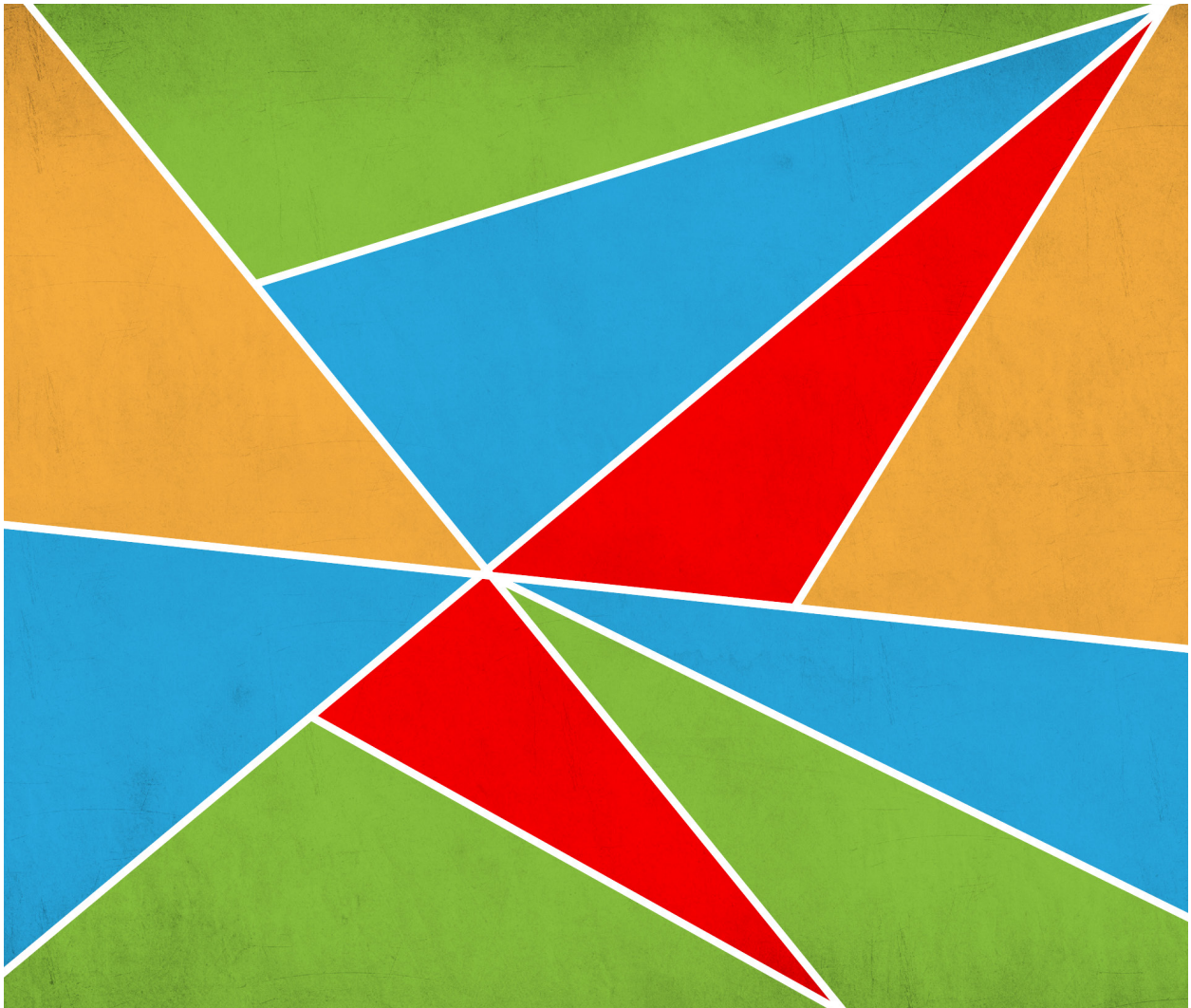


# Renewing Canadian Public Policy: Can Subsidiarity Provide the Framework?

A Cardus White Paper

By Milton Friesen



## FOREWORD

The animation of civic engagement through the pursuit of a social philosophy of what life together will look like in modern society is a critical need. While we do not need to share a common story that leads us to think and act in lock step with each other, we are very much in need of a sufficient degree of coherence to enter the public square for the purpose of meaningful dialogue, exchanging, debating, testing, and exploring ideas that lead to practicing community life more effectively.

One candidate for an exploration of public policy in Canada today includes the sets of ideas affiliated with the term “subsidiarity”. While this is not a particularly elegant term, it is an approach to balancing freedom and responsibility across all sizes and types of social organizations in society using a core of direct ideas: an individual or organization will not do for another what they can do for themselves but will not fail to provide for them what they cannot do for themselves. This can apply to an individual, a family, a corporate entity, or the State.

In Canada, finding a common vision for life together that transcends the particularities of partisan concerns seems increasingly urgent as political fragmentation and ad hoc arrangements of expediency blur and in some cases eradicate informed public exchange.

Can subsidiarity facilitate a more robust civic exchange at all scales of interaction? Can it make for stronger neighbourhoods? Schools? Families? Political parties? Parliaments? Over the course of many years of work in the public square, Cardus has concluded that it at least merits serious re-consideration. This white paper is intended to provide a possible way of approaching the challenge of thinking this through together.



