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INDICE PHILANTHROPIQUE · LES AFFAIRES

# Does Philanthropy Really Have to Be So Enticing?

*La philanthropie doit-elle absolument se rendre «alléchante»?*

October 27, 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/la-philanthropie-doit-elle-absolument-se-rendre-allechante/

If you occasionally go to the Bell Centre to watch the Montreal Canadiens play, you've probably bought a few tickets for the famous (and impressive) 50/50 draw. So have I, almost every time. And I have to admit there's something rather fascinating about watching the jackpot grow throughout the game. As the numbers climb, I almost forget it's for a good cause and start daydreaming about how I'd spend the money. After all, spending a few dollars for a chance to win hundreds, even thousands, is pretty tempting.

At the arena or elsewhere, the principle is simple. Half the money raised goes to the winner, while the other half helps fund the organization's activities. Everyone gets something out of it, especially the person who hits the jackpot.

The 50/50 draw is just one example among many. Charity lotteries are multiplying, offering everything from tickets to see Céline Dion to prefabricated homes, trips and much more. All sorts of prizes are dangled in front of us to convince us to open our wallets, all in the name of a good cause.

I even bought a raffle ticket myself for a chance to see Céline Dion perform. I could tell you it was primarily to support a good cause, but between us, it was also very much (mostly) about seeing Céline. There, I've said it. I didn't win.

## Buying a Ticket Isn't the Same as Making a Donation

The Canada Revenue Agency is clear: buying a lottery ticket does not qualify as a charitable donation for tax purposes, even when the proceeds go to a charity. You're buying a chance to win, not a charitable donation receipt.

Of course, philanthropy isn't defined solely by the tax treatment of a contribution. You can care deeply about a cause and enter its draw. Philanthropy, which was easy enough to define back when the collection basket came around on Sundays, has now become a spectrum we're stretching, not for fun, but out of necessity.

So you may be wondering, 'What's your problem, Daniel?' Fair question. Entering a lottery whose proceeds support a good cause does help fund it. It's useful, sometimes extremely lucrative for the organization, but it isn't automatically an act of philanthropy.

And if you win $5,000 after buying a $10 ticket, good for you. But let's agree, just between us, that this doesn't necessarily make you philanthropist of the year. And as with attending a charity gala, buying a ticket or winning the jackpot is unlikely to turn you into a future donor.

## Selling the Dream

What concerns me isn't so much the existence of these draws as what they reveal about our relationship with generosity. We're willing to spend $50 for a chance to win a brand-new car, but we're far less enthusiastic about giving that same amount directly to the cause.

We remember the jackpot, but sometimes not even the name of the organization that sold us the ticket. And if there were no prize to win, would we have participated at all?

I'm deliberately taking this line of thought a little further. By continually offering prestigious prizes to convince us to contribute, is philanthropy losing its very nature? Is it shifting from a commitment to the common good to a transaction in which the cause becomes almost incidental? If philanthropy has to sell us a dream to fund its missions, don't blame the organizations. Ask yourself instead why they've been driven to this point.

## Financially Necessary, but Not Enough

Organizations need to fund their services, pay their teams and ensure their long-term sustainability, even as needs far exceed the resources available. And contrary to what some people seem to believe, a good cause doesn't pay the bills on its own.

So they adapt and develop activities capable of generating significant revenue. When a formula works, why not use it? And is that a problem? Not necessarily. Not every fundraising activity has to be an act of philanthropy to be useful. But we do need to recognize these activities for what they are and avoid attributing virtues to them that they don't necessarily possess.

## Are We Part of the Problem?

We like to believe that generosity is an important value in our society. Yet sometimes we respond more readily to the lure of a prize than to the appeal of a cause.

Organizations have figured this out and offer us what we respond to. So I'd be in no position to criticize their ingenuity in finding ways to fund essential missions.

Keep buying your tickets. I probably will too. If you win, enjoy it, and why not consider sharing part of the jackpot with the cause that made it possible? But the next time you enter one of these draws, ask yourself this: would you have opened your wallet if the organization had been the only winner?

Because ultimately, if philanthropy has to promise to make us rich before we'll agree to help, maybe philanthropy isn't the problem.

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Daniel H. Lanteigne · Indice philanthropique, Les Affaires · October 27, 2026