



Priorities, Narratives, and Collaboration: Insights From Evolving Federal Mandates on Food Systems in Canada

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Whether it is in a post-election period, a cabinet shuffle, or prorogation of parliament, the speech from the throne and mandate letters signal a government's priorities as they relate to emergent issues and long-standing public policy challenges. While the speech from the throne has been regularly available through parliamentary and government records, federal mandate letters have only been made publicly available more recently, and little research has been done on their role in shaping change. Using Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), the authors explore how the overarching narratives presented by the current federal government have evolved across the period from 2015 to 2021. The authors then compare these narratives with the mandated commitments to the Minister of Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada (AAFC) during the same period. Through this comparative analysis, the authors highlight how the overarching narratives that emerged in later mandates, in particular the need to address systemic inequity, diverge with the commitments delivered to the Minister of AAFC. Part of the reason for identifying the divergence between central narratives and the current AAFC mandate is the hope that better alignment is possible. This includes making a new food policy environment in Canada; One that is equitable, prosperous for all, supports true reconciliation and Indigenous sovereignty, and ushers in a brighter future for the next generation and our planet. To conclude, the authors present alternative food systems frameworks that could help better achieve the more just and resilient world that the federal government narratives outlines.

Keywords: narratives, public policy, communication tools, agenda setting, food systems transformation, food sovereignty

FOOD SYSTEMS, PUBLIC POLICY, AND COMMUNICATION TOOLS: EVOLVING NARRATIVES IN THE TIME OF CRISES

Our policy environments are both a reflection of the past and a hope for the future, with the tension between the two pulling at decisions being made in the present. Communication tools, and discursive environments more generally, are a central way in which governments lay out their public policy priorities and future policy intentions. This intertwined reality of what is said, how its

framed, and what gets done contributes to the discursive environments in which policy is built. The question then is, to what extent the dissonance between reflection and aspiration can be overcome.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, much attention has been given to the performance and faults of food systems, both in Canada and globally (HLPE, 2020; Holland, 2020; Knezevic et al., 2020; OECD, 2020; Stark et al., 2020). While many of the authors point to underlying systemic issues in our food systems (e.g., environmental degradation, systemic racism, and economic inequality) as contributing factors to the faults, little consensus exists on how exactly to move forward. Pandemic programming, such as Canadian Emergency Response Benefit (CERB) or additional funding for food aid organizations, is meant to help with the acute challenges but lacks the structural shifts needed to address these systemic issues. To better reflect on how to create more equitable systems, public policy and discursive environments surrounding food must be better understood and evaluated. Since these underlying systemic issues will remain even as the pandemic becomes more controlled, it is important to consider the actions of governments and how their rootedness in discourses continue to impact public policy direction. Understanding this rootedness, the alignment between overarching narratives and food systems commitments presented by the federal government can be analyzed through the mandates provided to Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada (AAFC), the primary federal department responsible for food.

In this article the authors seek to investigate three cascading research questions:

1. How have the current federal administration's overarching narratives evolved since 2015?
2. Based on the evolving narratives identified, how have the mandates to the Minister of Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada changed?
3. How do the most recent narratives engage with critical food scholarship and alternative food movements, with an end goal of creating more equitable food futures?

The COVID-19 pandemic has prompted reflections on the potential of government and public policy to address injustice while laying bare the role they play in the ongoing pandemics of inequality and racism. Recognized by the United Nations as a central thread to achieving a more just society that “leaves no one behind” (United Nations, 2021), food systems both reinforce and are impacted by other core pillars of society (e.g., health, employment). By analyzing government documents, the authors glean how the narratives deployed by the federal government compare to the mandates provided to the Minister of AAFC. This analysis is done across the four different iterations of mandate letters from 2015 to 2021. By reviewing these different elements of communications comparatively, the authors explore the extent to which these mandates support or diverge from the evolving central narratives developed and deployed within the broader government discourse.

The authors' hope is that by identifying where divergence exists between the evolving overarching narratives used by the

current federal government and the mandates it has directed to AAFC, more can be done to treat food systems as a lever for change. In addition to the broader discussion on the discursive environments of food systems, this research seeks to draw on and contribute to the broader body of food systems transformations scholarship (Blay-Palmer et al., 2016; Knezevic et al., 2017) by highlighting possible pathways for change within public policy institutions.

ROLE OF AGENDA SETTING GOVERNMENT COMMUNICATIONS: DISCOURSE AND NARRATIVES

Discourse can be found anywhere and informs the narratives we tell and are told. In other words, “[a] discourse is a shared way of apprehending the world... each discourse rests on assumptions, judgements, and contentions that provide the basic terms for analysis, debates, agreements, and disagreements” (Dryzek, 2013, p. 9–10). Governments and other institutions communicate their objectives and worldviews through discourse, the politics of which are evident in policy and communications. Publicly available policy documents do more than inform stakeholders; they also communicate policymakers' prevailing values and frame the discussions around the policy issues that those documents focus on. They set the parameters of discourse in the policy community, or “the set of actors, public and private, that coalesces around an issue area and shares a common interest in shaping its development” (Skogstad, 2008, p. 208). Policy instruments then serve a secondary, discursive function of delimiting the scope of possibilities for future policy and thus influencing the stakeholders' understanding of issues as well as any future related policymaking. As Fairclough points out:

“The process of producing a policy paper is the process of moving ‘from conflict to consensus’... to a text where there is no intertextualizing of different voices” (Fairclough, 2003, p. 43).

