

DATA DIVE WITH NIK NANOS

CANADA MUST EMBRACE AMBITION

Government can call for action, but entrepreneurs are the ones who create jobs, prosperity and opportunities

OPINION

Nik Nanos is the chief data scientist at Nanos Research, a research associate professor at the Norman Paterson School of International Affairs, and the official pollster for The Globe and Mail and CTV News.

In the wake of trade tensions between Canada and the United States, Prime Minister Mark Carney has been criss-crossing the globe to build new partnership opportunities for Canadian businesses and entrepreneurs. There has, over the past year, been much talk about trade diversification and economic resilience to help overcome what has been a gut punch from our closest ally.

The big question is: Do we have the bold entrepreneurial ambition to remake and renew our economy?

New Nanos research for Shift Canada, a non-profit focused on advancing a culture of entrepreneurial courage, suggests Canadians understand the imperative to change, but that we need to up our risk-taking culture. The reality is that it will be Canadian entrepreneurs, large and small, that will make or break the effort to strengthen the economy.

The good news is that there exists a strong public mandate for more ambition. Canadians overwhelmingly endorse ambition as necessary for the future. More than nine in 10 Canadians agree or somewhat agree that Canada must embrace ambition now to protect quality of life for future generations. We have a broad consensus for bold action.

This ambition is not framed in ideology but in sovereignty. Four in five Canadians (81.7 per cent) say Canada's long-term sovereignty depends on bold domestic ambition. This view is shared across regions, signalling that ambition is increasingly seen as strategic and defensive, not abstract or ideological.

The Shift Canada survey also reveals that Canadians see the biggest threats to prosperity as external, and American. In the research completed earlier this year, the top unprompted risks to creating prosperity in Canada were dependence on the United States (11.1 per cent), the negative impact of U.S. President Donald Trump (9.4 per cent), and unpredictable American policies (6.4 per cent).

Canadians are fired up. Are we up to the task?

The 2026 Shift Canada Bold Ambition Index is a composite score of individual mindset, Can-

ada's risk-taking culture and the entrepreneurial environment. The Index paints a sobering picture. Our instinct for ambition remains weak. In the Index, we score a tepid 51.5 out of a possible 100 points; any score below 50 is a failure. If our entrepreneurial efforts were a report card, it would be a D-minus. This score suggests that while Canadians recognize the need for bold action, the country is only marginally equipped to deliver it at scale.

It may very well be that the willingness to take risks and embrace innovation exists, but the

system lags. The Index includes a number of subcomponents. For instance, "risk-taking culture" is the strongest pillar but still stands at an anemic 55.4 points out of 100 (another D), higher than "bold thinking" or "entrepreneurial environment."

What is clear is that financial caution and economic unease is putting the brakes on boldness. A majority of Canadians (54.2 per cent) say they are more concerned than last year about putting finances at risk, with younger Canadians being more concerned than Canadians over the age of 55

years.

The economic unease is deterring risk-taking. A significant number of Canadians (45 per cent) are more concerned about taking risks when the economy is weak. According to the latest Bloomberg Nanos Canadian Confidence Index, the proportion of Canadians who believe the economy will get stronger in the next six months has dropped from 27 per cent to 15 per cent over the past four weeks. People are 3½ times more likely (53 per cent) to think the economy will get weaker rather than stronger six

months from now.

Between trade uncertainty, housing affordability stress and now rising gas prices, today's economic mood is dour. The economic fragility is clearly translating into individual caution, limiting follow-through on ambition and risk-taking.

There's a gap between a government that wants more economic resilience and diversification, and a risk-adverse country worried about the economy and surviving day to day. A number of things can possibly close this gap.

Canada needs to turn the aforementioned gut punch into a mobilization moment. The relationship with the U.S. has sharpened awareness about vulnerability and sovereignty. Having a trade deal with the U.S. is not mutually exclusive to growing the Canadian economy and having more trading partners. Treating our trade strategy like a diversified retirement portfolio can yield long-term dividends. Geography will always influence our economic destiny, but there is little downside to building mutually beneficial trade relationships outside of North America.

Entrepreneurs, big and small, need to be at the centre of this national economic mobilization. Government can call for action, but entrepreneurs are the ones who create jobs, prosperity and opportunities. The country's ability to remake and renew the economy hinges on whether entrepreneurs act, not on rhetoric alone.

