

# The Future Lies West

## How Alberta Will Lead Canada

Michael Van Pelt and Brendan Steven

October 2026

A Cardus Perspectives Paper

CARDUS

*This paper was first delivered by Michael Van Pelt as a public lecture on October 9, 2026 in Calgary, Alberta. It has been lightly adapted for publication.*

## About Cardus Perspectives

Cardus Perspectives are contributions to the discussion about important issues in society. Perspectives are the work of the author and do not necessarily represent the position of Cardus as an organization.

## How to Cite

Van Pelt, Michael, and Brendan Steven. "The Future Lies West: How Alberta Will Lead Canada." Cardus, 2026. https://www.cardus.ca/research/spirited-citizenship/perspectives-paper/the-future-lies-west.

### Our Policy on the Use of Artificial Intelligence

Cardus researchers do not use Artificial Intelligence to generate ideas, arguments, or outlines, or to revise or edit their writing. All of the ideas expressed in Cardus reports are theirs, and they have written all of the words.

Researchers may use AI as a kind of search engine (to locate sources, for example) or to perform numerical calculations. They may also use it to transcribe audio/visual content or to translate some text from one language to another. In all such cases, a competent person reviews the result and makes any corrections needed.

---

CARDUS

Cardus is a non-partisan think tank dedicated to clarifying and strengthening, through research and dialogue, the ways in which society's institutions can work together for the common good.

cardus.ca

𝕏@cardusca

Head Office: 1 Balfour Drive, Hamilton, ON L9C 7A5

info@cardus.ca

© Cardus, 2026. This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-NoDerivatives Works 4.0 International License.

## About the Authors



**MICHAEL VAN PELT** is the CEO of Cardus. He is a thirty-year veteran of Canadian public life and a recipient of the Queen Elizabeth II Diamond Jubilee Medal. Since co-founding Cardus in 2000, Michael has helped build the organization into a leading public policy think tank and one of the most high-profile and respected faith-based operations in Canada.



**BRENDAN STEVEN** is director of marketing at Cardus. He brings to the role over a decade of experience in strategic storytelling through content writing and copywriting, content marketing, communications strategy, digital advocacy, and thought leadership. Brendan is a co-founder and coordinator of the Lumen Gentium Forum, a fellowship program building up leaders for the Church and society by offering young Catholic professionals an intensive formation in Catholic social teaching and virtuous leadership principles—equipping and mobilizing them for Christian mission within their spheres of influence.

## About Cardus Spirited Citizenship

Cardus Spirited Citizenship studies the ways in which Canadians work together to strengthen our shared social fabric. In particular we study charitable giving in Canada, city structures and networks, and creative ways to measure in dollar terms what faith communities contribute to their surrounding neighbourhoods.

Dear friends, may I begin by declaring my biases. My whole life has been formed by an Ontario small town, outsider, immigrant. For thirty years now I have been an avid observer of Alberta. My credentials lie in the deep friendships I have across this province. And maybe in the fact that I have sat at the kitchen tables of more Albertans in more small towns in Alberta than most Albertans have. So my story is different from most of yours in this room. Yet my grievances and gratefulness may well resonate with you.

Thus, I come to you with a humble message, one of admiration and encouragement. My thesis for you today is simple: that the province of Alberta has a unique cultural edge over the rest of Canada, one that, over the medium and long term, will see Alberta ascend to leadership of the Canadian federation.

This land—once called "The Last Best West"—will soon become first.

Today I want to lay that case out for you: the signs of this cultural edge, the threats to it, and the questions that remain unanswered about it.

Let me begin by laying out a couple of assumptions I'm making, and what precisely I mean by "culture." Perhaps you are used to hearing a version of the argument for Albertan ascendancy rooted in economics—and yes, I take for granted Alberta's economic capacity and dynamism, one that exceeds that of the rest of the country—a capacity founded on strong demand for oil and gas, but one that goes beyond it. Albertans don't have to be told how to make money by the government, and they don't need the government to do it for them, either. This is a source of immense strength.

My argument also assumes that Alberta will continue to play its essential and historical role in the Canadian federation—serving always as a leader in the assertion of its timeless provincial rights, in the face of Ottawa's constant disregard for the division of federal and provincial powers in our Constitution. Premier Smith has taken up this cause, and I assume Alberta will continue to play this role, realigning, or forcing a renovation, in provincial-federal relations in ways that benefit the entire country.

