

Max Bell Foundation

Priorities 2026-2028

Introduction: Priorities 2026-2028

One of our aims at Max Bell Foundation is to focus on issues that matter most to Canada and to Canadians. What matters most, of course, is a matter of perspective. Narrowing the enormous number and diversity of public issues to an agenda of priorities is a challenging task for an organization that seeks to allocate its finite resources in ways that yield the most public benefit.

We approach that task by tapping the expertise of individuals whose day-to-day work requires a focus on public issues. During 2025, we conducted interviews with 22 people employed in either professional public services across Canada or in civil society organizations. The interviews focussed on the question: what do you expect will be the priorities on your agenda in the foreseeable future?

We repeat this exercise every third year in an effort to ensure that our funding priorities remain broadly aligned with the priorities of Canadians, as expressed through their democratic institutions and civil society organizations.

The tables on the following pages summarize the results of our most recent update. It shows that our updated priorities differ only slightly from those of the past three years. In the years ahead, we'll look to support efforts to shape public policy changes that will in turn improve these outcomes. Updates appear in red.

Following the tables is a more detailed report on our findings.

Summary Results

Education

2023-2025	Update for 2026-2028
<i>Formal education settings in Canada enable success for all learners, especially those who face particular challenges or systemic barriers to success.</i>	no change
<i>The physical and mental health of learners is enhanced by their attendance at K-12 schools.</i>	replace with: Structured lifelong learning opportunities that better prepare people for success today and into the foreseeable future are available and accessible to those who seek them.
<i>Affordable high-quality early learning and childcare is available to all Canadians.</i>	no change

Health and Wellness

2023-2025	Update for 2026-2028
<i>Supports and services leading to better mental health outcomes can be accessed by all Canadians, especially those who face particular challenges or systemic barriers.</i>	no change
<i>Health care systems, including long-term care, provide all Canadians with timely access to high-quality, cost-effective care</i>	Health care systems, including home and community care , provide all Canadians with timely access to high-quality, cost-effective care.
<i>Canadians who may be vulnerable because of the social determinants of health can access supports and services that lead to improved health and wellness.</i>	no change

Environment

2023-2025	Update for 2026-2028
<i>Communities in Canada are better adapted to the effects of climate change.</i>	no change
<i>Canada has a low carbon economy.</i>	no change
<i>Canada conserves its biodiversity while promoting economic growth and development.</i>	no change

Civic Engagement & Democratic Institutions

2023-2025	Update for 2026-2028
<i>Canada's democratic institutions are resilient and engage respectfully with civil society.</i>	Canada's democratic institutions are resilient, fit for purpose , and engage respectfully with civil society.
<i>Canadians, especially those who face barriers to engagement, are enabled and prepared for respectful civic engagement.</i>	no change
<i>The public information and media environments contribute to constructive civic engagement.</i>	no change

Method

Every third year, Max Bell Foundation conducts an environment scanning exercise intended to identify and prioritize public issues. Through 2025, Max Bell Foundation staff interviewed 22 individuals who are employed either in federal or provincial public services, or by Canadian registered charities. Individuals were chosen for their experience and leadership in the Foundation's program areas (i.e., environment; education; health and wellness; and civic engagement and democratic institutions).

The interviews, conducted by telephone or videoconference, lasted approximately twenty minutes. Interviewees were asked the following questions:

- 1) What do you see as the 2 or 3 most important public policy issues in your field in the near term (i.e., 3 - 5 years)?
- 2) Is there anything else you think we should consider?

This research was not scientific. Our lists of interview subjects were developed primarily from contact lists on provincial and federal government websites. We contacted deputy ministers and directors of policy working in the ministries of health, the environment, education and those concerned with democracy and voting. We focused primarily on the Federal Government, and the governments of British Columbia, Saskatchewan, Manitoba, and Ontario. We also contacted representatives from provincial and national professional organizations like teachers' federations and medical associations. To develop a list of civil society leaders, we contacted the charities and foundations with whom the Foundation has worked in the past, as well as prominent researchers.

Detailed Results

Overall Trends

Across all conversations, several clear themes emerged:

- The Foundation's existing priority outcomes remain highly relevant to Canada's long-term public policy needs
- Effectively addressing system-level challenges requires sustained, evidence-informed policy work
- The Foundation's current priority outcomes are broad enough to encompass the majority of the issues identified through the interviews, while still offering the clarity needed for community organizations to develop focused, high-impact proposals

Participants also shared perspectives on how the Foundation could further strengthen its impact while pursuing these priorities. Common themes included:

- The value of supporting collaboration among organizations
- The importance of long-term policy advocacy
- The need for initiatives that are anchored in measurable outcomes

Many also highlighted the potential for increased coordination among funders to reinforce stability, reach, and innovation in policy-focused work.