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## INTRODUCTION

If it is possible for poverty, inequality, discrimination, and other forms of oppression to be systemic and structural, woven into the very fabric of personal and institutional relationships, it must also be possible that structures and relationships can enable human flourishing and contribute to our common good. Social interactions are highly complex, and deeply interdependent (Gunderson & Holling, 2002). What we know about these complex social dynamics is limited compared with what might be known (Pentland, 2014). We must proceed with partial knowledge and provisional frameworks that offset at least some aspects of our current dilemma.

This white paper on subsidiarity is an examination of a set of social organizing ideas and practices with a long history (Jonasson, 2000) that includes current secular (Colombo, 2008) and historic ecclesial expressions (Monsma, 2006; Pius XI, 1931). Subsidiarity refers to the core idea that “matters should be handled by the lowest or closest possible level to where they will have their effect” (Brugnelli and Colombo, 2010, p. 34). The ideas and practices reflected in these and many other sources are worth exploring as potential candidates for their potential to contribute to structures of flourishing in our time where it is clear that we need to improve institutional performance and our understanding of social dynamics.

Partisan politics that seem to engage fewer and fewer citizens and generate deeper and deeper cynicism, educational systems that try to shore up the shifting ground of changing family and social dynamics, and municipal governance that struggles to attend to both the citizens they serve and the higher orders of government upon which they are dependent all suggest that there is a need to re-imagine how the pluralities of structures, practices, and requirements that make up contemporary society might be arranged to better serve our common good.

Public policy frameworks that retain their utility beyond partisan debates are important. As Canadian political values shift and change, we need to explore ways of thinking about civic life that stay intact despite the turbulence of politics. The purpose of this white paper is to explore the role that subsidiarity might play in animating deeper reflection about Canadian policy related to labour, education, and municipal governance (Taylor, 2004).

## WHAT IS SUBSIDIARITY?<sup>1</sup>

The term “subsidiarity” is not a particularly common or elegant term, and the many ways it has been defined represent both conceptual and communication challenges. In the context of this white paper, subsidiarity represents a set of ideas defining how different sizes and types of organizations and institutions relate to each other. In particular, the way in which power, responsibility, and freedom are negotiated feature as central themes in both the discussion and practice of subsidiarity.

According to a secular application of subsidiarity such as is operative in Lombardy and the European Union, it is important to distinguish vertical and horizontal subsidiarity:

“While ‘vertical’ subsidiarity concerns the distribution of powers among different layers of the public sphere, “horizontal” subsidiarity relates to the sharing of competences and initiatives between public and private actors. In the “horizontal” sense, subsidiarity could be conceived like a sort of ‘division of labour’ between public sector and civil society (person, family, non-profit organization, market). It is in this sense that subsidiarity became the leading principle of the Lombardy Government.” (Brugnoli and Colombo, 2009, p34).

When this is held together with the earlier noted function of authority being as close as possible to the solution and effect context, subsidiarity affirms that the state is required to help when other actors cannot, but must also refrain from activity when more local effort is sufficient: this is an expression of the tension of freedom and responsibility.

One approach to understanding the different aspects of subsidiarity is to consider three facets that are interdependent: *decentralization, non-absorption, and reciprocal enabling.*<sup>2</sup>

### DECENTRALIZATION

The idea of decentralization includes recognition that authority and power need to exist in more than one place, that the vital functioning of society requires a distribution of power and authority across and within various institutions. That power must be distributed across the members rather than being held in a single office or position.

The idea of decentralization not only applies to political institutions, but can work in any organization (hospitals, business, schools, trade union, etc.). Again, each organization needs to develop criteria for the distribution or allocation of power that considers organizations smaller and larger than it is (e.g. federalism) and different in kind than it is (e.g. health care agencies interacting with educational agencies).

Decentralization is characterized by a distribution of responsibility and freedom, including the distribution of authority to make decisions about limited resources that are held in common by different entities and organizations. While such a distribution is visible to some extent in our public organizing on municipal, provincial and federal levels, it must also be continuously debated and contested to keep the balance of duty and benefit, freedom and responsibility in the kind of tension that contributes to our common good and protects our individuality.

Subsidiarity argues that highly centralized systems have high levels of control, but do so at the significant expense of true flourishing. It also argues that highly autonomous, uncoordinated approaches will greatly diminish important aspects of our personal and collective well-being. Decentralization is not the absence of common governance structures; rather, it sets them within an order of mutual benefit and oversight while guarding against undue constraints.

A cursory reading of a newspaper or the nightly news cast reveals that there are significant differences of opinions about how power should be distributed between municipal, provincial and federal governments. The debates often centre on one order of government needing or wanting something different than another order of government (eg. Ottawa wants to

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**NOTE:** The core content for this report is derived from the sources in the bibliography as well as the non-attribution discussion notes from a day-long roundtable meeting Cardus convened on September 30, 2013 at the Cardus office on 185 Young Street in Hamilton, Ontario. Identified quotes are used with permission.

1. Framing of this section was developed by Jonathan Chaplin, Executive Director of the Kirby Lang Institute for Christian Ethics (KLICE) which is based in Cambridge, UK. <http://klice.co.uk/>

2. A more thorough introduction can be found in Pierpaolo Donati's essay, “What Does ‘Subsidiarity’ Mean? The Relational Perspective.” *Journal of Markets and Morality*, 12(2), 211–243.

minimize payments to provinces to keep budgets in check and provinces want more revenues to meet the demands of their citizens). The exchanges reflect a very complex context with many interacting agendas and priorities.

Some of these balances are maintained by instruments such as our Constitution, while the legal code ensures that the exercise of freedom by an individual or collective entity does not limit the freedom of others. The tensions of freedom and responsibility are felt in our personal lives—freedom to decide with whom we associate, where we go, what we do but along with that responsibilities for taking care of those around us; respecting a ‘No Trespassing’ sign, or not taking what doesn’t belong to us. These balances lead to an inevitable emergence of order. That order, however, can take many forms ranging from authoritarian to anarchistic.