But I don't want to talk about economics or politics today—or at least, not as the lifeblood of Alberta's dynamism. I want to talk about culture. I am a Christian, inspired by Christian social thought and its wisdom for public life. At the heart of that two-thousand-year-old wisdom tradition is the idea that economics and politics are downstream from culture. In the words of St. Augustine, "to observe the character of a particular people, we must examine the objects of its love."[1] More than its GDP growth or its voting patterns, the true lifeblood of Alberta is the character of Albertans themselves, and the cultural patterns emerging from that character. These patterns reveal an extraordinary cultural strength, a prerequisite for a society's capacity to build for the future. And what is that strength? Put simply, Albertans are a people committed to family, community, and nation-building, to the core prerequisites for prosperity, to a deep sense of identity and place. Albertans are a people, in essence, formed for the common good.

1 Augustine, *The City of God*, bk. 19, chap. 24.

In that spirit, let's begin by talking more about people. This is the first cultural edge: Alberta's demographics. If demographics are destiny, what is the shape of Alberta's destiny? Ideally, when you lay out a line chart of the demographics of a society, by age, you end up with a pyramid—more younger people at the bottom, fewer older people at the top. A society's age pyramid is healthy when it stays wide at the bottom, when there are enough children being born and raised to grow the workforce that will one day carry the economic and social needs of those at the top and the bottom. By that measure, Alberta has the healthiest age pyramid of any province in the country. The median Albertan is thirty-eight years old—two and a half years younger than the median Canadian, and nearly a decade younger than the median Newfoundlander.[2] Alberta has the second-highest proportion of children of any province, and the lowest proportion of seniors—four full percentage points below the national average.[3] For every retiree, Alberta has more workers than anywhere else in the federation.

Alberta is building on this foundation of demographic strength with a strong flow of interprovincial migration. This is the second cultural edge. When it comes to where Canadians want to live, they are voting with their feet, and the votes are clear: They want to be in Alberta. In the past half decade, from 2020 to 2025, more than 380,000 Canadians moved to Alberta from other provinces. That's just counting Canadians moving within the country, not including immigrants from abroad. Compare that to just over 344,000 who moved to Ontario in that same period, and 303,000 to British Columbia. When you consider that Ontario already has triple Alberta's population, and BC has about 20 percent more, that number is astounding.[4]

Those are arrivals only. Take a look at net migration—arrivals minus departures—and the picture holds. Since 1995, Alberta's net gain from interprovincial migration is over half a million people, the largest of any province in absolute terms.[5]

Now, you might be thinking, "But Michael, Alberta has been living through a boom-and-bust economic cycle that sees workers come in and out." And you wouldn't be entirely wrong. A 2026 Fraser Institute study that looked at interprovincial migration patterns over the last thirty years did identify several boom-and-bust migration patterns. But there's evidence that something different is occurring right now. The migrants to Alberta these past five years are not just working-age men and women. They include children. More Canadian families are moving to Alberta with school-aged kids than are moving to Ontario or British Columbia or any other province.[6]

The same story is true when it comes to immigration. Back in 2006, just 9.3 percent of new immigrants to Canada made Alberta their home, in line with where the percentage had sat for

2 Statistics Canada, "The Daily. Canada's Population Estimates: Age and Gender, July 1, 2025," September 24, 2025, https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/250924/dq250924a-eng.htm.

3 Statistics Canada, "The Daily. Canada's Population Estimates."

4 Statistics Canada, Table 17-10-0015-01, "Estimates of the Components of Interprovincial Migration, by Age and Gender, Annual," https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/t1/tbl1/en/tv.action?pid=1710001501.

5 G. Munro, M. Palacios, and W. Dunstan, "Interprovincial Migration in Canada, 1995–2024: What Do the Numbers Tell Us?" Fraser Institute, 2026, https://www.fraserinstitute.org/sites/default/files/2026-06/interprovincial-migration-in-canada-1995-2024.pdf.

6 Statistics Canada, Table 17-10-0015-01, "Estimates of the Components of Interprovincial Migration, by Age and Gender, Annual," https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/t1/tbl1/en/tv.action?pid=1710001501.

decades. By 2011, it had climbed to 12.4 percent. By 2016, at the height of the oil boom, it hit a peak of over 17 percent. It has eased since—down to 14.5 percent by 2021, and roughly 13.7 percent in 2024, the most recent year on record—but it has never gone back to where it had been.[7] Twenty years ago, Alberta was drawing in less than one in ten of the country's newcomers. Today, even well off the peak, it's still drawing in something closer to one in seven. Over that same period, Ontario, the country's traditional immigrant gateway, saw its share fall from 52 percent in 2006 to 43 percent in 2011, and it hasn't meaningfully recovered since, sitting at about 42.6 percent in 2024.[8] Two decades in, Alberta has become a structurally more important door into this country than it used to be.