Overall, the interviews affirmed that Max Bell Foundation's priorities, with some adjustments, continue to be highly relevant and well aligned with Canada's most pressing public challenges.

Health and Wellness

Five interconnected policy challenges consistently surfaced. Together, they reflect a health system facing mounting demographic, technological, and social pressures, and a need for structural modernization.

1. Population Aging, Complexity of Care, and the Limits of the Current System

Canada's aging population is driving unprecedented complexity in care needs. Future seniors will have far more comorbidities, and the current system cannot "build its way out" through more hospitals or long-term care beds. Interviewees emphasized the need to redesign the continuum of care, with strong emphasis on:

- Home and community care to support aging in place
- Better support for informal caregivers
- Coordinated, team-based primary care as the system's foundation

This demographic shift intersects with inequities, including poverty, housing instability, and justice involvement, making social determinants of health a priority area for long-term systemic impact.

2. Primary Care Access, System Fragmentation, and the Rise of a De Facto Two-Tier System

A universal concern is the crisis in access to primary care, now affecting economic productivity and health outcomes. Lack of attachment to primary care pushes people into emergency departments and fuels the growth of private, virtual, and retail-based care, which risks accelerating system inequities and eroding the public model. Policy challenges include:

- Scaling team-based, multidisciplinary models
- Role redefinition for nurse practitioners, pharmacists, paramedics, and others
- Creating public options that preserve equity while meeting demand
- Modernizing governance and funding to integrate hospitals, primary care, long-term care, and home care (e.g., "health neighbourhoods," integrated care systems)

3. Climate-Related and Emerging Health Threats

Climate change is reshaping the health landscape. Respondents cited escalating impacts from heat, wildfire smoke, vector-borne diseases, and extreme weather, alongside rising

threats of pandemics and novel infectious agents. Public health systems must prepare for multiple, simultaneous climate-driven hazards, requiring:

- Stronger public health infrastructure
- Predictive surveillance and data systems
- Integration of climate resilience across health planning

Climate and health is also becoming a visible public concern, influencing political expectations.

4. AI, Digital Health, and Data Governance

The interviews indicate a dual reality: AI could dramatically improve care, especially by reducing administrative burden (e.g., AI scribes) and enabling continuous learning health systems, but Canada's health systems are not technologically ready. Barriers include outdated infrastructure, lack of governance frameworks, and major risks to public trust. Emerging priorities include:

- A national AI governance and safety framework, including a living registry of approved tools
- Interoperability and regulation of digital health applications
- Protection from authoritarian misuse of data and establishment of Canadian data sovereignty
- Support for open, transparent data environments to prevent dependence on opaque private systems

5. Mental Health, Violence Prevention, and the Erosion of Compassion

Respondents expressed deep concern regarding worsening mental health, particularly among men aged 20–44, trades and mid-career workers, and underserved populations. Stigma, poor access, and lack of integrated models persist. There is also rising alarm about:

- Gender-based violence and online misogyny
- Violent extremism, radicalization, and online harms
- A broader societal erosion of compassion, influencing public attitudes toward homelessness, addiction, and social policy

These issues call for upstream, public-health-driven prevention strategies, wraparound supports, and cross-sector partnerships.

Education

Respondents pointed to three interconnected public policy challenges that will dominate the education file in the coming years:

1. Sustaining and Valuing the Education Workforce

Canada is facing a systemic human resource problem in education. There are growing shortages of teachers, education assistants, principals, and superintendents, especially in French-language systems, rural/remote areas, and specialized subjects. At the same time, student needs are more complex, and politicization of schooling has intensified. This is driving burnout, absenteeism, attrition, and a thin leadership pipeline. Educators increasingly feel undervalued. Public policy needs to:

- Address recruitment, retention, and leadership development as a strategic priority
- Revisit funding levels and funding design, not just totals
- Elevate the social value of teaching and support healthier workplaces for educators

2. Redesigning K–12 for Wellbeing, Inclusion, and the Age of AI

There is a clear wellbeing crisis for both students and staff. Respondents referenced declining academic achievement, rising mental health challenges, and classrooms where broader social problems (poverty, trauma, polarization, online harms) show up daily. The system is committed to inclusive education but lacks the capacity and models to do it well, especially for students with high and complex needs-raising hard questions about safety, equity, and the balance between individual and collective rights in classrooms. At the same time, AI is reshaping what “learning” means. If information and tutoring are ubiquitous, the purpose of schooling must foreground citizenship, relationships, critical thinking, and social skills. Policy opportunities here include:

- A national conversation on the purpose of education and what we want schools to achieve
- Investing in models that link learning and wellbeing (for students and staff) and treat education as a core social determinant of health
- Developing practical approaches to inclusive education that are safe, resourced, and sustainable in real classrooms
- Supporting schools to integrate and govern AI and digital tools rather than simply banning or ignoring them

