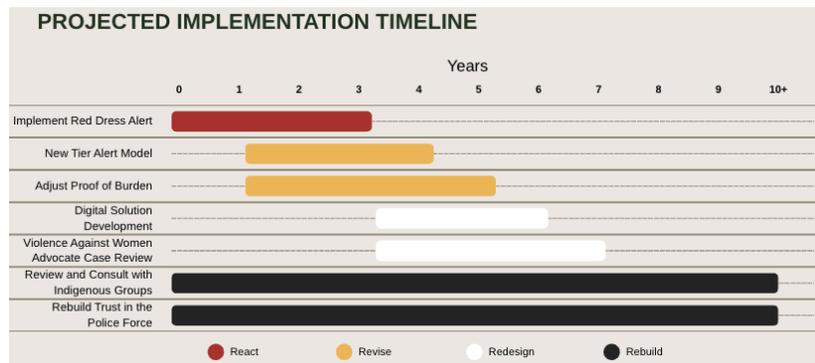
Primary responsibility for implementation should be with the IAFNER in conjunction with the MCCSS. Both ministries must partner with the OPP, which retains the responsibility for issuing alerts. Because the Red Dress Alert would operate through the NPAS, federal coordination is required alongside Ontario’s implementation responsibilities.



**Figure 1:** Visual representation of the Combatting Alert and Information Fatigue Framework. This image is inspired by the traditional Medicine Wheel used by Indigenous communities for healing. Designed and drawn by co-author Melanie Tanabe.

### React

The short-term solution is to immediately React, prioritizing speed and visibility over system redesign. Timing is critical when IWG2S individuals go missing, and implementing the RDA system promptly ensures that active cases receive attention. A pilot study in a northern Ontario community with access to basic networks and smartphone technology will test the RDA’s feasibility and collect feedback from Indigenous communities, the OPP, and residents. Data will be collected at each stage, with strict emphasis on Indigenous data governance. Since the RDA can use the NPAS, it can be adapted and tested within 3 years. Early evaluation measures should focus on alert reach, responsible timing, and public engagement with alert content.



**Figure 2:** Projected implementation timeline for the Combatting Alert and Information Fatigue Framework

### Revise

Better criteria for issuing alerts should be created by an Indigenous task force composed of Indigenous women’s organizations, community leaders, and technical advisors. The task force must define the threshold for issuing alerts, minimum information requirements, and conditions for expanding or withholding alerts. The present format of alerts includes alert classification (i.e., AMBER Alert), followed by the victim’s and suspect’s name, gender, and age. The information regarding the victim’s last known location, along with the vehicle the suspect operates, is described last. Our proposal suggests reordering the information provided on alerts to include the actionable item first (e.g., “Look for a blue Hyundai KONA License Plate BYDE 837”), followed by the alert classification and the victim’s name, gender, and age. This helps the public to understand the level of urgency and use the first few seconds of valuable attention to push them towards action.

Subsequently, the tiered model helps combat alert fatigue, addresses anti-Indigenous racism that may arise from RDAs, and revises the format so that actionable items are prioritized. Alerts will be delivered in Tier 1, the immediate location of the incident, with boundaries increasing over time to Tier 4, where it will be sent province-wide. Tier 2 will expand to send alerts across the region, and Tier 3 will forward alerts to Indigenous networks and communities in Ontario. If an Indigenous child goes missing, alert severity automatically begins at Tier 2. The victims’ risk factors determine the severity and which tier an alert belongs to. Within 24 hours, each alert should be escalated to Tier 4, as the first 72 hours that someone goes missing are the most critical. The OPP must justify not issuing an alert, similar to California’s system. Survey findings show respondents tend to overestimate the number of AMBER Alerts (Appendix A).

In contrast, the RDA is designed to issue fewer alerts than the AMBER Alert system due to its tiered, Indigenous-led design criteria and is unlikely to contribute to alert fatigue. The pilot phase allows adjustments to the criteria and tiers based on observed public response and community feedback before wider implementation.

### Redesign

This proposal will generate long-term results by enabling users to receive alerts via a basic network connection. Users can choose to opt in for locations different from their current geographical area. This approach reduces barriers to broadband access and extends wireless connectivity in remote Indigenous reserves.

Redesign will implement the Violence Against Women Advocate Case Review (VACR) - based on the Philadelphia Model - created to address rape and sexual assault cases that police deemed unfounded. Advocates and independent community experts reviewed sexual-assault cases that did not result in charges to identify systemic issues and recommend changes to police training and response. The OPP should adopt this collaborative, accountability-based review model to enable external reviewers to identify patterns of bias and case mishandling.

### Rebuild

Rebuild(ing) trust requires an ongoing process of healing and relationship-building between the OPP and local Indigenous communities. The RDA will generate data requiring continued evaluation and funding to support its evolution. The collaborative efforts in the 2025 Indigenous Awareness Symposium in Rama, Ontario illustrate this objective. Indigenous Police Chiefs of Ontario and the Ontario Association of Chiefs of Police worked alongside the OPP Indigenous Policing Bureau to advance Indigenous education and culture. The partnership addressed key concerns affecting Indigenous communities, generated recommendations, and strengthened trust between law enforcement and Indigenous communities.