Beyond migration, Albertans are having more babies. The latest Statistics Canada data tell us that Alberta's total fertility rate (the average number of children an Albertan woman will have over her lifetime) is 1.41, above the Canadian average of 1.25 and sitting alongside the rest of the Prairies as the provinces with the highest fertility rates in the country.[9] But this is only a partial good news story. Like the rest of the Western world, Alberta is well below population replacement rates, only somewhat less worse off than most of Canada. Still, this slight advantage will compound over time. A higher ratio of working taxpayers to dependent retirees than in other places means more taxpayers paying for the social programs and other supports that older people rely on. And what's fascinating is that even though Alberta, like all the provinces, did not have enough babies to hit the replacement rate, it's one of the only places where the people *wanted* to. When Cardus surveyed Canadians in 2025, asking not how many children they expected to have, but how many they'd ideally want, the Prairie provinces reported the highest personal fertility ideal of any region in the country, for both men and women. Women in the Prairies were the only women anywhere in Canada who, on average, wanted more than two children.[10]

These raw numbers of Alberta's demographic advantage are encouraging, but the advantage runs deeper. Character matters just as much as quantity. And as I said earlier, it is the character of Albertans themselves—not just how many of them there are or will be—that matters here. So let's talk about indicators of that character, starting with civic commitment.

Here are two key metrics of the health of any civil society, which make clear the personal commitment of individuals to the integrity of the community around them: volunteering and charitable giving. On these fronts, the pan-Canadian story is a painful one. The most recent

7 Statistics Canada, "The Daily. Immigrants Make Up the Largest Share of the Population in over 150 Years and Continue to Shape Who We Are as Canadians," October 26, 2022, https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/221026/dq221026a-eng.htm; Global News, "Alberta Sees Share of Immigrants Rise," https://globalnews.ca/news/547782/alberta-sees-share-of-immigrants-rise; Statistics Canada, "The Daily. Canada's Population Estimates, Fourth Quarter 2024," March 19, 2025, https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/250319/dq250319a-eng.htm.

8 Global News, "Alberta Sees Share of Immigrants Rise"; Ontario Ministry of Finance, "Ontario Demographic Quarterly: Highlights of Fourth Quarter," https://www.ontario.ca/page/ontario-demographic-quarterly-highlights-fourth-quarter.

9 Statistics Canada, "Fertility and Baby Names, 2024," September 24, 2025, https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/250924/dq250924d-eng.htm.

10 L. Stone, "Home Alone: Why Most Canadians Have Fewer Children Than They Want," Cardus, 2026, https://www.cardus.ca/wp-content/uploads/2026/05/Home-Alone-Why-Most-Canadians-Have-Fewer-Children-Than-They-Want.pdf.

Statistics Canada data published in 2025 reveal that Canada's overall volunteer rate fell 8 percent in five years, sitting at just shy of 73 percent as of 2023. Formal volunteering fell even further: By 2023, barely one in three Canadians were volunteering through an organization. Even those still volunteering are volunteering less. The average volunteer gave 173 hours in 2023, thirty-three fewer hours than in 2018. Total hours of volunteering in Canada went from five billion in 2018 to 4.1 billion in 2023. Imagine all the good that this missing billion hours could have done for our communities. Meanwhile, the donor rate (the percentage of Canadians who gave any financial gift to charity) fell over the same period, from nearly seven out of ten Canadians, to now just barely more than half.[11]

That's the national picture. A different story is being written in Alberta, which remains in the strongest volunteering cluster in the country alongside Manitoba and Saskatchewan. As of 2023, nearly eight in ten Albertans were volunteering in some form.[12] And when it comes to giving, Alberta had the highest average annual charitable giving of any province in 2023, at just over $3,600. Perhaps even more importantly, Alberta was the only province to grow both in depth and breadth of giving from 2013 to 2023.[13] While the rest of the country's charitable giving is shrinking, perhaps even toward miserliness, Alberta is gaining ground in generosity.