The way in which policy documents frame an issue can set the agenda for current and future discussions around that specific policy issue. It is difficult to prove or disprove the arguments underlying a discourse (Dryzek, 2013), but Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) enables comparison, which can identify conflicts within or between discourses and narratives. Put differently, “CDA helps deconstruct the policy texts to reveal assumptions, subject positions and social relations between and within institutional contexts” (Marston, 2004, p. 40).

A conversation, speech, policy document, advertisement, picket line, or a call for action all contain narratives which stem from discourses. Narratives are, in part, the way we frame the thoughts we share and what language we include. Discourse has a more aggregate and iterative effect, connecting our words from singular things into a web of meaning. Through a multitude of channels (e.g., social media, government documents, speeches), governments, like individuals or groups, develop and deploy narratives that reflect their intended position

or desired communication frame. When reviewed in aggregate, these narratives contribute to the governments both central and sectoral discourses. Within these channels lie formalized processes (e.g., delivering the speech from the throne at the opening of parliament) that act as the integral link between discursive environments and the boundaries of the possible within public policy. Situated in a Canadian context, these formalized processes include producing documents that help set the agenda for the coming parliamentary session. This includes the speech from the throne and the development of mandate letters for each cabinet minister. Similar to other parliamentary tools used in research (e.g., hansard records), these documents are steeped in contextualized narratives that represent a moment in time as well as the deep legacies of past public policies (McIntyre et al., 2018). Whenever released, the speech from the throne and mandate letters signal a government's priorities as they relate to both emergent issues and long-standing public policy challenges.

Scholarly work on agenda setting communications includes research on relationships between the public, press, and governments (Soroka, 2002; Green-Pedersen and Mortensen, 2010). Even though the strategic nature of how or when communication tools are deployed continues to be debated by scholars (Glenn, 2014; Marland, 2017), this work provides valuable insight into the way government communications are developed and used. In this article, we focus on the narratives and discourses developed by the federal government between 2015 and 2021, led by Prime Minister Justin Trudeau. In particular, we focus on how these narratives are embedded within the speech from the throne and preamble to the mandate letters to develop the governments discourse and how they evolve over time. The evolving narratives that are unearthed will then be compared to the specific mandated commitments provided to the Minister of AAFC from the Prime Minister over the same period. Displaying the connectivity between policy and these agenda setting documents, Summa Strategies (a public relations firm) notes that the speech from the throne “outlines the government's general priorities which are then divided up amongst Cabinet through mandate letters to add substance, specificity and accountability to these priorities” (Summa Strategies, 2020). This deep linkage between the different documents makes it important to understand how central government narratives evolve and whether—considering a lag between discourse and corresponding action—the subsequent iteration of mandates reflect these changes.

Relying mostly on insights from the former Harper administration, Marland (2017) finds that while the Trudeau administration has provided more agency for Ministers—and departments more broadly—to control their communications on minor announcements, there remains an emphasis on central narratives and consistent themes (such as support for the middle class) found in the agenda setting documents for larger announcements. They note that:

“Looking deeper, internal PCO[1] guidelines encouraged departments to package their messages within themes used in the speech from the throne, including the middle class, economic

growth, environment, inclusive diversity, and collaborative approaches.” (P. 46)

The Federal mandate letters “outline the objectives that each minister will work to accomplish, as well as the pressing challenges they will address in their role” as set out by the Prime Minister (Office of the Prime Minister, 2020). Mandate letters provide one of the most granular reflections of what the government is hoping to tackle and insight into key investments or policy change on the horizon. While several scholars and practitioners have researched the influence of mandate letters (McRobert and Tennent-Riddell, 2016; Waubert de Puiseau, 2016; Lucyk, 2020) or different elements of the speech from the throne (Midzain-Gobin and Smith, 2020; Kalapurayil, 2021), there remains little work on Canadian federal government mandate letters as they relate to food and agriculture systems.

DATA AND METHODS

Selecting the time period from when federal mandate letters were first made public (2015) until the most current iteration (2021), the data included: four iterations of the speech from the throne, three mandate letters, and one supplementary mandate letter. **Table 1** provides a breakdown of the type of publication, year of release, and accessible links to each document.

For this article, we focus on the first two dimensions of Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis classifications: text analysis and processing analysis. However, the work is contextualized by the third dimension which relates to embedded norms and “the socio-historical conditions that govern these processes” (Janks, 1997). In focusing on the first two, the authors review the narratives and discourse used within the documents selected. The authors then compare the shifting larger narratives (dimension two) with the narratives included in food systems mandates. The divergence is identified by contextualizing food systems within dimension three (the norms and historical conditions that govern) and comparing mandated commitments with the overarching government narrative changes identified previously (dimension two). In part, the authors note the stickiness of the current agricultural productivism paradigm with its deep-rooted connection to colonization and industrialization. To that end, the authors recommend ways to shift policy processes that could address dimension three and result in better alignment with the shifting narratives of inclusion, systemic change. The process was both iterative and scoped, with a central emphasis on the agenda setting documents and the sub-set of food systems mandates that stemmed from them.

Once the documents were compiled, the authors read each of the mandate letters and speeches independently to identify themes before comparing notes. As most of the documents were analyzed in early—to mid- 2021, the data was revisited for the integration of the mandate letter released in December of 2021 to ensure the most current evaluation of narratives, discourses, and commitments were included. Based on the common themes identified, the authors tracked the main overarching government priorities—found in the speeches from the throne and preambles

TABLE 1 | Documents used for the analysis of federal narratives and food systems commitments from 2015 to 2021.