Subsidiarity takes these kinds of balances and tensions as central to our collective deliberations. These include consideration of fundamental human freedoms, legal commitments, and established patterns of cultural, economic, and social exchange. It is hoped that deliberations about subsidiarity might provide the means to more efficiently and effectively work out these tensions and deliver the goods and services that we need.

It is important to point out that subsidiarity accepts that there are different orders of organization in society, different balances of freedom and responsibility within the diversity, and therefore a degree of continuous negotiation that must be engaged in as part of civil responsibility. This may not work out neatly in terms of everyone getting exactly the same things in all cases.

We might consider it fair to distribute economic, cultural, and social goods equally to every individual or group in society. However, the goal to fairness is that distribution is not always perfectly symmetrical—not everyone needs the same things at the same time or in the same way, and not all of the various goods are comparable. Each context is unique and requires a certain amount of informed judgement if a degree of equity is to be gained. It may well be that fairness cannot exist as a symmetrical idea and must include good judgement and a balance of uncertainty. This matter has been raised in a Canadian context through the unique arrangements some Provinces have with the Federal government regarding federal funding levels (Gibson, 2005). Such an asymmetrical approach allows for the customization of various combinations of resources that can be used differently depending on context and need. Parents do not typically provide every child with exactly the same benefits all of the time—they may be fair in their distribution, while being varied in the form of that distribution.

Subsidiarity provides a framework in which decisions about the distribution of goods and authority are suited to the context rather than all decisions being made centrally and applied in a wooden or linear way. The systems established around subsidiarity are framed in such a way that adjustments can be made as close as possible to the context where the consequences will be felt most, rather than from a distant and unaffected position.

Examples of these tensions can be seen in the various powers held by provinces and by the federal government on significant public goods such as education, health care, courts of law, immigration, and taxation. Negotiated solutions are persistent and permanent as processes in these settings.

In recent history, overarching commonalities have included human rights and the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*. The intent of these efforts has been to determine the legitimate boundaries at play in the balance of freedom and responsibility in the key social and legal contexts Canadian citizens find themselves in.

## NON-ABSORPTION

Subsidiarity is concerned with the relationships of functioning social entities interacting with other functioning social entities. Therefore, the differences are matters of size, scope and function of social entities—not merely the differences of components or parts.

In this conception, the discussion moves to questions of how power and authority play out between different these different social groupings. Arthur Koestler used the term “holarchy” to describe the relationship between entities that were functional wholes rather than disparate parts. This does not forego interdependence; rather, it recognizes that certain hierarchical functions do not eradicate the coherent function of an individual entity. Buzz Holling developed a concept of nested structures he refers to as “panarchy” (Gunderson and Holling, 2002). The concept is useful for considering how the interactions of different orders of systems do not require the loss of identity or function implied when we think of a smaller system working within a larger one.



This may appear too abstract to be useful. In the context of societal relationships and political frameworks, the principle in play is that the greater good suffers when a larger or more powerful institution impairs the effective function of a smaller or less powerful institution. If, for instance, a functioning family unit is broken apart through improper intervention by the function of the State so that the family unit no longer functions independently, the family unit is effectively absorbed into the larger State and no longer delivers the benefits to family members that were part of its prior function.

At another scale, a locally governed municipality, administered effectively, delivers a wide range of benefits to its citizens. If a higher order of government removed local legal powers, took over key revenue streams, and began to determine all aspects of land use planning, the municipal government would effectively be absorbed by the higher order of government. In terms of subsidiarity, the local government would lose all vitality in delivering goods to citizens with negative results.

As a principle of subsidiarity, the State should not control each institution that comprises the society it governs; there needs to be freedom (i.e. a significant degree of autonomy) for various institutions to carry out the functions for which they are best suited and which support the essential conditions of a liberal democracy.

We may assume that the existence of a hierarchy reflected in the various orders of government (ie. vertical subsidiarity) guard against absorption, but whenever any order of government exceeds the limits of its authority, some other functioning part is impaired or absorbed. Maintaining the proper balance of power, then, requires a clear agreement about where the lines of responsibility and freedom are in the interactions of the various orders of government. These lines will be drawn differently depending on political, cultural and philosophical commitments. Despite the difficulty, the processes of negotiating these differences are critical pre-conditions of subsidiarity.

One practical example where such debates may emerge would be if a pharmaceutical company started taking over the science department of a public university where free inquiry is expected in the service of the public good, not merely the good of a particular private enterprise. A particular company may be capable of taking over a university department from a financial vantage point; however, the principle of non-absorption would maintain that the existence of such a possibility does not mean the arrangement would be good for society<sup>3</sup>.

A high degree of freedom and self-governance is essential for thriving; therefore, absorption is harmful because it inhibits the range of freedom required for the full flourishing of the “absorbed” institution. The cost of absorption is also recursive because it limits the institution that absorbs the other by adding a burden that it cannot carry. To return to the earlier example of the state taking over a functioning family, the State cannot deliver the wide range of goods that are inherent in a functioning family unit and in trying to do so, will over-tax its resources at many levels without achieving the hoped-for results.

A society characterized by vitality requires that the powers of different orders of institutions are both protected and limited. It is essential that the limits be debated and established in the process of applying the principle and this debate must remain active.

