

# In Philanthropy, Great Power Comes With Great Responsibility

*En philanthropie, aux grands pouvoirs reviennent de grandes responsabilités*

March 3, 2026 · By Daniel H. Lanteigne

This is an AI-generated English translation of Daniel H. Lanteigne's original French-language column, provided for reference. Read the original in French on Les Affaires → <https://www.lesaffaires.com/opinions/en-philanthropie-aux-grands-pouvoirs-reviennent-de-grandes-responsabilites/>

During a recent interview on Radio-Canada, I was asked whether philanthropy was a form of power. My answer was immediate: yes. To claim otherwise would be to be disconnected from reality. When you concentrate billions of dollars in assets, when you decide which causes will be supported, to what extent, according to what criteria and at what pace, you necessarily exert real influence over social change, the public agenda and political priorities.

This power, in itself, isn't problematic. That wealthy people want to contribute to the common good through philanthropy is something to celebrate. Absolutely. What's more, in Canada, this power is, for the most part, exercised responsibly, aligned with widely shared values such as social justice, equity, reconciliation or the ecological transition. Aren't we the "best country in the world, and then some"?

Besides, who can appoint themselves the guardian of what constitutes a worthy cause? If this question is being raised with such urgency today, it's because wealth concentration is reaching unprecedented levels. The latest Oxfam report makes this clear. Private wealth is growing at an accelerating pace in the hands of an ever-shrinking number of individuals, while the state struggles to adequately fund public services and essential infrastructure. This dynamic weakens social cohesion and raises major democratic concerns.

But shouldn't we, collectively, be glad that this private wealth flows through philanthropy? Again, I say yes. But.

## **Giving Is Political**

Philanthropy likes to present itself as a space above the fray—apolitical, pragmatic, oriented toward concrete solutions. But the moment you fund something, you're giving it a direction. And from that point on, you're exercising power. You're ranking social priorities. You're legitimizing certain worldviews over others.

In the United States, this reality is currently impossible to ignore. Giant foundations, ultra-wealthy donors and crowdfunding platforms all demonstrate the extent to which private wealth can influence public debate, research, public policy, and sometimes even democracy itself.

This isn't about judging intentions. It's about acknowledging a fact. Philanthropy is a lever for shaping society. And like any powerful lever, it deserves serious scrutiny.

## **Are We Too Easy on the Wealthy?**

Public debate is increasingly focused on the extreme concentration of wealth and its effects on taxation, public services and democracy. We still talk far too little about its philanthropic effects.

When a few hundred foundations hold assets comparable to the budgets of entire government ministries, the question is no longer simply what they fund. It becomes far more fundamental. Who decides, on whose behalf, and with what legitimacy?

The question is all the more relevant given that Canada is one of the countries most generous, tax-wise, toward major donors.

No tax on the capital gain of shares donated to a foundation. An immediate donation receipt. Assets that grow tax-sheltered. Limited disbursement requirements and no strict deadline to meet them.

Tempting, certainly. Too tempting? More and more people are starting to ask, given the sums accumulated and the growing, urgent, critical needs.

It's hard not to see this as an effective recipe for fueling cynicism.

## **Is the Canadian Model Different?**

Canada has long stood apart. Historically more discreet and more cautious, the Canadian philanthropic sector developed in a complementary relationship to the state rather than a substitutive one. Philanthropy funded innovation, pilot projects, and blind spots. Government took on essential services and collective infrastructure.

But that line is blurring. It isn't so much that philanthropy is trying to replace the state. Rather, it's the state that is gradually stepping back and relying more and more on private generosity to maintain certain services. Through budget cuts, chronic underfunding and calls for revenue diversification, what was once a public duty is today becoming a forced philanthropic opportunity.

The shift is subtle. It doesn't stem from a hunger for philanthropic power, but from a vacuum that is forming. And collectively, we accept it all without question. Yet the American example shows that a gradual substitution can lead to a concentration of private power over entire sectors of public life. That simple statement should call all of us to a minimum of collective vigilance, shouldn't it?

## **Something Is Changing... for the Better**

More and more Canadian foundations are explicitly acknowledging the power dynamics at play in their practices. They talk about redistributing power, trust-based funding, asset transfers, and co-creation with communities. Some openly support fairer taxation or are willing to challenge their own privileges.

Calling for higher taxes on the ultra-wealthy, acknowledging that extreme wealth concentration threatens democracy—this doesn't weaken philanthropy. It puts it back in its rightful place within a healthy democratic ecosystem, one where giving doesn't try to substitute itself for the collectively funded common good.

There is no single moral judge of philanthropy. It isn't the state, the foundations, the donors, or even the beneficiary communities taken individually. The only credible and reassuring answer lies in governance, transparency and constant dialogue with civil society—in the sector's ability to recognize its blind spots, accept criticism, share

decision-making power, and be accountable not just for results, but for choices.

Philanthropy is neither a miracle solution nor a problem in itself. It is a form of social power. And like any power, it demands humility, awareness and responsibility. The real danger isn't that philanthropy is powerful. The real danger would be to keep pretending that it isn't.

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