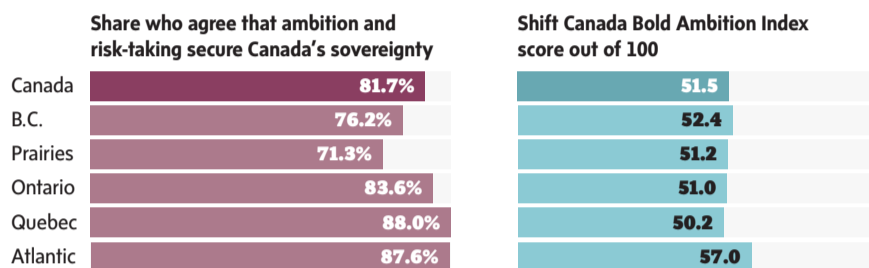
The Shift Canada research suggests that we need to build from the bottom up in two respects. First, we need an education system that nurtures a culture of innovation, entrepreneurial spirit and individual action. Second, the environment for businesses to operate in Canada needs to better encourage and reward innovation and risk-taking. These spur action today and prepare the future entrepreneurs we will need.

Canadians are clear-eyed about the risks, and united on the need for ambition. The next step is to translate that consensus into the confidence and risk-taking needed to compete in a world where the rules are changing and a "hunger games" ethos is driving decisions.

The Prime Minister may be criss-crossing the globe working to open doors, but the research suggests we need a big shift, one which unleashes a renewed culture of entrepreneurial courage. Without that shift at home, it will be difficult to translate economic ambition into economic results.

Canadians on ambition

AMBITION AND RISK-TAKING: THOUGHTS VS. REALITY



CONSIDERING RISK AND REWARD

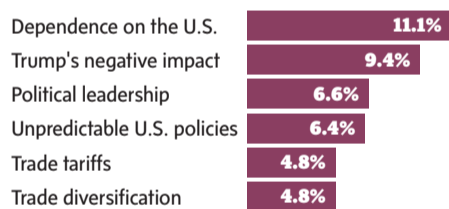
● Agree ● Somewhat agree ● Somewhat disagree ● Disagree ● Unsure



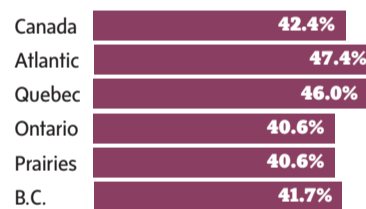
Note: Numbers may not add up to 100 because of rounding.

U.S.: A FRIEND OR FOE?

Top six threats to creating prosperity in Canada today, according to Canadians



Share who believe trade deals with the U.S. and Mexico have a positive impact on the Canadian economy



MURAT YÜKSELIR / THE GLOBE AND MAIL, SOURCE: NANOS RESEARCH

In this time of crisis and opportunity, Cuba requires true political reform

ENRIQUE KRAUZE

OPINION

Historian, essayist, publisher and the editor of the cultural magazine *Letras Libres*. His books include *Mexico: Biography of Power* and *Redeemers: Ideas and Power in Latin America*.

Long before Marxism-Leninism became Cuba's official ideology in the early 1960s, the island was the epicentre of Latin American nationalism. Throughout the 20th century, that sentiment was fuelled by relentless U.S. interference, particularly across the Caribbean, which stunted the development of Latin American republics and left liberals and democrats politically isolated.

It is hardly surprising, then, that much of Latin America has long sympathized with Cuba, cast as the David to America's Goliath. That sympathy had lasting consequences, as generations of young people across the region sought to emulate Fidel Castro and Che Guevara. Today, as Cuba faces a deepening economic and humanitarian crisis exacerbated by U.S. President Donald Trump's oil blockade, that historic narrative continues to shape perceptions of the country's plight.

Yet the United States' missteps, including the 1961 Bay of Pigs invasion and its decades-long trade embargo, are only part of the story. Ultimately, the primary responsibility for Cuba's current predicament lies with the communist regime itself.