It has long been noted that totalitarian states are generally preceded by social breakdown of one kind or another. If the various institutions of society are weak, it is much more likely that centralized State or market powers will oppose any decentralization and will be unchecked in the absorption of other smaller orders of society; a more fragile, less vital society results.

As mobility, technology, and autonomy continue to shape social and cultural conditions in Canada, new questions arise about how subsidiarity can guide decision-making that will lead to an effective balancing of freedom and responsibility.

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3. Trevor Cowling notes that in the UK education policy reflects this as well: “The local authorities that used to run public schools are receding in influence to be replaced by autonomous schools and groups of schools sponsored by a variety of organizations, including the Church of England. This may look like decentralization, but is not because central government sets stringent targets through demanding expectations of examination performance and inspection outcomes when schools are inspected by the Office for Standards in Education. If schools don’t come up to scratch the headteacher may be sacked, the governing body may be removed or the sponsor may lose the school. Such public shaming is a powerful determinant of behaviour. So in effect the result is very tight central direction which is performance focused, although the appearance is decentralization.” (Trevor Cooling, personal communication, used with permission)

## RECIPROCAL ENABLING

The third aspect of subsidiarity that merits attention is the idea that the various divisions of power and authority (from the individual to the State) are not to be imagined as various walled territories but are instead required to contribute to mutual flourishing. This is referred to as *reciprocal enabling*.

The argument is that all types of institutions influence other institutions around them and need them to fulfill their own purposes. This mutual assistance is carried out in such a way that neither entity is impaired in the process. The freedoms of each respective body are maintained and may be enhanced while their responsibilities and obligations are also met. Examples of this include the relationship of a neighborhood to the municipality, a local school to the school board, or a congregant to the congregation. The deep interdependence formed by reciprocal linkages prevents subsidiarity frameworks from becoming static and constrictive.

Reciprocal enabling contributes to the framework of subsidiarity by ensuring that the negotiations of freedom and responsibility are held in a mutually beneficial tension among various entities. If the pursuit of the common good is to mean anything, it is essential that such tensions are safe-guarded in the framework of exchanges. Donati(2009) argues that the common good is not a blue print or an empirical substance or a concrete objective that can be achieved, but is instead the recognition of a deeply shared humanity, a “relational integration of organizations and individuals” that the principles of subsidiarity protect.

In this conception, the common good is not the sole responsibility of the State—as though the State could directly conjure or mandate interdependence and a deep commitment to mutual flourishing. It is incumbent on all of the various social entities in society to continuously negotiate balances of freedom and responsibility by means of common principles and practices. Subsidiarity recognizes that the complexity of factors that contribute to the common good are such that no single entity can be solely responsible for its generation or perpetuation.

## CURBED ENTHUSIASMS

The possible value of subsidiarity is not that it answers all of the important questions about how a society might seek a coherent order. Rather, it seems suited to act as a conceptual scaffold malleable enough to flex across the highly varied sizes, types, and orientations of our many social entities while being sufficiently durable to preserve a degree of coherence amid those differences.

The framework of subsidiarity is only one part of what needs to be a more extended discussion about the kind of society we want, how we might avoid the mistakes of the past, and how we might still foster growth in new approaches that lead to significant and favourable outcomes.

It is important not to misconstrue hierarchy and subsidiarity. While subsidiarity can have a hierarchical form, it does not presuppose it. Subsidiarity is not just another word for the levels of power that are present in any society. It reflects a much more enriched sense of how *freedom to be* and *responsibility for* are held in mutually beneficial tension. As an example, we want the *freedom* to earn our living (perhaps as a coal miner) but must also consider our *responsibility* for the cost and impact of that work.

Solidarity and justice are other important dynamics involved in discussions about allocations of authority and require both historical and collective commitments along with assessments about how those principles may change over time.

What are the core guiding principles of justice that stand above the particular negotiations of one institution interacting with another? Does the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms provide an adequate summary of these principles? How does the Charter reflect institutional and organizational rights and freedoms as identified by subsidiarity? Is the Charter primarily about the elemental actor, the individual?

Justice and the enshrining of various rights are intended to provide structures and concepts to mediate conflict between institutions and individuals. We will need to continue to invest in understanding how subsidiarity as a framework can contribute to a wide range of debates at all social scales.



## HOW IS SUBSIDIARITY UNDERSTOOD ACROSS THE CANADIAN POLITICAL SPECTRUM?

If subsidiarity is to play an ongoing role in Canadian political process, it is important to understand how the core ideas outlined in the previous section may be interpreted by the major Canadian political parties as they exist today. Different political commitments will lead to different interpretations of subsidiarity and also different understandings of what aspects of subsidiarity will be embraced or rejected.

For the purposes of this white paper, Right, Left, and Center are understood in the way they are generally recognized in current Canadian political activity. A general political party orientation has been used to establish categories – it is used as a way of thinking through subsidiarity and clearly there is room for more formal work to be done along this line and this paper is a contribution to that. Given the difficulty of political labels in contemporary Canadian political life, this challenge will be left to the side for this white paper. The purpose of the terms will have been served if it fosters further discussion and debate about how subsidiarity might enrich current political debate across the spectrum. Can subsidiarity deepen political debate about who we are and want to become without privileging any one political vantage point as a matter of principle?