What's driving this Albertan commitment to community life? Undoubtedly many factors, but one is faith. In 2023, Canadians who attended religious services weekly gave more than three times as much, on average, as those who did not attend weekly—and though they're just one in nine Canadians, they account for four in ten dollars given to charity nationwide.[14]

So, does this therefore mean that Alberta is more religious than the rest of Canada? Yes and no. Let's focus on Christianity for a moment. In fact, Alberta overall is less Christian-identifying than the rest of Canada—just under half of Albertans identified as Christians in the 2021 Census, versus 53 percent nationally. And there are more religiously unaffiliated Albertans—40 percent of the population—than the national 34.6 percent.[15] But although fewer Albertans identify as Christians, Albertan Christians, alongside Christians in the other Prairie provinces, attend services weekly at much higher rates than other Canadians. Alberta hasn't escaped wider secularizing trends; as in the rest of Canada, religious participation has been falling steadily here

11 Statistics Canada, "The Daily. Volunteering and Charitable Giving in Canada, 2018 to 2023," June 23, 2025, https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/250623/dq250623b-eng.htm.

12 Statistics Canada, "Overall Volunteer Rate by Age Group, Canada and Provinces, 2023," https://www.stats.gov.nl.ca/Statistics/Topics/charitabledonations/PDF/Volunteer_Rate_Age_CanProv_2023.pdf.

13 Fraser Institute, "Generosity in Canada: The 2025 Generosity Index," December, 2025, https://www.fraserinstitute.org/sites/default/files/2025-12/generosity-in-canada-2025-generosity-index.pdf.

14 Statistics Canada, Table 45-10-0038-01, "Donor Rate and Average Annual Donations, by Religious Attendance," General Social Survey on Giving, Volunteering and Participating, November 21, 2025, https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/t1/tbl1/en/tv.action?pid=4510003801.

15 Statistics Canada, "2021 Census of Population, Religion Profiles for Alberta and Canada"; Statistics Canada, "Focus on Geography Series, 2021 Census of Population: Alberta, Province," https://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2021/as-sa/fogs-spg/page.cfm?lang=E&topic=10&dguid=2021A000248; Statistics Canada, "Distribution (in Percentage) of Religious Groups, Alberta, 2011 and 2021," https://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2021/as-sa/fogs-spg/alternative.cfm?topic=10&lang=E&dguid=2021A000248&objectId=2; Statistics Canada, "Census Profile, 2021 Census of Population: Profile Table," https://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2021/dp-pd/prof/details/page.cfm.

too. But what's distinct about Alberta is that an active core of practicing religious people has remained comparatively resilient amid the wider decline.[16]

Beyond the fact that religious people volunteer more and give more to charity, why would we consider religiosity itself to be a cultural edge? Now, I'm a Christian myself, so I note my philosophical bias. Simply the life-giving promise of good conquering evil—the promise of redemption—is the stuff of culture-building. It is anti-nihilistic. But on a purely sociological level, religiosity is a cultural edge because the data tell us that religious people are simply happier, healthier people. When he spoke to Cardus earlier this year,[17] Dr. Matthew Lee of Baylor University explained that the largest study of its kind, the Global Flourishing Study, which surveys over 200,000 people across twenty-two countries, found that people who attend religious services weekly or more often report meaningfully higher flourishing than those who never attend.[18] In fact, the study's researchers concluded that religious service attendance was one of the factors most consistently associated with well-being, across countries and across outcomes. Dr. Lee calls this the "relational cluster," the handful of factors his team finds most consistently predictive of flourishing: love and care, social support, a sense of belonging, and the absence of loneliness. Religious community delivers on all four. This effect is resilient across a person's lifetime: A Harvard study that followed over five thousand young people from adolescence into adulthood found that those who were raised attending religious services weekly were 18 percent more likely to report high happiness as young adults, 29 percent more likely to volunteer in their communities, and 33 percent less likely to use drugs.[19]

Let's talk a bit more about young people specifically. On this, I am with the great Georges Vanier, former governor general of Canada, who said, "Tell me the character of a nation's young people, and I will tell you the future of the nation."[20] Other than the family, nothing forms the character of young people like their education. And when it comes to education, Alberta is a Canadian leader, and indeed a world leader.

How can we know this? After all, every province has different curricula and different testing regimes, so an apples-to-apples comparison can be hard. But there are two assessments that children in every province take: the grade 8 PCAP, and the PISA, which is sat by fifteen-year-olds in Canada and ninety-one other countries and economies.[21] On the 2023 PCAP, Alberta was first among all provinces in sciences, and the newly released 2025 PISA has Alberta leading all

16 Statistics Canada, "Religiosity in Canada and Its Evolution from 1985 to 2019," October 28, 2021, https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/75-006-x/2021001/article/00010-eng.htm.

