

ISSUES & IDEAS

'Think like a Beaver': Bridging the generational economic divide

UBC academic argues young families are not receiving their fair share of taxpayer-funded services

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VANCOUVER SUN



Dr. Paul Kershaw, in a new column that begins today on this page, argues that Canada no longer works for all generations. In fact, his analysis suggests that young families

with children are being deprived of a chance at a good life because boomers are hogging a lot of public dollars with potentially disastrous consequences for society.

That said, even Kershaw would admit that parents care about their kids, and grandparents are keenly interested in the welfare of their grandchildren. So there is common ground for an amicable discussion and search for solutions.

Kershaw is a former morning and

night. By day, he is an academic, public speaker, media contributor and volunteer.

In these latter roles, he is one of Canada's leading thinkers about family policy, receiving two national prizes from the Canadian Political Science Association for his research.

At the University of British Columbia, in the College for Interdisciplinary Studies, Kershaw is the Human Early Learning Partnership (HELP) Scholar of Social Care, Citizenship

and the Determinants of Health.

In launching this series titled "Think Like a Beaver", we hope to start a public dialogue about how we can distribute/invest tax dollars in a more equitable and efficient manner so that all Canadians can aim for the stars.

The decisions politicians make should be based on a set of verifiable facts and thoughtful analysis.

Our goal is to help politicians make informed decisions on where and how to spend public resources so that

Canadians of all generations can live their lives to the fullest potential. Kershaw's weekly Monday columns will give us a foundation to engage in this conversation.

You are welcome to write to Kershaw at: paul.kershaw@ubc.ca and to Sun Letters at: sunletters@vancouver.sun.com

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A conversation about Canada working for all generations

PAUL KERSHAW



Does Canada work for all generations?

No, Canada has become a far more difficult place to raise a family. Did you know the Canadian economy doubled in size since the mid-1970s, even after controlling for inflation? On average, the economy now produces an extra \$35,000 per household.

But despite this additional prosperity, the standard of living has declined for the generation raising young kids today. Consider three facts.

1. The average household income for young Canadian couples has flattened since the mid-1970s, after adjusting for inflation.

2. Household incomes are stagnant even though far more young women earn employment income today.

3. All the while, average housing prices in Canada have skyrocketed by 76 per cent.

When housing costs nearly double while household incomes stall for a group of adults who devote more time to the labour market than any previous generation, we are talking about a massive social and economic change — one akin to a silent, but no less damaging, earthquake in our environment.

The generation raising kids today is squeezed for time at home; they are squeezed for income because of the cost of housing and they are squeezed for services like child care that will help them balance successfully raising a family with earning a living.

Indeed, UNICEF and the OECD rank Canada among the very worst industrialized countries when it comes to investing in families with preschool age children.

This is a bad deal.

In response, this series will explore a New Deal for Families — one that transcends partisan ideology because

it gets back to basics. It is time to ask how can we:

- Put the family back into Canadian

values, while acknowledging the diversity of households.

- Spend more time together, and

spend less on stuff.

- Give real choices for women and men to contribute at home and on the



HEATHER WITHERSPOON

job, rather than just talk about this balance being a possibility.

- Enable and expect personal responsibility, because moms and dads alike have enough time to raise their kids, and enough time to earn a living.

In search of solutions, this series finds inspiration in beaver logic.

The beaver is a national animal to be proud of. Sure, it may not be as regal as the eagle to the south. But the beaver is a builder.

Recall the last creek or river you passed by where beavers dutifully constructed a dam. Ever wonder why they build it? Nobody lives in the dam. The dam does not provide shelter to a single beaver family.

Beavers build the dam, because the dam creates a reservoir. When the reservoir is deep enough, the beavers are able to swim faster than they can walk on land. When the reservoir is deep enough, beavers are further out of reach from predators. When the reservoir is deep enough, it provides a safe home for beavers to build lodges.

Whenever the dam springs a leak, busy beavers adapt. They fix the dam, renovating it to withstand the new challenges in their environment. Beavers adapt because they all depend on the dam to safeguard their shared standard of living.