	LEFT (NDP/ LABOUR UNION)	CENTER (LIBERAL)	RIGHT (CONSERVATIVES/ LIBERTARIANS)
<b>WHAT SUBSIDIARITY MAY ENHANCE</b>	The state has a key role in the common good. It protects the family/community from market/state forces and powers. Solidarity would seem amenable to it.	State has a role in promoting the common good and protecting family/community from state and market forces. Solidarity is NOT native to traditional Canadian Liberal thinking.	Talk about the importance of subsidiarity, but often fall into absorption of other spheres by state/economy.  State has a limited role in common good. Market is not a problem, unless the State distorts it.
<b>WHAT SUBSIDIARITY MAY CONSTRAIN</b>	Decentralization diminishes the state's role in common good. Uneasy with traditional solidarities (family, church); these are problems that have to be overcome (e.g. power to redefine traditional institutions like marriage). Would not like the fact that the state is not the defacto highest authority.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A confused view of decentralization that is inconsistent.</li> <li>• Unease about how subsidiarity might support traditional associations within family, marriage, religion, and social organizing.</li> <li>• May be worry about subsidiarity having a confused and inconsistent view of the power of the state.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Confuse decentralization with marketization.</li> <li>• Traditional solidarities can get in the way of market forces.</li> <li>• They would love that the state is NOT the highest authority.</li> </ul> <p>Solidarity is NOT native to it and the interest of maximizing freedom can undermine the reciprocal understanding of responsibility in subsidiarity.</p>

In the context of this white paper, subsidiarity is being considered in the light of a liberal democracy, within the central space rather than in the context of the extremes of totalitarianism or anarchy. The neat boxes above are far from reflective of the actual diverse Canadian political landscape but may serve as a point for discussion.

## THE LANGUAGE AND POLITICS OF SUBSIDIARITY

Among the questions that animate the exploration of this white paper are whether subsidiarity can be a way of recognizing and structuring deeper collaboration and interdependence between the many individual and institutional actors in Canadian society.

Citizens need to constantly re-evaluate how much they believe government should or should not do. Subsidiarity help set the framing for engaging in dialogue about these questions in a way that transcends partisan short-hand intended to win political power. If politics is downstream of culture, why do we look to political parties to furnish us with visions of what we need? Party machines generally do the very opposite, seeking to read the wind, locate the parade, and then position themselves to benefit from it.

If subsidiarity is not a consistent or well-understood concept in general, what common good generating ideas are funding political parties? What intellectual and imaginative wells are they drawing from? How do these ideas play out in the public landscape? What funds political parties intellectually?

The interest in considering subsidiarity from the vantage point of traditional political party positions is not to suggest that such parties are the source of ideas and desires about what we want from society. The test, instead, is to determine that subsidiarity is not pre-disposed to preference any particular political position. This is a central concern in determining the suitability of subsidiarity as a framework for renewed engagement by Canadian citizens around what the vision and future of the country ought to be. Can subsidiarity form a conceptual public square that renews our habits of exchange as citizens and rebuilds confidence in the possibility that public engagement can be more than the mind-numbing clamour of party promoters whose idea of nuance is to turn the volume to 10 regardless of audience?

One of the considerations for this framing is the way in which language is used and the kind of language that is used. It may well be that assigning simple political labels to ourselves and others simplifies complex discussion, but it is clear that it does so at the expense of more enriched engagement. Subsidiarity may be a means by which the apolitical aspects of freedom and responsibility can enter the discussion and the public consciousness in new ways. The demands we face today by intersecting and seemingly intractable problems requires that we find new forms of exchange and thinking.

Subsidiarity has diverse sources, contexts and potential applications. One of the key statements of subsidiarity in the twentieth century came from Pope Pious XI:

“As history abundantly proves, it is true that on account of changed conditions many things which were done by small associations in former times cannot be done now save by large associations. Still, that most weighty principle, which cannot be set aside or changed, remains fixed and unshaken in social philosophy: Just as it is gravely wrong to take from individuals what they can accomplish by their own initiative and industry and give it to the community, so also it is an injustice and at the same time a grave evil and disturbance of right order to assign to a greater and higher association what lesser and subordinate organizations can do. For every social activity ought of its very nature to furnish help to the members of the body social, and never destroy and absorb them” (Encyclical Letter *Quadragesimo Anno*, 1931, paragraph 79).

An immediate concern will be the nature of such theological sources in the context of a secular civil society. The case of Lombardy in particular and the European Union in general are good examples of how the ideas around subsidiarity have grown from a variety of contexts including cultural, philosophical, theological and political traditions (Brugnoli and Colombo, 2010 p36). It has been argued that in a fragmented society subsidiarity enables a more central role for trust and the ability of individuals to make sound contributions to society:

“It is the very idea of trust that opened the way to a new idea of state. The classical, modern concept of state developed on the ‘Hobbesian’ suspicion of the negative effects of individual desires. In this perspective, the state is the only power able to balance individual wishes and “common good”. On the contrary, subsidiarity trusts a persons original and positive capability to directly pursue the common good” (Brugnoli and Colombo, 2010 p39).

There is clearly much to be discussed and considered around these ideas but it seems clear that there is considerable scope for dialogue and engagement about subsidiarity and its implications, given that it is based on ideas of human dignity and autonomy (not unlike what we see in the Charter) extended into organizational and institutional dimensions. Those interested in social enterprise, social good business, social innovation and related themes will find important common-cause overlaps with the ideas of subsidiarity.

The ideas of non-absorption, decentralization, and reciprocal enabling could foster broader vision and more open thinking about what we are doing and where we are going. It may well be that organizations and institutions that are non-partisan will be essential to lead this effort. It is vital that we consider the political vision of Canada. How does that vision change in various societal contexts including municipal, provincial and federal settings? Is there any coherent political vision nationally?