Type of document and title (if applicable)	Date released	Publicly accessible web link
Making real change happen; Canadian federal government speech from the Throne 2015	December 4th, 2015	https://www.canada.ca/en/privy-council/campaigns/speech-throne/speech-throne.html
Mandate letter to the minister of agriculture and agri-food Canada	November 15th, 2015	https://pm.gc.ca/en/mandate-letters/2015/11/12/archived-minister-agriculture-and-agri-food-mandate-letter
Moving forward together; Canadian federal government speech from the Throne 2019	December 5th, 2019	https://www.canada.ca/en/privy-council/campaigns/speech-throne/moving-forward-together.html
Mandate letter to the minister of agriculture and agri-food Canada	December 13th, 2019	https://pm.gc.ca/en/mandate-letters/2019/12/13/archived-minister-agriculture-and-agri-food-mandate-letter
A stronger and more resilient Canada; Canadian federal government speech from the Throne 2020	September 23rd, 2020	https://www.canada.ca/en/privy-council/campaigns/speech-throne/2020/speech-from-the-throne.html
Supplementary mandate letter to the minister of agriculture and agri-food Canada	January 15th, 2021	https://pm.gc.ca/en/mandate-letters/2021/01/15/archived-minister-agriculture-and-agri-food-supplementary-mandate-letter
Building a resilient economy; Canadian federal government speech from the Throne 2021	November 23rd, 2021	https://www.canada.ca/en/privy-council/campaigns/speech-throne/2021/speech-from-the-throne.html
Mandate letter to the minister of agriculture and agri-food Canada	December 16th, 2021	https://pm.gc.ca/en/mandate-letters/2021/12/16/minister-agriculture-and-agri-food-mandate-letter

to the mandate letters over the selected time period—to identify themes that: emerged, were strengthened, evolved, or maintained over time. Once the overarching narrative analysis was complete, the authors tracked the results against the mandates given to the Minister of AAFC. The authors then evaluate the findings against food systems literature to identify alternative conceptions of governance that could support better alignment between the overarching federal narratives and future food systems commitments to create inclusive and equitable food futures. CDA was used throughout the process to help the authors dissect and identify overarching narratives and how they were reflected—or not—within the food systems mandates provided to AAFC.

Well-suited for trans-disciplinary and inter-disciplinary work, CDA allows for the analysis of discourse within specific policy fields or areas of study while situating these narratives in broader social understandings (Fairclough, 2013). CDA has shown to be a helpful tool for moving past the surface of discourse and into the contextual and historical housing of these narratives. Concerned with inequity and power (van Dijk, 1993; Weiss and Wodak, 2007), CDA also highlights the opportunity for actions that offer more equitable futures, making it an apt choice for this research. Across Canada, CDA has been used by scholars to examine policy environments including: poverty reduction (Smith-Carrier and Lawlor, 2017), food security (Knezevic et al., 2014; Smith-Carrier, 2021), public health (Alexander and Coveney, 2013), and agricultural production methods (Anderson and Maughan, 2021; Duncan et al., 2021).

One of the limitations of this study is that because the mandate letters have only been available publicly since 2015, there are no counterfactuals to include from former administrations. Even with this limitation, the contents of four iterations of the AAFC mandate letters allow the authors to conduct a comparative study between the overarching narratives included in the preamble of each document and the evolving mandate commitments given to AAFC.

OVERARCHING NARRATIVES BY THE GOVERNMENT OF CANADA BETWEEN 2015 AND 2021

This section explores the overarching narratives shared with all Ministers across the four versions of the speech from the throne (2015, 2019, 2020, and 2021) and the preamble of the mandate letters (2015, 2019, and 2021a and b). The section is broken into the four periods: setting the tone in 2015, refining the priorities in 2019, reckoning with crises in January 2021 (a), and existing in crisis, searching for direction in December 2021(b). The January 2021 mandate letters were written to be supplementary, rather than replacement, to the 2019 versions. Following the election in 2021, and the subsequent return of a minority government under Trudeau, the mandate letters released in December 2021(b) replace the previous mandates presented in 2019 and the supplementary in earlier 2021(a).

Setting the Tone: 2015

After the 2015 election and a transition in administrations, the new majority government under Trudeau crafted a distinctive tone steeped in “change” language, emphasizing shifting electoral and governance priorities. Indicative of these narratives, the 2015 speech from the throne states:

“Let us not forget, however, that Canadians have been clear and unambiguous in their desire for real change. Canadians want their government to do different things, and to do things differently (Government of Canada, 2015a).”

The narratives used in the speech from the throne and the preamble to the mandate letters included a focus on creating a more productive relationship between the government and the public service, bolstering the middle class, embracing multiculturalism, opening a new chapter of reconciliation,

committing to transparency, electoral reform, and addressing climate change. It was an era of government that allowed for the inclusion of new discourses and aspirational promises.

Refining and Strengthening Narratives: 2019

Situated in the minority and pre-pandemic context, the 2019 documents introduced a renewed emphasis on working across party lines and challenges in the international liberal order. While the international liberal order's inclusion could be connected to Canada's bid for the open UN Security Council seat (Government of Canada, 2019a; Harris, 2020), other narratives were more deeply seeded in the broader policy environment. Encapsulated in a quote from the 2019 speech from the throne, Governor General Payette:

“In this election, Parliamentarians received a mandate from the people of Canada which Ministers will carry out. It is a mandate to fight climate change, strengthen the middle class, walk the road of reconciliation, keep Canadians safe and healthy, and position Canada for success in an uncertain world.”

Narratives on gender-based violence, gun control, equity, environmental protection and supporting the middle class were maintained in the 2019 version compared to 2015. Reconciliation and diversity evolved, becoming unique narratives rather than their previously bundled presentation. A notable shift occurred in commitments around electoral reform in the 2017 letter to the Minister of Democratic Institutions (Government of Canada, 2017) and the overarching narratives began to dissolve with it.