Such logic guides this series. Each week for 24 weeks, I will urge readers to think like a beaver.

Thinking like a beaver is important now, because in this era of economic uncertainty and global insecurity, so much attention is given to what constrains Canada. This focus risks diminishing our national aspiration, and neglects our proud history of building and adapting.

History books make clear Canadians have been reticent to build new social policy since the 1970s, and for the most part, this struggle remains an untold story.

Next week's column will focus on the intergenerational tension in Canada.

Dr. Paul Kershaw is the Human Early Learning Partnership (HELP) Scholar of Social Care, Citizenship and the Determinants of Health at the University of British Columbia.

Prosperity without growth is possible

BY TIM JACKSON AND PETER VICTOR

Every society clings to a myth by which it lives. Ours is the myth of economic growth. For the last five decades the pursuit of growth has been the single most important policy goal across the world. The global economy is almost five times the size it was half a century ago. If it continues to grow at the same rate, the economy will be 80 times that size by the year 2100.

This extraordinary ramping up of global economic activity is without historical precedent. It is totally at odds with our scientific knowledge of the finite resource base and the fragile ecology on which we depend for survival. And it has already been accompanied by the degradation of an estimated 60 per cent of the world's ecosystems.

For the most part, we ignore the stark reality of these numbers. Or we claim, as Vancouver Sun writer Harvey Enchin did, that ecological protection is an "assault on freedom" (Greenest city moniker an Orwellian nightmare, Sept. 3). We defend the pursuit of business as usual in the fervent hope that more of the same will

Not just in the poorest countries, where a better quality of life is desperately needed, but even in the richest nations, where rampant consumerism threatens the fabric of our society.

The reasons for this collective blindness are easy to find. The modern economy is structurally reliant on economic growth for its stability. When growth falters — as it has done recently — politicians panic. Businesses struggle to survive. People lose their jobs and sometimes their homes. A spiral of recession looms. Questioning growth is deemed to be the act of lunatics, idealists and revolutionaries.

But question it we must. The myth of growth has failed us. It has failed the two billion people who still live on less than \$2 a day. It has failed the fragile ecological systems on which we depend for survival. It has failed, spectacularly, in its own terms, to provide economic stability and security. Shooting the messenger, or grossly misrepresenting their political views as Enchin does, is as futile as it is dishonest.

Prosperity for the few, founded on ecological destruction and persistent social injustice, is no foundation for



essential. But we also stand in urgent need of clearer visions, braver policymaking and a renewed sense of shared

of capital markets is long overdue in the wake of the global financial crisis. Untrammelled speculation in commodities and financial derivatives brought the financial world to the brink of collapse. We need solid investments in lasting assets: in clean low-carbon technologies, health and education, good quality housing, efficient transport systems, public buildings, and open spaces — investment in the future of our communities.

Enterprise has a vital role in this new economy. But the days of unrestrained profiteering at the expense of the customer and taxpayer must be ended. The invisible hand of the market must be tamed in the service of community. The most foresighted CEOs of the visionary companies already understand these demands. And new social enterprises (such as B-corporations in the United States, which use the power of business to solve social and environmental problems) are beginning to thrive in the post-crisis economy.

Fixing the economy is only part of the battle. We also have to confront the convoluted social logic of consumerism. The days of spending money we don't have on things we don't need

services, stable communities, decent, secure employment and healthy environments. The ability to participate in society, in less materialistic — and more meaningful — ways, is not the bitter pill of eco-fascism as Enchin would have it, but our single best hope for social progress.

Whatever the future holds, one thing is clear: Change is inevitable. There is no comfortable scenario in which we just carry on as before. Those who hope the growth economy will lead to a materialistic utopia are destined for disappointment. We simply don't have the ecological capacity to fulfil this dream. By the end of the century, it will leave our children and grandchildren with a hostile climate, depleted resources, the loss of habitats, the decimation of species, massive food scarcity, large-scale migration and almost inevitably war.

So our only real choice is to work for change. To transform the structures and institutions that shape the social world. To sweep away the short-term thinking that has plagued society for decades and to replace it with a more credible vision of a lasting prosperity for all.