17 Video of Dr. Lee's presentation at Cardus's Faith-Based Healthcare Symposium, February 2026, is available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lI0UGWuJ9Qw&t.

18 "The Global Flourishing Study: Study Profile and Initial Results on Flourishing," *Nature Mental Health 3*, no. 6 (April 30, 2025), https://www.nature.com/articles/s44220-025-00423-5.

19 Y. Chen and T.J. VanderWeele, "Associations of Religious Upbringing with Subsequent Health and Well-Being from Adolescence to Young Adulthood: An Outcome-Wide Analysis," *American Journal* of Epidemiology 187, no. 11 (September 2018): 2355–64, https://academic.oup.com/aje/article/187/11/2355/5094534.

20 G. Vanier, *Only to Serve: Selections from Addresses of Governor-General Georges P. Vanier*, ed. G. Cowley and M. Vanier (University of Toronto Press, 1970), https://muse.jhu.edu/book/107471.

21 OECD, "PISA 2025 Results (Volume I): Future-Ready Students," https://doi.org/10.1787/73451bc5-en.

provinces in science again.[22] In reading, Alberta also led the country.[23] And in math, Alberta came second nationally on the PISA, behind Quebec, and placed third on the PCAP.[24]

Now before we get too excited, Canada as a whole has seen a long decline in PISA math performance . . . Alberta included.[25] Alberta's math performance may be declining more slowly than the rest of the country, but it's still declining.

But zoom out past Canada's borders, and the story gets even more remarkable. On the 2025 PISA science assessment, Alberta's students outscored their peers in every English-speaking country in the world that sat the test, except Singapore.[26] In fact, of the ninety-one countries and economies that sat the test, only seven scored higher than Alberta.[27] Alberta is leading Canada in education, but more than this, it's one of the strongest-performing school systems in the English-speaking world.

Everything I've told you so far is about where Alberta's education system stands today. But there's good reason to think it will still be leading a generation from now—and that's due to how the system itself has been built. Alberta has built something no other province has: a system that publicly supports Catholic schools, francophone schools, charter schools, religious and non-religious independent schools, alternative programs, and even home education, all at once, in a system of robust educational pluralism. Parents have responded: Independent school enrollment grew 43 percent over the last decade, nearly triple the growth of the traditional system, and charter schools are so over-subscribed that demand now outstrips supply by a wide margin.[28] These are mostly small, community schools, and the families who choose them vote, volunteer, and join community organizations and groups at rates far above their neighbours.[29] This is an educational system designed to produce a thriving society, filled with choices reflecting an array of pedagogies, cultures, and faiths, and the needs of a wide variety of students. A system capable of extraordinary innovation.

22 Council of Ministers of Education, Canada, "PCAP 2023 Public Report," https://www.cmec.ca/Publications/Lists/Publications/Attachments/447/PCAP2023_Public_report_FINAL_EN.pdf; Council of Ministers of Education, "Measuring Up: Canadian Results of the OECD PISA 2025 Study," table 1.5, https://cmec.ca/Publications/Lists/Publications/Attachments/448/PISA_2025_Public_Report_EN.pdf.

23 Council of Ministers of Education, "Measuring Up," table 3.4.

24 Council of Ministers of Education, "Measuring Up," table 3.5; "Alberta Students Rank Top in Canada," Education News Canada, https://educationnewscanada.com/article/education/level/k12/3/1206397/alberta-students-rank-top-in-canada.html.

25 M. Zwaagstra and P. MacPherson, "Alberta Student Scores Plummet Despite High Rankings," Fraser Institute, September 16, 2026, https://ca.news.yahoo.com/zwaagstra-macpherson-alberta-student-scores-110021806.html; Council of Ministers of Education, "Measuring Up."

26 Council of Ministers of Education, "Measuring Up," table 1.5.

27 Council of Ministers of Education, "Measuring Up," table 1.5.

28 Cardus, "Exploring Alberta's Independent School Landscape," https://www.cardus.ca/research/education/reports/exploring-albertas-independent-school-landscape/; Cardus, "Unchartered Territory," https://cardus.ca/research/education/reports/unchartered-territory.

29 Cardus, "Who Chooses Alberta Independent Schools and Why," https://www.cardus.ca/research/education/reports/who-chooses-alberta-independent-schools-and-why/.