Responding to Crises: The 2021 Supplementary

Delivered in the same minority government environment of 2019 and purportedly prompted by the COVID-19 pandemic, the supplementary speech from the throne notes that:

“the last six months have laid bare fundamental gaps in our society, and in societies around the world. This pandemic has been hard for everyone. But for those who were already struggling, the burden has been even heavier.” (Government of Canada, 2020).

Within the speech is a section entitled 'building back better' for a post-pandemic recovery, specifically addressing recovery for the middle class. Presented as the final section, “the Canada we're fighting for” includes narratives of reconciliation, addressing systemic racism, protecting official languages, creating a welcoming Canada, and strengthening Canada's position in the world. It is noteworthy that these are separate sections; the siloing in discourse creates a narrative and policy wall between issues of systemic justice and growing the middle class, suggesting to the authors that the two may be treated—at times—as mutually exclusive narratives. The 2021 documents showed the emergence of a new narrative around systemic racism. Narratives focusing on reconciliation were strengthened and some of main narratives emerging in 2019 remained (e.g., growing the middle

class) or evolved (e.g., environment; collaboration, diversity, and inclusion).

Existing in Crises, Searching for Direction: 2021

In a historic moment, Canada's first Indigenous Governor General, Her Excellency the Right Honorable Mary Simon, delivered the speech from the throne in November of 2021. The ensuing mandate letter preamble called COVID-19 a “once in a century challenge” (Government of Canada, 2021a). While COVID-19 continued to put pressure on health care systems, other parts of Canadian society were also under scrutiny. Mass graves were found at residential school sites across the country in 2021, inciting a renewed emphasis on reconciliation. While present in earlier agenda setting documents, the mandate letters of 2021(b) more explicitly directed all ministers to implement the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) in their work. In addition, the preamble of the mandate letter maintains a call for a continued dedication to diversity in the public service, including a gender-based analysis (GBA Plus) and the use of quality-of-life indicators beyond economic measures, and highlights the integrity of journalism and the need for solid relationships between media and government. However, the emphasis on disaggregated data collection that emerged as so critical earlier in the year disappeared from the overarching narratives, rather remaining in the mandates provided to the Minister of the Treasury Board (Government of Canada, 2021e). In addition, language related to systemic racism broadened to “inequities and disparities” felt by communities across a spectrum of identities, including abilities, gender, race, faith, and sexuality recognizing, perhaps, the intersectionality of identity across individuals and communities.

Table 2 depicts those overarching narratives which emerge or persist across the four iterations. For the purposes of this table, diversity is collapsed into a common category with inclusion and collaboration.

Many of the themes identified by the authors were similar to those named by Marland (2017), however the narratives have evolved to represent more refined or broad versions compared to the 2015 agenda setting documents. At the same time, several commitments were abandoned which resulted in the shedding of specific narratives that connected to the discourse from the 2015 documents (e.g., electoral reform). The pandemic and converging crises of 2020/21 introduced new discourses and narratives to the agenda setting documents (e.g., systemic inequities).

Several notable shifts occurred across the iterations from 2015 to 2021. First, the speech from the throne becomes noticeably longer. The speech was delivered in just over 15 min in 2015, grew to nearly an hour in 2020, before reducing to just under 35 min in 2021. This expansion could indicate the increasing complexity of governing in a world fraught with converging crises (e.g., pandemic, climate, social) while still needing to deliver on pre-existing commitments. Secondly, while many of the narratives that emerged in 2015 remain across iterations, there are several important evolutions and later additions. Namely, the strengthening of reconciliation commitments from

TABLE 2 | Overarching government of Canada narratives from 2015 to 2021.

	2015	2019	2020/2021a	2021b
1. Reconciliation	Emerged	Evolved	Strengthened	Maintained
2. Growing the middle class	Emerged	Maintained	Maintained	Maintained
3. Protecting the environment	Emerged	Maintained	Evolved	Strengthened
4. Collaboration, diversity, and inclusion*	Emerged	Evolved	Evolved	Evolved
5. Tackling systemic racism and unconscious bias	–	–	Emerged	Evolved

*Collaboration, Diversity, and Inclusion are bundled under one category as originally found in 2015 iterations of the agenda setting documents.

2015 to 2021, which includes the more developed direction for the implementation of UNDRIP. Additionally, the introduced emphasis on collaboration narratives in the minority government of 2019 onward is important, as it contextualizes the need to work across parties differently than in a majority. There is also the 2020 emergence of a new narrative recognizing systemic racism and the 2021 evolution that indicates a broader understanding of intersectionality within marginalized identities (e.g., sexuality, gender, ability). Climate change narratives shift to more urgent and strengthened framings later in the iterations—shifting toward new reduction commitments and the enhanced commitment for adaptation. While not a shift. The consistent and dominant frames of international trade and middle class remain central, with the ever-reinforced tenet that growing the economy and protecting the environment are not mutually exclusive aspirations.

MANDATING FOOD SYSTEMS: EVOLVING COMMITMENTS FROM 2015 TO 2021

Promote, Protect, and Innovate Canadian Agri-Food Systems: 2015

The mandate of 2015 focuses largely on maintaining and enhancing the current agri-food system through investing in scientific research and innovation, renegotiating the national subsidy framework for agriculture, and promoting Canadian food producers by expanding global markets while protecting supply management at home. There is a large emphasis across mandates on the use and investment in science as well as the promotion of new markets. The mandate letter states that the Minister's "overarching goal will be to support the agricultural sector in a way that allows it to be a leader in job creation and innovation" (Government of Canada, 2015b).