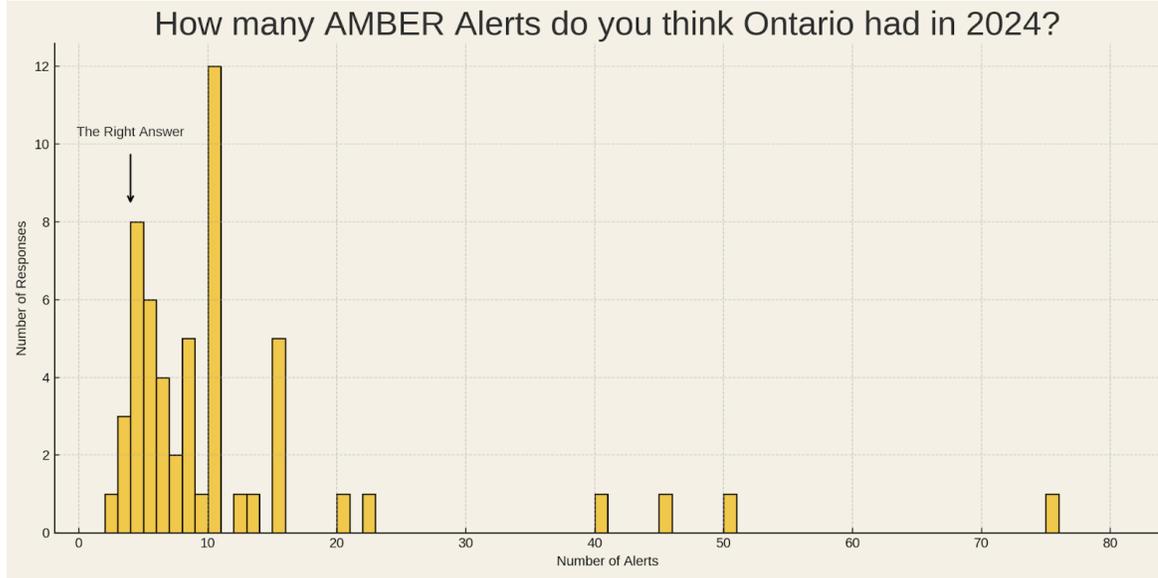
This stage must include concrete measures such as regular reporting on alert use and resolution, Indigenous participation in reviewing alert criteria and outcomes, and mechanisms for community feedback to improve the system. This is a long-term, continuous process required across all phases to establish and sustain a healthy relationship between the OPP and Indigenous communities. Consulting advocacy groups and Indigenous stakeholders is essential to reducing the number of MMIWG2S victims.

### Risks and Trade-offs

A tiered system may delay province-wide alerts, but it reduces alert fatigue and improves public attention. Indigenous-led criteria may increase the number of alerts, but they strengthen legitimacy and reduce backlash. Piloting the system delays full rollout, but lowers the risk of system failure and allows for evaluation. The greatest risk is limitations in sustained funding or accountability. Embedding the framework within Ontario's Pathways to Safety strategy and assigning clear provincial responsibility helps mitigate this risk while maintaining intergovernmental collaboration.

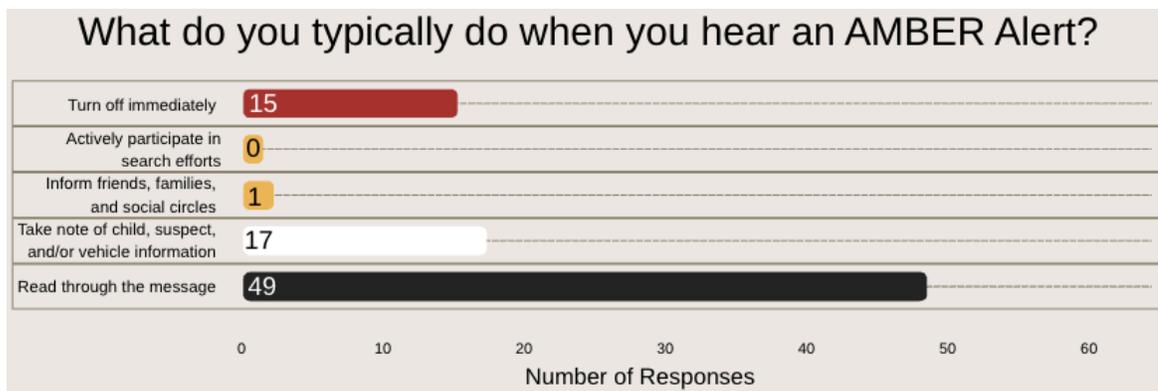
## Appendix A

This survey examined public reactions to AMBER Alerts and perceptions of their frequency. Among 55 respondents, over two-thirds estimated >4 incidences of AMBER alerts in 2024 (the actual reported number), suggesting that their high salience and emotional impact may inflate perceived frequency, and contribute to alert fatigue over time.



**Figure A1:** Survey question #1 with user responses.

The second question asked respondents how they respond to an AMBER Alert. Approximately one-third reported turning off the alert immediately, undermining its purpose, and no individuals indicated they would participate in search efforts. This question allowed multiple selections, including options such as reading the message and noting child, suspect, or vehicle details.



**Figure A2:** Survey question #2 with user responses.