In places like Lombardy, Italy, they have been working for more than 10 years to see if the framing of subsidiarity will lead to more effective governance, delivery of education and social care for citizens. How has that project been working out? Can Canadians learn from that experience? These are among the questions that require answers within our own contexts.

## IS SUBSIDIARITY UPSTREAM OR DOWNSTREAM OF CULTURE?

If democracy cannot be assumed but must be sought, developed, and sustained, then finding ways to continue to enact the balance of freedom and responsibility that democracy promises is of significant importance. Given this, the pursuit of subsidiarity must have the possibility of enriching our civic discourse, perhaps even acting as a civilizing influence amid the turbulence of political exchange. The mechanisms or processes that lead to culture change must be considered along with subsidiarity as they engage the various aspects of the ordering, re-ordering or disordering of society over time. That political engagement has been declining in the West, including in Canada, is almost a ubiquitous conclusion. Politicians are among the least trusted members of society and cynicism about public process is rampant. Therefore, an important impact angle that our deliberations need to consider is whether subsidiarity could play a role in moving more citizens to engage in public life in more sustained and effective ways.

It has been noted by Donati (2009) and others that subsidiarity is a means of ordering social resources that are already in existence rather than being the means of generating social resources from scratch. As social resources grow and develop in larger and larger groups, the relationships among the various entities are the point at which subsidiarity can begin to be put to use.

To the extent that subsidiarity requires pre-existing social conditions, it will be important not to expect it to generate those conditions. It needs social resources (social capital) and can enhance and sustain it, without necessarily being the source of those resources. As noted earlier, subsidiarity allows larger and larger orders of human organization to facilitate the flourishing of the whole while making room for individual balances of freedom and responsibility to continue to operate as well (reciprocal enabling). As order increases, the smaller units are not over-written by the larger (non-absorption), nor are they controlled by the larger units (decentralization).

This process should lead to structures of flourishing. Getting the balance right, then, is essential if the suffering represented by unmet needs is to be addressed at a structural level. In this way, subsidiarity can be a buffer against overwhelming centralized power on the one hand, or the disorder of total individual interest on the other. Where there is greater individualism (less collective power), society becomes more susceptible to government and market control. If the mediating institutions that are essential to subsidiarity disappear, a more totalizing form of control is likely to emerge.

It has been noted that a loss of mediating institutions leads to increased numbers of chronically isolated individuals who, in turn, suffer adverse effects leading to premature death and a variety of costly health issues (Holt-Lunstad, et al). Societal networks of institutions at all scales, each functioning as a vital entity, are thus essential to collective well-being. If individuals suffer from social isolation (an inadequate number of meaningful ties to other individuals) it is worth considering what happens to institutions that are insular, limited in their ability to build bridges between and across other institutions. As an example, in a given community, neighbourhood organizations may be so dissipated that they hardly work together – they lack horizontal subsidiarity as peer organizations engaged in common work. This in turn impairs their ability to engage meaningfully with higher orders of organization like local governments or other expressions of the State and thus limits the value they can provide to local citizens. When reciprocal enabling is absent, one or another order is taking on too much and is in danger of failing while others are suffering from a lack of full engagement of their capacities.

## HOW WOULD SUBSIDIARITY IMPACT VARIOUS IMPORTANT POLICY DOMAINS?

While there are other domains that might be considered, given Cardus' current work in education, labour relations, and municipal government, these three will be given consideration below. Comparison of the emerging questions was made through a review of the more mature Lombardy experiment where active application has revealed the promises and challenges of subsidiarity as a social philosophy that can enrich various forms of public discourse and decision making (Brugnoli & Vittadini, 2009). In an effort to be concise and encourage deliberation and exchange, the core reflections below take the form of questions that will need to be explored further in a Canadian context as an “instructive framework” (Chaplin, unpublished) from a political authority to some lower body, political or otherwise, or even to individuals. This is broadly the sense in which it is used in the European Union, where it is intended to protect the competences of member states against unjustified transfers to EU institutions.

### PUBLIC EDUCATION

It is no simple matter to balance the many competing interests that shape public education. The following brief identification of important tensions illustrates how subsidiarity may be an important aspect of public education policy and delivery design.

One of the core tensions in public education is difference in stakeholder values. The state has interests in educating people to sustain the civic interests that it depends on, to grow good citizens or at least ensure that their education keeps them moving in that direction. In the case of the United Kingdom, for example, there has been a shift over the last 30 years from State and ideology controlled education to a new policy of letting various brands of more diverse schools grow (cf. Trevor Cooling, roundtable attendee from the UK). These more entrepreneurial schools fit local needs better. This plan has seen a range of strategies from top-down local scope educational development in the 1970s to top-down national scope approaches (1980s). Currently there is momentum to shift back to local approaches, or boutique approaches designed to “let all the flowers grow.” One of the results of this approach has been an increasingly utilitarian view of education. The aspect that resonates with a subsidiarity approach is the trust in local decision makers being given room to decide what is best in their local settings. The tension of the approach shows up when standardized national and regional tests are imposed on these schools. Debates over curriculum and results are the expressions of these tensions.

In a very real sense, each person in a school system has something they offer and something they expect in return. These needs are as varied as the people and groups with which they are associated. The family needs a safe, effective, well-rounded educational experience that will prepare their child to assume a meaningful place in society, which often translates into getting a good job. The community may need a school that prepares students to take jobs but also wants efficient operations since they are paying for the school, fostering of attitudes that enhance the safety of their neighbourhood, and respect for their property and values.

