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Beyond Boomercentrism

There is too much focus on boomers -- and not enough on the young

By Paul Kershaw, Vancouver Sun April 20, 2010

Many Canadians tell a common story, about how we want our kids and grandchildren to have more than we do. I hear it from my parents and their friends, all fine members of the baby boom generation. As individuals, these people have worked hard, reared children -- they've contributed.

But, as a generation, whenever baby boomers tell the story about leaving more for those who come after them, the story is fiction, not fact.

Think about it. Canadian baby boomers are a generation that inherited little public debt. But as they ponder retirement, the federal and provincial debt loads both top 30 per cent of Gross Domestic Product.

Baby boomers inherited little environmental degradation. But they preside over a country that is now identified as a fossil fuel dinosaur by the international community.

Debt and global climate change are problems left for future generations to solve. This alone signals an issue of intergenerational justice that merits far more attention than it receives. Boomers consume beyond what they pay for, and beyond the pace at which the Earth can restock resources for those who follow.

Regrettably, these are not the only examples of intergenerational tension. Through no fault of their own, the potential of the next generation to address the challenging legacy left to them is being handicapped by a policy context largely designed and implemented by baby boomers.

How do we know what policy choices are compromising the ability of the next generation? For a decade, University of B. C researchers at the Human Early Learning Partnership, a world-renowned Global Knowledge Hub in research about the social determinants of child development, have worked with kindergarten teachers in almost all classrooms, in all school districts around the province. The data we collect show that 29 per cent of B.C. children are vulnerable before they reach kindergarten. By vulnerable, I don't mean that kindergarten kids aren't the next Mozart or Einstein. Rather, vulnerable children struggle with one or more age appropriate tasks, such as holding a pencil, climbing stairs, following instructions from teachers, getting along on the playground and knowing 10 letters.

You might think that child vulnerability is primarily a problem for the income-poor. But it's not. The majority of vulnerable B.C. children reside in middle-or upper-income households and neighbourhoods. Early vulnerability is a problem for mainstream families.

What is behind all this early vulnerability? The answer is that, compared with other countries, we don't invest much to support families to access the time, resources and community services they need to fulfil their caregiving and earning responsibilities. The fact is that Canada consistently places near, or at, the bottom of UNICEF and other international rankings of child care, early learning, work-life balance and family poverty policies. But most Canadians don't know this fact.

Why don't we know? Part of the reason is that we are a boomercentric society. Much of our policy debate is dominated by issues that speak to the aging demographic, especially medical care and pensions. It happened again at the end of March: Federal Finance Minister Jim Flaherty announced that his government was revisiting whether the country's retirement income system needs improvement. Opposition members responded by lamenting the slow pace of government efforts to fix the alleged pension problem.

Pensions are being prioritized (again!) by the government and opposition alike, even though the finance minister concedes that the Canadian system is considered strong by international standards.

Without doubt, we can and should ensure our pension system remains near the top of the international ranking. Baby boomers have every reason to desire a comfortable retirement. But where is the debate about policy issues for which Canada is ranked badly? We may have owned the podium at the Olympic and Paralympic Games, but time and time again, research shows that we can't even see the podium when it comes to family policy for young kids. When do we question our poor standing on this issue in the House of Commons, or the legislature?

I believe boomers genuinely want to leave more to their children and grandchildren than they have enjoyed. The story they tell themselves is not intended to be fiction. Although the generation's record of accomplishment on this front is weak so far, and the debt and global climate change are massive problems they leave for the future, there remains time for boomers to fix one major intergenerational problem: They can undo decisions which tolerate nearly 30 per cent of the next generation reaching school in a vulnerable condition. For this, we must move beyond the boomercentrism that guides our priority-setting to invest in the smart family policy parents require now, and that children deserve.

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