Stay the Course: 2019

The mandated commitments of 2019 help reinforce those made in the earlier version. In fact, the 2019 letter calls on the Minister to continue to support the agri-food sector as a "leader in job creation and innovation" (Government of Canada, 2019b). This is included along with the emphasis on supporting the sector's "global export potential" (ibid). To that end, the mandated commitments focus on maintaining production capacity which is seen as the foundation for the broader supply chain, as well as the promotion and protection of Canadian farming in trade,

use of—and investment in—science, as well as a more developed mandate for a national food policy.

(Un)Safe Food Systems: 2021(a)

The impact of the pandemic on food systems and the workers on whom they depend make a clear entrance into the mandates in early 2021. Likely motivated by the high-risk environments of on-farm and processing facilities and the high rate of COVID-19 contraction comparative to the general Canadian population (Kelley et al., 2020), the supplementary letter included the need to protect vulnerable workers. There is also a new urgency around the threat of climate change and the implications of, and for, farming than in previous years. There is an absence of any narratives that would address tension between the underlying conditions for success in the priorities of the 2019 mandates (e.g., access to low wage labor) and the aspirations outlined in supplementary letter of 2021(a).

Change on the Margins and Climate-Urgency: 2021(b)

Narratives around the specific protection of workers fall out of the 2021(b) iteration, replaced with the need to regulate, inspect, and develop programs that would presumably facilitate a safer environment. Any opening for a more systemic change indicated by the narratives and commitments delivered in 2021(a) are mostly shifted back to the margins with the exception of the national school food program and the urgency of climate change. Notably, 2021(b) is the first mention within the publicly available mandates of AAFC which acknowledges and includes marginalized groups in the sector. In reference to the negotiations on the update to business risk management (BRM) programming, the mandate letter states:

"Ensure that producers, including Indigenous, young and women farmers, have the opportunity to contribute." (Government of Canada, 2021d).

While the language does not guarantee how these considerations will be taken into account, the recognition of these groups within food systems is significant.

In addition to the themes within each iteration, the following observations emerged from a review of the mandated commitments between 2015 and 2021.

1. Narratives supporting interdepartmental collaboration and local food emerges and retreats;

2. Some mandates continue to draw from a more historical framework for agricultural programming while other mandates emerge as new or even possibly competing priorities; and
3. The most significant shift happens between the 2019 and 2021(a) iterations of the documents, but the 2021(b) iteration showed signs of reversion back toward some of the priorities of earlier versions of the mandate letters versus strengthening the supplementary mandates (2021a) from earlier in the pandemic.

Inter-departmental collaboration is a key shift across the years. In 2015, only two of eight mandates required collaboration with other departments (climate change and infrastructure), and both were framed as “support the Minister of” rather than an explicit need to work toward a shared outcome. In 2019, there were six of 10 mandates that expected some form of inter-departmental work. While there were fewer-than-normal supplementary mandates provided in 2021(a), six of the seven mandates were inter-departmental. The shift to mandating more cross-government efforts on policy development is important to note as it implies a wider recognition of the interconnected nature of agricultural policy. However, the 2021(b) letter shows a reversion toward more siloed approaches to policy development with only half of the 14 mandates including “working with” or “supporting” other Ministers. While this is equal or greater to the total number of collaborative mandates of the previous iterations, it is not proportionally greater.

In addition, mandates on international trade and export development are quite consistent across the iterations with a focus on protecting Canadian interests, growing export markets, and compensating supply management sectors for concessions made in trade negotiations. The one exception is within the interdepartmental work mentioned previously. In 2019, there is a clear commitment for Ministers to work together in the effort to grow and diversify markets for Canadian goods. While the mandate could have originated from a number of influences (such as the media or public sources mentioned by agenda setting scholars), it is important to note that 2019 was a very contentious period with Canada’s largest trading partner, the United States. The only reference in 2015 to domestic markets is in the commitment to develop a food policy for Canada, which is then reiterated and refined in 2019. By 2019, there is also a reference to developing domestic markets, but this too is bundled with international export language. It is not until the 2021(a) supplementary letter that there is a clear commitment for “government-wide efforts to” support local food and strengthen domestic supply chains (Government of Canada, 2021c). However, in the 2021(b) version local food has diminished, replaced by a more aggressive narrative of addressing climate change and growing Canada’s role as a global agri-food leader.

Recognition of local food and domestic capacity was not the only shift to occur between 2019 and 2021(a). The need to protect vulnerable workers, explicitly address food insecurity, reduce carbon emissions in food systems, and integrate nature-based solutions into farming systems were all included as mandated

commitments, running contrary to many of the negative indirect consequences from more industrial export models. Some of these new additions are reiterated in the December 2021(b) mandate letter. While these changes may seem small, squaring them with the frameworks upheld by commitments in 2015 and 2019 will be no small task. Canadian export strength relies, in part, on an abundant access to clean water, cheap natural gas, and low paid labor. To protect labor, including workers’ rights, would necessitate a fair wage and decent working conditions. While there are three mandates connected to labor in 2021(b), they are all either consultative, enforcement oriented, or narrowly scoped in nature.

In 2021(b), the Food Policy for Canada (FPC) began to take shape with the commitment to a national school food program and the fund to reduce food waste, both of which are related to reducing food insecurity. Other promising openings, such as nature-based solutions, were sidelined for investments in high-tech research. Implementing nature-based solutions and reducing emissions would also take a re-alignment of priorities toward the inclusion of costing negative externalities into the artificially low price of commodity-based food stuffs. The tension presented by these competing commitments, overarching narratives, and historical frames may need a far more nuanced approach to public policy than currently found within AAFC.