Another significant tension is the balance between local autonomy (letting each school decide what is most important for students in its context) versus the standardizing and controlling aspects of state-required examinations. In a very real sense, the one who controls standardized testing and funding controls what the students and teachers will spend their time doing, ie. the curriculum. In the language of subsidiarity, the question is whether imposing standardization impairs the function of a school and the learning opportunities of a student. Some may argue that it ensures the student has access to the same learning opportunity wherever they go. Others would suggest that such approaches violate the principle of keeping decision making as close to the consequence as possible – something important to the core ideas of subsidiarity.

In Lombardy, the translation of subsidiarity in public education led to a coupon system where up to 25% of student funding could be directed to a school of the parents choosing. The motivation was to allow families to choose educational institutions more freely in a quasi-open market. The 25% limit was intended to allow choice but not to radically alter the system. The evaluation of this approach is part of the subsidiarity learning process in Northern Italy (Brugnoli & Colombo, 2010).

In the UK, standardization in testing proved a challenge to local control as did health and safety regulations, teacher instruction, and operational consistency (Cooling, comments). Families and even communities can begin to feel that the state makes all the decisions that matter, absorbing in practice the autonomy they are promised in principle. This is akin to an

employer providing a list of duties for the day that will be impossible to fulfill and then adding that you are free to pursue your own projects after the ones on the list are complete.

If the purpose of the school is education, a task which cannot be usurped by the State and over which the State has no inherent authority, then the State has to justify to citizens any regulatory imposition as an improvement in vitality and both vertical and horizontal subsidiarity. It would need to be demonstrated that families are better as a result of the standardization, that education is more effective in serving various orders of society, and that a wider range of organizations and institutions thrive as a result.

It may be that subsidiarity could protect education from being absorbed by an over-bearing state on the one hand and, on the other, from the market encroachment on education when schools are short on public resources and turn to business to sponsor facilities, programs or other supports. The demands of the market are such that education can rapidly become a commodity that yields a financial return to investors or suffers elimination. Significant aspects of education and formation are not amenable to either an overbearing state or the commodification possible when education is in the free market.

## LABOUR RELATIONS

It is worth considering whether subsidiarity may provide a way to move the considerations of labour unions to a more enriched way of thinking and acting, one that gets past the reductive economic view of work. Workers are more than units of labour seeking to get as much as possible from an economic enterprise. The role of the individual, the market, and the state, to name a common triad, is deeply complex and interdependent. The urgency of attending to how the dynamics of these interactions lead to more effective institutions and capable citizens is clear.

Subsidiarity has the potential to weave a more substantial sense of shared well-being into the conversation of labour and business. It is important that unions work with the business corporation to enable the production of needed goods and services. The discussion could be facilitated through a consideration of both lateral subsidiarity (eg. unions and business connecting with peer organizations) and horizontal subsidiarity (eg. other orders of organization that they interact with, both smaller entities such as families, schools or community organizations and larger entities such as local, provincial and federal governments). Government programs interact with and support a wide range of social contexts through training, employment insurance, occupational health and safety, child care and many more. An enriched conversation based on the pursuit of reciprocal enabling as a guiding principle, is as needed as it is rare in contemporary Canadian labour discussions.

Unions would be protected from conservative governments where libertarian impulses seek to dissolve (and thus absorb) the solidarity of workers. This both raises the question of dissolution as a form of absorption and suggests that a labour union as an institution could play mitigating role between centralized governmental control, ownership of production, and the vicissitudes of markets. Increasing individualism may be another social challenge that a fostered sense of solidarity could help to offset. Subsidiarity would provide a framework around which these debates could be structured in our contemporary setting. The extent to which it could advance beyond traditional lines of debate is unknown.

More fully orbed and vital union development that extends well beyond economic productivity is important to explore. Can unions regain a richness of language and structure that includes questions of vocation, the common good, community building, and a solidarity that functions amid cultural, racial, religious and other forms of diversity in an increasingly complex Canadian social landscape? This would represent a significant recovery of a more enlivened union vision at provincial, national and international levels.

Social fragmentation, worker mobility, and global pressures in manufacturing and other industries highlight the importance that unions, in the social institutional landscape, can play in re-forging links between local work, social ties, belonging, and the protection that a larger social unit affords. Perhaps most importantly, solidarity is based on physical proximity and the well-being of a given geographic area or region. This argument suggests that connectivity is not equivalent to solidarity, the former being a thin, fragile, and highly transient form of connectedness that is very recent and merits a certain degree of caution despite highly optimistic promoters of “networked individualism” (Wellman & Rainie, 2012).



## MUNICIPAL GOVERNMENT

Subsidiarity is a social philosophy, not a partisan political platform (Brugnoli & Vittadini, 2009). It is a way of thinking about how various social units, across size, function and purpose, relate to each other. Given that our most embedded experience of governance on a day-to-day basis is our local government, it seems pertinent to note possible benefits that subsidiarity may provide in that context. All orders of government, including the civil service, must be considered in the exploration of subsidiarity as an orienting framework. Within the scope of this white paper, a very brief consideration of municipal government will have to suffice.

There is little dispute that it is impossible for local government to provide for all the needs of the citizens within its reach. Elected councils must provide good government and can only do so as part of a rich and diverse social ecosystem of groups, organizations, and institutions of all kinds. Schools, businesses, police departments, hospitals, galleries, places of worship, neighbourhood groups, families and clubs are all at play in municipal settings. Subsidiarity is a way of considering how the respective health and vitality of this diversity (in kind and function) can be arranged so that each functions according to what it needs to do without thereby impairing the essential function of another social unit.