When Mr. Castro emerged

from his stronghold in the Sierra Maestra mountains, where he had waged an insurgency against Fulgencio Batista's regime, he was widely seen as Cuba's saviour. His arrival in Havana in 1959 was later mythologized in the popular song *Y en eso llegó Fidel (And Then Fidel Arrived)*, which portrays a country on the brink of collapse, awaiting rescue:

*And here they thought they'd keep
Playing at democracy
And the people, who in their misfortune
Were on the verge of death ...
The fun is over
The Commander arrived
And ordered it to stop.*

But this narrative bore little resemblance to reality. Batista's regime, which toppled a republic founded in 1902 and installed a brutal military dictatorship, was hardly "playing at democracy." At the same time, however, Cuba under Batista retained elements of a pluralistic society, including dozens of newspapers and a vibrant cultural life.

Nor did Mr. Castro restore order. Instead, he established the first Latin American dictatorship that made no attempt to disguise its nature, dismantling the rule of law, abolishing freedoms and imposing a single-party system. Marxist dogma prevailed, enforced through re-education and labour camps and a vast surveillance apparatus run by the Committees for the Defense of the Revolution (CDRs), which Mr. Castro himself described as "a million muzzles."

Importantly, the Cuban people

Cuba's current economic reality stands in stark contrast to that of the precommunist era.

"were not on the verge of death." In 1958, Cuba had the third-highest GDP per capita in Latin America and produced 80 per cent of the food it needed. With more than six million inhabitants, the country had roughly one head of cattle per person, and annual per capita beef consumption reached 34 kilograms.

That relative prosperity was soon undone as Mr. Castro's regime dismantled the private sector, beginning with large companies before moving to medium-size firms and small businesses. In 1968 alone, about 58,000 small enterprises were expropriated, from street vendors to barber-shops.

Paradoxically, many of those businesses had been created after the revolution. Their owners, derided as "petit bourgeois," were often reassigned to manual labour in agriculture or construction. Even small private plots within state farms were eliminated. The only entrepreneur left was the state, personified by Mr. Castro.

Grand economic experiments followed, often with disastrous results: an absurd attempt to crossbreed zebu cattle with Holstein dairy cows, the destruction

of mangroves for coffee plantations, and the ill-fated campaign to produce 10 million tons of sugar. These policies devastated Cuba's diverse rural economy.

Fortunately for Mr. Castro, he had friends in the Kremlin. Between 1960 and 1990, the Soviet Union provided Cuba with US\$65-billion in subsidies, enabling it to make significant gains in education and health care, though Cuba was already a regional leader in both before the revolution. When those subsidies dried up following the Soviet collapse, Mr. Castro could have followed China's path and opened the economy while retaining political control. But he didn't have to after a second lifeline appeared in the form of the late Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez, whose regime provided Cuba with subsidies exceeding even Soviet support at its peak. In 2012 alone, Venezuelan subsidies totalled US\$14-billion.

When this assistance began to wane, then-president Raúl Castro, who succeeded his ailing brother in 2008, faced another opportunity to pursue meaningful change. Confronted with a sclerotic state-controlled economy, he insisted that "the notion that Cuba is the only country where people can live without working must be erased forever." But he, too, refused to introduce meaningful economic reforms, let alone consider political liberalization.

Cuba's current economic reality stands in stark contrast to that of the precommunist era. By 2023, sugar production had fallen to just 5 per cent of its level before

Mr. Castro, while the number of pigs had shrunk by two-thirds. The country now imports more than 70 per cent of its food.

Cuban exports have also collapsed, falling by 74 per cent between 1985 and 2023. The cattle population has declined to 2.9 million (in a country of 11 million people), and slaughtering cows is severely punished. As a result, annual per capita beef consumption is just 438 grams, or 1 per cent of what it was in 1958.

Statistics, of course, do not capture the full extent of the decline. Miriam Gómez, widow of the Cuban writer Guillermo Cabrera Infante, who lived in exile from 1965 until his death in 2005, offered me a sad account:

"Cuba is a country erased; her beautiful buildings are rubble where people sit to die. They say the stench is unbearable. Cuba, which smelled so good, is what I remember and miss most: how the scents shifted from jasmine to gardenia, to night-blooming jasmine, to honeysuckle, to fried ripe plantains – thousands of wonderful scents that the tropics accentuate! Unfortunately, now it only accentuates the stench; even the plants look wilted, and the people are different."

Today, Cuba faces what may be its third opportunity for reform. But economic change, if it finally happens, must be accompanied by true political reform. Nothing less than the restoration of the original republic is admissible. When Cubans can finally read freely, they will be able to return to Mr. Infante's works and recover the memory of the island they once knew, and may yet know again.