Ontario, by contrast, is lagging far behind. Its educational muscles are atrophying. Ontario funds exactly four kinds of state schools—public and Catholic, anglophone and francophone—and that's it. It has no charter schools, and, outside its Catholic system, it provides no public funding at all to faith-based schools or any independent schools. And what are Ontarians getting for it? Ontario spends $16,164 per student—nearly 20 percent more than Alberta's $13,494, the lowest in the country—and Ontario still finishes behind Alberta in reading, science, and math alike.[30] This fall, Ontario's teachers and education workers went back to class without a new contract in place, after negotiations stalled over the summer, and in a one-size-fits-all system, families whose schools are disrupted have nowhere else to go.[31] Ontario's system is unbendable, and so it is breaking under the immense pressures of its own self-imposed limitations. Meanwhile, the dynamism and flexibility of educational pluralism in Alberta is delivering success now and setting the stage for even greater success in the years to come.

As important as schooling is for young people, as I said before, nothing is more important than the family reality they grow up in. So I want to turn now to Alberta's cultural edge when it comes to marriage and family life.

Marriage is so much more than just a lifestyle choice or a personal preference. Marriage remains the most stable foundation for family life, and the evidence for its benefits is overwhelming, both for those married and the wider society. These benefits were meticulously documented by my Cardus colleagues Peter Jon Mitchell and Andrea Mrozek in their book *I . . . Do? Why Marriage Still Matters*. Married men, they note, earn between 10 and 40 percent more than their unmarried peers.[32] Children raised by married parents are roughly three times less likely to grow up in poverty.[33] And married people are simply more likely to be the kind of citizens we celebrated earlier in this speech: more likely to volunteer, and more likely to be active in their communities.[34] Marriage is a context in which adults and children can truly thrive.

So how does Alberta shape up when it comes to marriage and married families? Unfortunately, the answer is not great, but it is still better than the rest of Canada. Cardus published a report a few weeks ago proposing a Canadian Married Family Index. The Index tracks three measures in every province and territory from 2001 to 2021—fertility, the share of adults who are married, and the share of children living with married parents—and compares each province to its own

30 C.D. Howe Institute, "Time to Address Canada's Falling Math Scores," E-Brief 369, table 1, https://cdhowe.org/publication/time-to-address-canadas-falling-math-scores; Fraser Institute, "Education Spending in Public Schools in Canada, 2025 Edition," table 4, https://www.fraserinstitute.org/sites/default/files/2025-08/education-spending-in-public-schools-in-canada-2025.pdf.

31 CP24, "Ontario Teachers Set to Return to Classroom Without New Contracts," September 2, 2026, https://www.cp24.com/local/toronto/2026/09/02/ontario-teachers-set-to-return-to-classroom-without-new-contracts-we-want-to-hear-about-your-concerns/.

32 W.B. Wilcox and N.H. Wolfinger, *Men and Marriage*, cited in A. Mrozek and P. J. Mitchell, *I . . . Do? Why Marriage Still Matters* (Cascade, 2024), 36.

33 R.M. Kreider, "Living Arrangements of Children," cited in Mrozek and Mitchell, *I . . . Do?*, 29.

34 Y.-I. Kim and J. Dew, "Religion and Volunteering in Marital Context," cited in Mrozek and Mitchell, *I . . . Do?*, 37.

starting point in 2001.[35] The national news is not good: Every single province and territory saw its score decline over those twenty years. But no province declined less than Alberta. In fact, in every Census year since 2001, Alberta's score was the highest in the country.[36] Alberta is still losing ground on marriage and family, but far more slowly than elsewhere in Canada.

There are structural reasons to think that lead will keep widening in Alberta's favour. When researchers look for what is driving the retreat from marriage and family across North America, one factor surfaces again and again: the cost of a home. A recent University of Toronto study found that rising housing costs since 1990 explain fully 51 percent of the entire fertility rate decline in North America over the following two decades.[37] Demographer and Cardus senior fellow Lyman Stone has reached a similar conclusion, calling housing costs "almost certainly a major driver" of the decline in births across North America[38]. Canadians feel this in their own lives, too: Nearly a third of Canadians who have delayed having children point to the housing affordability crisis as a reason why, and nearly one in five who have decided against having children at all say they simply can not picture how they would ever afford a home to raise them in.[39] Now consider where Alberta sits. Edmonton and Calgary are the two most affordable major housing markets left in the country, while Toronto and Vancouver rank among the least affordable cities on the planet.[40] If the cost of housing is suffocating family growth everywhere else in Canada, Alberta is one of the last places still giving young families room to breathe.