IMPLEMENTATION TOOLS OR DETOURS FOR CHANGE: COMPARING NARRATIVES WITH MANDATES

If, in fact, the mandate letters are meant to be the toelines of all future actions then it is conceivable that the commitments included should be in line with the overall discourse deployed by the government. The 2015 and 2019 versions of the agenda setting documents include narratives that can be tracked across to the specific mandates provided to the Minister of AAFC with some consistency. In particular, the focus on protecting and promoting international trade is a way of operationalizing the narratives of economic growth. In addition, the emphasis on clean tech in agriculture as response to the climate crisis is in near complete ideological alignment with the government’s environmental discourse. As the 2015 speech from the throne states,

“Protecting the environment and growing the economy are not incompatible goals; in fact, our future success demands that we do both.” (Government of Canada, 2015a).

However, there is a clear divergence from this narrative in the 2020 and 2021 versions of the agenda setting documents. Namely, the commitments provided to AAFC do little to address the most centralized narratives of the later iterations such as systemic inequity and reconciliation. While systemic change is central to the overarching narratives, the mandates focus on symptom-based solutions through technology or inclusion of additional voices without provision of agency within decision making or

recognizing the current political imbalance between these groups and more dominant industry-led voices.

Based on the comparative analysis between the overarching narratives and mandate commitments, we outline areas where the overarching narratives may be diverging from the actions mandated to the Minister. To do this, we take the position that no mandate is considered out of scope or irrelevant for the achievement of an overarching narrative since all public policy has an impact that is both interconnected and transformative with the possibility of embedding a social norm or reality. This position is supported by the research of government communications scholars whose participants observe the central role that mandate letters play in later policy products (Marland, 2017). The following section connects narratives from the throne speech and mandate preambles with the work mandated to AAFC between 2015 and 2021.

Charity Over Food Sovereignty Approaches

The redistribution of land away from Indigenous communities toward settlers was a concerted act of public policy [e.g., Dominion Lands Act (Yarhi and Regehr, 2006)]. These acts of seizure and redistribution maintain a deep connection to our current settler-colonial agricultural policies as well as who has access to lands under current conceptions of ownership and access. Despite this, there is little recognition of the need for AAFC to support sovereignty through self-determination of Indigenous food ways. In the implementation of mandates there have been instances of support to Indigenous-led activities, such as the Harvesters Support Grant (AAFC, 2020)¹, but this is only a fraction of the total support. There has been an overwhelming amount of criticism for the government's near sole focus on charity model interventions while ignoring more systemic and community efforts (Levi and Robin, 2020; Tarasuk and Mitchell, 2020). In a study with an Indigenous community in Ontario's subarctic region, Skinner et al. (2013) note that families continue to cope with food shortages through food sharing and traditional food ways. There remains a chasm between the overarching narratives of reconciliation presented by the government, the continued use of jurisdictional scapegoating to push problem solving to a different level of government, and the commitments prioritized and mandated to the AAFC.

Missing a Rights-Centered Approach to Production

Several AAFC mandates are targeting low-income or marginalized communities, notably commitments related to food security and migrant workers' rights. While these populations could be contained in "those who are working hard to join [the middle class]," their continued marginalization suggests that these mandates are in conflict with the narratives on systemic inequity and "Growing the Middle Class" imperative. Current BRM programs do little to reverse the trend or establish

¹As described by the Government of Canada, the Harvesters Support Grant "increases access to country foods by providing funding to support traditional hunting, harvesting and food sharing in isolated communities" (Government of Canada, 2022). The program is facilitated through the broader Nutrition North Canada program.

further support for small growers who focus on community-based markets and food systems, aiming programs instead at a "medium" farm that no longer exists (Stevenson, 2021). There may be some possible alignment with the commitment to grow export markets, but the benefits of these transactions tend to concentrate on a small group of beneficiaries. Finally, pressure to compete at international prices is often included in the justification to delay or deny workers' rights and environmental protection, leaving tension between the different mandates, in particular the 2019 mandate letter and its supplementary companion in 2021(a). This tension remained unattended in the 2021(b) version.

Taking Nature Out of Nature-Based Solutions

Nature-based and comprehensive climate pricing solutions butt up against what we know has been implemented and mandated previously. For example, farm-level greenhouse gas reductions are not mentioned until 2021 even though carbon pricing and tackling climate change were outlined as early as 2015 in the overarching narratives. The focus in 2015 and 2019 was on adaptation and technological solutions rather than a more systemic path to reduction. While nature-based solutions are a step toward more integrated climate action, there remains no regulatory measures focused solely on reduction for on-farm emissions after three mandates. The 2021(b) version puts an emphasis on precision agriculture and clean tech and disaggregates the inclusion of alternative farming models in farm subsidy programs from the government's commitments around the environment. In addition, nature-based solutions do not appear in the latter 2021(b) version at all.