3. Building an Agile Lifelong Learning & Skills Ecosystem

On the postsecondary and workforce side, Canada is not yet prepared for the skills implications of nation-building projects, AI, and the net-zero transition. Labour and skills shortages are long-standing and will worsen with demographic change. Key gaps include:

- Upskilling and reskilling mid-career workers, who often lack confidence, time, money, and accessible pathways to move from declining sectors to growing ones
- A postsecondary system that is slow to adapt programs (e.g., green skills, AI skills) and destabilized by shifts in international student policy
- Weak career guidance systems, especially for workers who are still employed
- Persistent barriers in skilled trades (apprenticeship ratios, fragmented efforts) and newcomer integration (foreign credential recognition, sector-specific language and workplace culture training)

Policy needs to focus on making the skills ecosystem nimble, coordinated, and inclusive. Priorities should include aligning immigration, education, training, and industry strategy; funding collaborative intermediaries; and ensuring people can realistically move, learn, and adapt throughout their working lives.

Environment

Several shared and urgent public-policy themes emerged. Together, they point to an environmental landscape defined by climate-driven risk, interconnected systemic pressures, and the need for durable, politically resilient policy solutions.

1. Climate Change as a System-Wide Risk Multiplier (with Wildfire as a Primary Touchpoint)

Climate change is no longer perceived as a discrete issue but as an accelerant affecting health, housing, economic stability, infrastructure, and social cohesion. Wildfire risk in particular is now a central public-policy pressure point, one that Canadians understand viscerally, and which is intensifying due to hotter, drier conditions, extended fire seasons, and expanding development in high-risk areas. Respondents stressed the need to shift from a predominantly reactive wildfire-response model to a prevention and mitigation model, including land-use planning, FireSmart/fuel management investments, updated building codes, and integrated national/provincial strategies. Climate change also amplifies cross-sector risks, from agricultural disruption to insurance system strain to regional economic shocks, which require multi-hazard, cross-ministry approaches rather than siloed policies.

2. Policy Durability, Political Fragmentation, and the Erosion of Trust

A dominant concern is the fragility of environmental policy in Canada. Climate and energy policies are regularly reversed or weakened, producing uncertainty that undermines private-sector investment, emissions progress, and public confidence. Durable policy requires broad political consensus, constituency building (particularly in rural, northern, and conservative communities), and improved environmental literacy among decision-makers. Rising polarization, misinformation, and distrust in experts and government are viewed as major threats to environmental decision-making and long-term climate action. Several interviewees noted active misinformation campaigns around wildfires and climate science and warned that declining trust could destabilize democratic processes.

3. Infrastructure, Built-Environment Readiness, and Energy-Transition Dependencies

Canada is not prepared for the physical realities of a changing climate. Interviewees emphasized gaps in building codes, wildfire and flood-risk mapping, municipal capacity, and insurability. Many provinces continue to approve development in high-risk floodplains and wildfire-exposed areas. A lack of coordinated data and risk-mapping leaves local governments unable to make evidence-based decisions. In parallel, the energy transition, central to climate mitigation, is constrained by labour shortages, supply-chain

bottlenecks, and unaligned postsecondary systems. The risk is a transition that leaves behind low-income households and small businesses (energy poverty), or that fails to develop the workforce needed to deploy clean technologies at scale.

4. Indigenous Leadership, Equity, and Community Resilience

There is a strong consensus that environmental policy must significantly expand support for Indigenous knowledge, stewardship, governance, and fire-management practice. Indigenous communities bear disproportionate climate impacts yet receive insufficient funding to lead prevention, land management, and resilience work. More broadly, widening socioeconomic inequities were flagged as a destabilizing force that interacts with climate impacts, driving social division, weakened democratic institutions, and increased vulnerability.

5. Sustainable Finance and Investment Mobilization

Canada lacks enough public capital to address climate adaptation and mitigation. Interviewees highlighted the need for transition finance, credible taxonomies, blended-finance models, and regulatory environments that mobilize private capital toward climate-aligned investments. Backlash against “environmental, social, and governance” investing and political polarization threaten momentum in this space, even as large-scale financing is essential for durable progress.

Civic Engagement and Democratic Institutions

Three overarching and interconnected public-policy issues consistently emerged:

1. Digital Sovereignty, Information Integrity & Platform Governance

Canada's civic health is increasingly shaped by digital infrastructures that the country does not control. Experts highlighted Canada's 93% dependence on foreign-owned platforms, vulnerabilities in cloud and communication infrastructure, and the democratic risks of platform governance driven by U.S. political and regulatory dynamics.