Let's shift gears for a moment—from raw numbers to something harder to measure but just as real. I want to share some things I've noticed as an outsider looking in, cultural characteristics that you won't find in a StatsCan table but that are alive in Alberta all the same.

The first is this province's entrepreneurial ambition. According to the Business Development Bank of Canada's first-ever "State of Entrepreneurship Report," released in October 2025, 43 percent of Alberta entrepreneurs are seeking significant growth or a major transformation of their business—the highest of any province in the country.[41] Calgary investor Derrick Hunter, CEO of Bluesky Equities, has a theory for why. He argues that Alberta's history of boom and bust "has fostered an environment that rewards execution, tolerates risk, and judges people more on results than pedigree." The rest of the country, he warns, still suffers from a kind of "tall poppy

35 P. J. Mitchell and J. Ko, "The Canadian Married Family Index: The Uneven Decline of Marriage Across Canada," Cardus, 2026, https://www.cardus.ca/research/family/reports/the-canadian-married-family-index.

36 Mitchell and Ko, "The Canadian Married Family Index," figure 1.

37 B. K. Couillard, "Build, Baby, Build: How Housing Shapes Fertility," University of Toronto Department of Economics, November 2, 2025, https://ti.org/pdfs/BuildBabyBuild.pdf.

38 L. Stone, "Higher Rent, Fewer Babies? Housing Costs and Fertility Decline," Institute for Family Studies, 2018, https://ifstudies.org/blog/higher-rent-fewer-babies-housing-costs-and-fertility-decline.

39 Angus Reid Institute, "Birth Rate Crisis? Half of Those Who Want Children Have Waited Longer than They'd Like, Due Largely to Cost," October 10, 2024, https://angusreid.org/birth-rate-crisis-child-care/.

40 "Demographia International Housing Affordability," OpenStats Canada, 2026, https://openstats.ca/studies/demographia-housing-affordability-canada/2026/.

41 Business Development Corporation, "BDC State of Entrepreneurship: Report 2025," October, 2025, https://www.bdc.ca/globalassets/digizuite/59303-bdc-state-entrepreneurship-report-2025.pdf.

syndrome" that "punishes success and dampens ambition" and "stifles innovation."[42] Alberta, in other words, is a place where people are judged by what they build, not by where they came from. And the data suggest there's something concrete about that observation: Economist Miles Corak's research on intergenerational income mobility found that a child born into the bottom fifth of Canadian family incomes has a better shot at reaching the top fifth as an adult in Alberta than anywhere else in the country—an 18.5 percent probability, against a national average of 11.4 percent, and well ahead of Ontario and Saskatchewan, the next-closest provinces.[43] Alberta also has one of the lowest rates in the country of children born poor staying poor. Where you start in Alberta matters less than how hard you're willing to work and how you want to grow.

On Hunter's point about an Albertan ethic that rewards execution and tolerates risk, nothing quite brings that home for me like watching a grown man get charged by a live bull.

When you think of the Calgary Stampede, you probably picture the rodeo and the chuckwagons. But when I attend, I see a cultural edge. What makes the Stampede unlike any other festival in the country is that it bleeds into every corner of the city—into the grocery store, the news broadcast, the C-suite. Even deep in the suburbs, people put on the cowboy hat. It's the most successful blend of history, party atmosphere, business, and politics found anywhere in Canada. Deals get made in boardrooms, sure, but they're more fun to close wearing jeans and eating mini donuts while watching the bucking broncos at two in the afternoon on a Tuesday.

And here's what I find most remarkable about it: The Stampede is both deeply rooted and radically open. It carries real history—ranching, Indigenous tradition, a century of western heritage—and Albertans wear that history without arrogance. But it doesn't require you to have been born into it. Nearly a quarter of Albertans were born outside Canada, and newcomers put on the boots and the plaid right alongside everyone else—not just tolerated, but welcomed into it.[44]

That combination—a strong, rooted identity that is also genuinely open to anyone willing to join it—is rare, and it's exactly the kind of culture you can't build by government decree or marketing campaign. You can build it only the way Alberta has: through a tradition that people actually want to be part of and keep alive, year after year. The Calgary Stampede is a masterclass in how a place builds an identity that is welcoming while still staying strong and meaningful. Canada could use more institutions like it.