Systemic Inequity on the Margins of Mandates

Systemic racism is one of the most recent inclusions in the overarching narratives, but there is no connection with the mandates included in 2021(a). Even if related to the 2019 mandate letter, there is no acknowledgment of the need to diversify farming, land ownership, or to review the current imbalance across food systems but rather a mandate to make intergenerational transfer easier between members of a farm family. While this process is important for continuity, it fails to offer any commitment on how to integrate new farms/farmers into the growing void left by increased succession of aging Canadian farmers (Stevenson, 2021). The closest link between the mandates and systemic racism is a reference to disaggregated data in the preamble of 2021(a) which was sent to all Ministers. There was no inclusion of a specific mandate to work with the Minister of the Treasury Board on identifying the needs and areas for data within food systems in Canada. Rather than building out a plan for comprehensive disaggregated data collection, the earlier language from the preamble has been removed without any integration of specific commitments in 2021(b). This is in the face of knowing that Canadian agricultural organizations and farms are bereft of diversity (Igbavboa and Elliot, 2020). While AAFC has submitted the

letter of implementation for the “Call to Action on Anti-Racism, Equity and Inclusion” (Government of Canada, 2021f), this work specifically focuses on systemic racism and inequity within the Ministry rather than those receiving government funding or the agri-food industry at large. Ensuring that data is collected, and used for the benefit of policy development, both within and outside of the Ministry is key to developing more equitable environments. The only insight into the linkages between the overarching narratives of diversity or systemic inequity and commitments provided to the Minister of AAFC is the mandate, mentioned earlier, relating to consultation for updating business risk management where the Prime Minister asks that “that producers, including Indigenous, young and women farmers, have the opportunity to contribute” (Government of Canada, 2021d). How the government plans to achieve this without any measures to build capacity, address historic land injustice, or collect data to support better decision making is left unanswered.

DISCUSSION: ALTERNATIVE FRAMEWORKS FOR CHANGE

While there is a growing chasm between the government’s overarching narratives on systemic inequity with the mandates provided to the Minister of AAFC, the supplementary letter in 2021(a) created a window in which more transformative change could be achieved. Part of the reason for identifying divergence between central narratives and food systems frameworks is the hope that better alignment is possible. This includes making a new policy environment for food; One that is equitable, prosperous for all (including the middle class), supports true reconciliation and Indigenous sovereignty, and a brighter future for the next generation and our planet. In areas where divergence is identified, we offer alternative models that better align food systems’ aspirations with overarching narratives. These include but are not limited to: the introduction of a Ministry of Food to support inclusive structures; addressing multi-scale governance by strengthening regional and local food systems through a nested approach; and supporting sovereignty by reconceptualizing achieving the right to food rather than reductionist forms of food security.

Inclusive Structures: Developing a Ministry of Food

Globally, there are many examples of countries working to bridge food as commodity and food as necessity in their government ministries. In some cases (Uganda, Guinea), nutrition outcomes have been added to ministry of agriculture’s purview (Fan et al., 2020). In other cases, such as the government of the United Kingdom, the Ministry of food has been tethered to Environment and Rural Affairs (Government of the United Kingdom, 2022). In the European Union, however, there are few implemented examples of a full integrated approach to food systems within government institutions. One of the closest

is the emergence of food policy groups which can be structured as a part of, parallel too, or apart from government decision making bodies.

Our research notes that as part of the recent Canadian policy landscape, interdepartmental collaborations emerging in the 2019 and 2021(a) mandate letters are a starting point for the level of cohesion required to ensure food access and sustainable food systems. However, a ministry that incorporates these different facets of food- as it pertains to income, inequality, and health to name a few- might be better equipped than any of these individual ministries, even when collaborating. A Ministry of Food on its own would not solve the challenges outline within the overarching narratives of the government but it would provide a more critical space to discuss food issues and consider confounding factors than the present agricultural model of governance, such as the AAFC. By creating a more inclusive Ministry of Food, the complex landscape of systems actors would be part of the policy process (MacRae, 1999a). This would include consumers, producers, processors, communities, Indigenous partners, and many government departments across scales. With more voices at the table, and a transparent rebalance of power to those most affected by food systems, a Ministry of Food could center decision making on systemic changes that support equitable outcomes. For example, if nutritional value and environmental outcomes were included within food systems production programming directly, the sole emphasis on efficiency may yield to a more diverse and complex set of success measures. Alternatively, if succession was thought of in terms of land equity and not just intergenerational transfer or asset management, government programming may significantly change (Perttula and Wilkes, 2021). MacRae (1999b) outlines both an advantageous schedule for implementation and the benefits of this more inclusive model for institutional governance of food public policy. In addition, MacRae (1999a,b) shows that how food systems are governed is just as important to an outcome as what policy commitments are made. MacRae (2011) builds on integrated governance structures through the joined-up principles for frameworks in food policy. In fact, the author weaves together elements of governance in an inextricable way for readers. The recent announcement of the Canadian Food Policy Council may be one step in this direction but there is far more work to be done. While the membership appointed to the Council represents several different perspectives and positions, the current structure of reporting only to the Minister of AAFC limits cross-department reform and leaves the narrative squarely within agriculture and agri-food vs. food systems more broadly. While argued using a provincial lens, the concepts and structures proposed by MacRae (1999a) are also positioned well to support federal transitions. This may include taking a more territorial approach to food systems that links local food policy groups with their federal counterpart as well as place-based planning for food systems programming. A Ministry of Food leaves space for nuance and allows for many voices to join the development process, rather than the more technocratic or exclusionary practice.