As an example, there are three aspects of municipal government that subsidiarity themes could meaningfully inform (Friesen, 2013):

First, where interdependencies are yielding environments of thriving people and institutions, understanding how and why things are working well is essential for ensuring that continues into the future. Amid the challenges municipalities face, there are always many bright spots where cooperation leads to innovation, sharing to mutual benefit, and collaboration to significant problem solving. It may well be that where we see this happening, certain principles of subsidiarity are at work – various sizes of complete units are working in harmony with each other and contributing to the common good as a result of their interactions. Alert civic leaders are, of course, always learning from what works just as they do from what does not and subsidiarity will need to assist in this if it is to have lasting value.

Second, there is a great deal we do not know about where there is thriving, how it came about, and how it might be preserved. Despite an appearance of research saturation about the social environment we live in and form through our actions, we are barely beginning to understand core features of these functions, particularly where they range across traditional disciplines and practices. At a municipal level, we need to do more and better research about both the social structures that characterize our communities and the dynamics that constantly change those structures. At its best, research helps us to add up (and occasionally multiply) partial insights about our common successes and failures. Money can be a help and a hindrance in our cities and communities, the hindrance part being noted some decades ago despite its counterintuitive sense (Jacobs, 1992). If external resources impair a community's ability to do what it can for itself, then harm is being done. Research can help us understand which conditions lead to results we desire and which do not. Subsidiarity would affirm that a loss of community function as a result of improper funding is not desirable.

Finally, municipalities ordering of responsibilities must seek to include as many of the citizens, groups, organizations and institutions that comprise it in the process of balancing interests, carrying out common projects, and enacting a fruitful degree of regulation while avoiding infringements that decrease function. Certain kinds of efficiencies do not readily embrace wider engagement. An administration seeking to have a bylaw passed to speed up its decision making may resent that a semi-organized and contrary collection of community groups have to be part of the process. A school board may hope to move a change through the system without getting too much attention from parents who would oppose the change if they understood the implications. Town and city are settings where these negotiations of who gets a say and who doesn't are played out. Subsidiarity provides a way to talk about the legitimacy of administrative decision making and the importance of effective citizen groups speaking up for what matters to them and their communities. Voter engagement is one measure that is often used as an indicator of a healthy citizenship but institutional engagement of all kinds is another marker of a strong social ecosystem at a municipal level.

If subsidiarity can furnish a framework for amplifying what is working well, for learning more about how our communities actually function, and for a more fulsome engagement across all social scales in our municipalities, it will be useful indeed.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Lombardy is noted as one of the most advanced, effective, and successful regions in Italy and even rivals some European countries along various performance measures (Brugnoli & Colombo, 2010). Their experience with subsidiarity as a secular social philosophy for organizing society suggests that it merits review, analysis, and some degree of application in the Canadian setting. There is, however, much that needs to be done if development along this line is undertaken.

1. At a scholarly and senior policy level, a more comprehensive examination of what subsidiarity means would need to be taken. There is a great deal of research and reflection in a European setting and Canada has utilized various types of subsidiarity as well in its political organizing. This would require conferences, workshops, papers, collaborative research development in Canada and possibly in Europe (Lombardy) to increase subsidiarity literacy at an advanced level. Understanding the promises and hazards of incorporating these ideas is important and the consequences are not always immediately obvious (Brouillet, 2011).
2. The functional and practical aspects of subsidiarity need to be explored alongside formal research and review. This may take the form of identifying where the principles of subsidiarity are being utilized, whether consciously or not. It may be that using a simplified subsidiarity framework, municipal and community leaders at gatherings such as the Federation of Canadian Municipalities could be engaged in this process of identification at the same time that formal reviews and research are taking place.
3. Various publication outlets ranging across digital and print media platforms could be used to foster wider awareness of subsidiarity (perhaps using a different term) as integral to informed civic action and participation. There is a great deal of concern about voter turnout, rates of volunteering, whether the emerging generation will pick up civic projects, and related matters. If ideas related to subsidiarity, where freedom and responsibility are held in constant tension, can capture at least a portion of the public imagination, the gains could be important.
4. There are many social action communities and projects that can contribute to an learn from subsidiarity. These include social enterprise, innovation, collaboration networks, neighbourhood, and community movements. In these and related efforts, the ideas of local ownership (responsibility) are alive and growing. Subsidiarity could provide a useful framework for discussions of scaling and impact (Friesen, 2014).
5. Political party leaders and strategists will need to review the core concepts of subsidiarity to determine how and in what way the ideas create harmony or discord among their members and the constituencies they seek to elicit support from. If politics is indeed downstream of culture, it may be that this is the last place that where a rooted sense of subsidiarity shows up. However, as creatures with antennae highly tuned to public opinion, this also represents an important context to float ideas of subsidiarity.

As in so many other aspects of life together, local communities are the early warning systems of how we are doing, “If subsidiarity is to survive within the world’s existing federal systems, it will ultimately be due to the determination of citizens to maintain the vitality of their local communities and to nurture their regional governments’ capacity to do justice” (Koyzis, 2004). There is nothing simple or easy about collaboration and collective work (Sennett, 2012) but there are simply no suitable alternatives to that difficult toil. The tools of conviviality are as essential to our societal well-being and the many benefits that delivers to us as are the tools of transport, construction, and communication (Illich, 2009).

While it is seldom a theme of discussion in social and political philosophy (Jonasson, 2000), we might consider whether subsidiarity is not only of instrumental value in getting things ordered and balanced, but whether it also reflects something of the intrinsic worth of a living and vital coordination, social beauty that is reflected in the astonishing intricacy of the societies of which we are a part.

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