Policy priorities include:

- Building a national assessment of Canada's full-stack digital dependence (social platforms, cloud, communications)
- Exploring regulatory options for platforms, including online safety, algorithmic transparency, and domestic digital capacity (e.g., Canadian cloud or communication tools)
- Addressing harms to democratic participation such as mis/disinformation, online harassment (especially of health communicators), and AI-amplified election risks
- Supporting civil-society organizations to participate in global coalitions that pressure platforms and share learning across democracies

2. Rebuilding Civic Literacy, Trust & Democratic Resilience

All interviewees noted erosion of trust in public institutions and a declining understanding of democratic norms among adults, not just youth. Civic engagement is hampered by polarization, misinformation, and the dominance of political actors who can undermine democratic interventions through deceptive communication.

Policy priorities include:

- Large-scale, accessible adult-oriented civic literacy initiatives (e.g., workplace-based learning models like Germany's "Democracy at Work")
- Programs that strengthen local social trust and social cohesion (neighbour-to-neighbour connection, community-based engagement, shared spaces)
- Strengthening and depoliticizing public education as a civic pillar
- Supporting institutions, courts, civil service, health agencies, to reinforce trustworthiness, independence, and public confidence

3. Generative AI, Global Learning & Institutional Adaptation

AI is emerging as a transformative force in elections, information ecosystems, education, and public governance. Canada's slow institutional capacity to respond, combined with a tendency to look only to the U.S. and Europe, limits its ability to adapt.

Policy priorities include:

- Policy frameworks addressing AI and elections, synthetic content, and information manipulation.
- Strengthening government capacity to anticipate and respond to AI-driven risks, while leveraging non-governmental actors who can move more quickly.
- Embedding global comparative learning into democratic reform: drawing on lessons from Taiwan (trust-building through transparency), South Korea (resilient health institutions amid polarization), and other democracies' approaches to misinformation and civic renewal.
- Anticipating related public-health intersections (e.g., vaccine hesitancy, crisis communication) where trust and information integrity shape civic outcomes.

Cross-Cutting Themes

Across all respondents, several structural, cross-cutting policy challenges emerged. These issues reflect a rapidly shifting geopolitical, technological, and institutional environment that Canada is not yet prepared for.

1. Economic Resilience, Sovereignty, and State Capacity

A central theme was the fragility of Canada's economic policy architecture in an era of geopolitical instability, U.S. unpredictability, and rapid technological disruption. Canada lacks the policy infrastructure, institutional homes, and cross-sector linkages needed to think and plan beyond short political cycles. Interviewees stressed the need to rebuild state capacity, the ability of governments to make decisions, manage risk, adopt technology, and execute complex policy, after decades of erosion. Unlike peer countries using industrial policy aggressively, Canada's public sector lacks the structures and talent to match the speed of global change. Strengthening state capacity and rebuilding bridges between government, academia, and industry were described as foundational requirements for economic resilience.

2. Technology, AI Competitiveness, and the Adoption Gap

AI was identified as the most transformative force shaping public policy over the next decade, one Canada is poorly positioned to navigate. Despite being a global leader in AI research, Canada lags significantly in commercialization and adoption, in part due to a business landscape dominated by small and medium enterprises and risk-averse corporate culture. Interviewees described an urgent need for:

- A coherent, long-term AI competitiveness strategy
- Policy capacity anchored in technical expertise, not abstract "AI policy talk"
- Strategies to prevent over-dependence on foreign AI platforms
- Flexible, adaptive regulatory approaches that can keep pace with rapid change

The overarching challenge is ensuring that AI helps drive productivity and innovation while avoiding economic dependence and social harm.

3. Policy Durability and Effective Engagement with Government

A major public policy concern is the fragility of major policy wins, particularly in climate and conservation. Interviewees emphasized that it is far easier for governments to dismantle regulatory or climate measures than to build them. Durable policy requires:

- Embedding mechanisms such as trust structures, long-term financing, and legislated frameworks
- Ensuring policies include implementation pathways, not just announcements
- Strengthening NGO and civil-society capacity to engage government strategically and patiently

Many NGOs lack the skills, political literacy, and long-term planning culture needed to secure lasting policy change. Foundations can play a critical role by supporting policy development capacity, backbone organizations, and coalition-building, and by pushing grantees to think beyond initial wins to long-term entrenchment.

Acknowledgement

We are deeply grateful to everyone who generously contributed their time, experience, and insights to this process. The perspectives shared throughout these conversations were thoughtful, candid, and grounded in deep practical and policy expertise. They played an essential role in shaping our understanding of the opportunities and challenges facing Canada's public policy landscape.

In synthesizing such a wide range of viewpoints, we recognize that no summary can fully capture the nuance, depth, and diversity of the perspectives offered. While we have done our best to reflect the themes that surfaced consistently, any errors, omissions, or misinterpretations are our own. We appreciate the complexity of the issues discussed and the care with which participants articulated them.