We've covered a lot of ground together—demographics, schools and marriages, entrepreneurs and cowboy boots. In all of these, I see an Alberta on the rise, poised to ascend to national leadership. But I still have a nagging feeling. Am I overstating the case? Is what we're seeing in Alberta just a delay? Is this province simply a few years behind the same currents reshaping the

42 D. Hunter, quoted in "Release the Animal Spirits," *The Hub*, January 22, 2026, https://thehub.ca/podcast/audio/release-the-animal-spirits-derrick-hunter-on-why-entrepreneurs-are-key-to-canadas-economic-recovery/.

43 M. Corak, "The Canadian Geography of Intergenerational Income Mobility," Stone Center on Socio-Economic Inequality, City University of New York, 2019, https://stonecenter.gc.cuny.edu/files/2019/05/corak-the-canadian-geography-of-intergenerational-mobility-2019.pdf.

44 CBC News, "Alberta Sees Dip in Immigration but Immigrants Make Up Greater Proportion of Population, Census Shows," October 26, 2022, https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/edmonton/alberta-2021-census-immigration-ethnocultural-religion-migration-1.6629877.

rest of the Western world? Marriage here is still declining, just more slowly than elsewhere in the country. Alberta is still below replacement-level fertility, just less below it than the rest of Canada. Maybe Alberta isn't actually rising to greater heights. Maybe it's just walking more slowly to the edge of the cliff.

Maybe. I don't think so, though. One reason: The math of the Canadian federation is fundamentally changing. Look at where this country's population growth, and its political weight, is heading over the next ten, twenty, or thirty years. The provinces that Alberta has so often found itself at odds with are not going to hold the same prominence as they do today. Alberta's young population, its interprovincial migration and immigration numbers, its fertility rates—all of these compound, and if they remain consistent, they will rebalance the demographic weight of our Confederation. If I'm right, Alberta will one day be in the driver's seat of national life—and if that's true, Alberta could be the hope and inspiration for the rest of our struggling country, an example that other provinces might choose to follow. One day we could well be living in a Canada that looks much more like dynamic Alberta than sclerotic central Canada—and this would be for the better.

Allow me to frame Cardus's effort on this front. Let's be realistic: Cultural levers are far harder to pull than economic or political ones. You can amend a tax with the stroke of a pen; you cannot instantly legislate your way to a culture that cherishes marriage, has more kids, or nurtures a love for going to church on a Sunday morning. And because culture, economics, and politics are so deeply entangled, each shaping the others, it's tempting to retreat entirely to the tactics that are so much simpler to use: the tactics of policy, regulation, and law-making. We cannot and will not back away from the political and economic questions so pertinent to Alberta and the rest of Canada. There is constitutional integrity and social and cultural gifts when the divisions of power and authority are honoured and respected. There is even greater power when families and communities can build productive businesses that provide meaningful goods and services. That said, Cardus is betting on Alberta's cultural edge, and that is where our focus will be. We refuse to accept the fatalism of cultural decline. And I'll tell you where that refusal comes from. It comes from the beauty of the Christian faith—a faith that insists history is not simply something that happens to us but something we're invited to co-create alongside a loving God. We were not made to be passive. We are agents of truth, beauty, and goodness, filled with hope, entrusted with the capacity to cultivate a better world. That conviction is at the heart of everything Cardus does.

Because our focus is on culture, then, the questions that remain unaddressed by my speech become even more poignant, and they push beyond my thesis:

Can Alberta, and can Canada, combat the rising cultural anxiety and nihilism that saps any real desire to build something for the next generation?

Can we recover a sense of the common good—of the public, of what we owe one another—without collapsing into the kind of polarized, angry, bitter politics that is just as corrosive to nation-building as apathy is?

Do we have enough institutional stability, enough real vitality in our civic life, to withstand the geopolitical and ideological pressures now bearing down on us, and can we still have vibrant, honest public disagreement without it curdling into permanent division?

And maybe most fundamentally: Can we recover a hopeful view of the human person and of our common good—a deep and abiding respect for the fullness of human dignity and its immense social implications? Can we renew our love for those good things that so many of us have lost sight of, such as family, children, and all of what it actually means for a human life to flourish alongside others?

More than just recover that view—are we capable of embracing it? Of living it? Will our children and grandchildren see and know clearly what, for us, has become blurred?

These are the questions I ask as I move beyond my cultural-edge thesis, and I invite you to join in that conversation.