Nested Food Systems

The nested food system supports all of AAFC's mandates while also supporting the overarching narratives of government. All food systems are nested already, but there must be a concentrated effort on synergy and support between varying levels. The two sides of Canadian agriculture now- the export-oriented side and the farmers' market side- are lacking the intention and clear, targeted, multi-scalar support that would fill the growing gap left by the decline in middle-sized farms in Canada (Stevenson, 2021). The national or internal prong of a nested system is also not a single system but rather a collection of interrelated localized systems. These can be divided according to several geographic, ecological, or socioeconomic factors like provincial boundaries, watersheds, and demographics of place. Each of these systems will be nested within another or several others. Not only are our global and local food systems nested, but they are part of a system of systems (SoS), interconnecting many other sectors, such as oil and gas and international trade (Hipel et al., 2010). The strength of an SoS or nested systems approach is that it embraces the complexity that these interconnections bring and uses that to solve problems, as opposed to siloing solutions according to a single industry. According to Hipel et al. (2010), the conflict between local and international food systems "is an inescapable condition due to the immense diversity of values and opinions" (Hipel et al., 2010, p. 4). The SoS policy strategy works this diversity of values and opinions into its outcomes, making systems of systems more risk-aware, reliable, and resilient. Research is already underway to help provide insight into the impacts and opportunities for data-driven decisions on regional food systems, such as the Okanagan Bioregion Food System Project by Kwantlen Polytechnic University (Mullinix et al., 2021).

Shifting the Goalposts From Food Security to Sovereignty

Food insecurity, "as a result of poverty, inadequate infrastructure, and trade policy" (Krejci and Beamon, 2010), has increased across Canada during COVID-19. COVID-related acute food insecurity and pandemic-exacerbated chronic food insecurity are stark illustrations of the extent to which the current internationally recognized definition of food insecurity falls short on understanding the reality of communities in our current market-based systems. Food insecurity is highly racialized in Canada (Igbavboa and Elliot, 2020; Tarasuk and Mitchell, 2020; Yellowhead Institute, 2021). Despite decades of data on the causes of food insecurity and calls for proactive policy responses, food security responses from the Canadian government remain focused on a crisis charity-led response, funding food banks and other emergency services (Government of Canada, 2021b) which only acutely address the issue (Loopstra and Tarasuk, 2012) rather than exploring the drivers of food insecurity as a symptom of a more systemic problem (Riches, 2020). While a national school food program would be a significant and important step toward food security for children across the country (Coalition for Healthy School Food, 2018), there is still

much left to be tackled in order to truly achieve a food secure future for all. As defined by La Via Campesina, food sovereignty is the ability of all people at all times to access safe, healthy, and culturally appropriate food which is produced in ecologically sustainable methods in a system over which the people have control (La Via Campesina, 2003). In summary, achieving food sovereignty must ensure food security, while achieving food security does not ensure food sovereignty. Centered in a human-rights framework, food sovereignty demands of governments systemic and transformative actions, centering food systems on human-rights vs. market economies (La Via Campesina, 2003). It also requires a decent income and better distributed profits within the food system, exploring circular economies and other community benefits to more regionalized and resilient approaches. In addition, Canada could advocate for a new interpretation for food security that better reflects its current shortcomings. Introduced by the High-Level Panel of Experts to the Committee on World Food Security in 2020 to include agency, this new definition would allow food security and food sovereignty to live in complement to one another, mutually reinforcing the need for a new transformative approach to food systems (HLPE, 2020). The definition proposed by the HLPE also addresses the intimate connection between achieving food security and the need for sustainability (HLPE, 2020).

Nested systems and inclusive governance structures could give space for the many sovereignties being called for within Canada, including Indigenous food sovereignty. Where 50 percent of First Nations families are food insecure (Levi and Robin, 2020), COVID-19 notwithstanding, food sovereignty is a pressing concern. Self-determination and Indigenous foodway revitalization are intertwining to ensure long term, sustainable food access with dignity and agency for Indigenous communities currently in crisis (Levi and Robin, 2020). Indigenous nations have many different traditional foodways and food practices which are not currently bounded by private property regimes in the same way that other nations' are, highlighting again the need for interplay between different food systems. Since reconciliation is highlighted in the preamble of the mandate letters, and now that the ministry is mandated to implement UNDRIP, Indigenous relationships to land and foodways—as well as its deep connectivity to achieving food security in Canada—cannot be ignored.

CONCLUSION: FUTURE POLICY LEVERS AND FOOD SYSTEMS FOR JUST, RESILIENT SOCIETIES

While overarching narratives have evolved over time, agricultural policy (the main conception of food policy) has stayed relatively stagnant. There are deep, path dependent forces of agricultural decision making that are unspoken and implied through policy preferences. While not mentioned, the pull of industrial agriculture and colonization is strong and has been ongoing for decades and centuries, respectively. However, the

growing chasm between the government's overarching narratives and food systems mandates does not need to be permanent, rather there are leverage points within policy that can begin to create a shift toward these more aligned frameworks. By incorporating alternative food systems frameworks, such as the three outlined in the previous section, in upcoming policy development processes (e.g., review of the Canadian Agricultural Partnership; future mandates), real change can occur. Additional research on food systems narratives in Canada could support a better understanding of specific evolving mandates (e.g., climate change) and strengthened narratives (e.g., reconciliation). As the 2021(b) speech from the throne states: "We know that reconciliation cannot come without truth." The work of many scholars and communities have advanced the call for—and research in—Indigenous food sovereignty as being pivotal to addressing food security (Martens et al., 2016; Robin, 2019). These efforts have shown that the change is possible but it must come with the recognition of rights and respect towards communities and the land.

The 2020 speech from the throne states:

"This is our generation's crossroads. Do we move Canada forward, or let people be left behind? Do we come out of this stronger, or paper over the cracks that the crisis has exposed? This is the time to remember who we are as Canadians. This is the opportunity to contain the global crisis and build back better, together."

Food system approaches can be a part of achieving the government of Canada's discourse of change but to do so mandate commitments must actively contribute to the just outcomes that the administration says that it hopes to achieve.

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The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author/s.

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