

# Where's the Family Party?: A tonic for democracy

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**R**obocalls misdirecting Canadians to polling stations. That's the last thing our democracy needs. Canadians have enough difficulty finding the ballot box, with voter turnout rates at around 60 per cent federally, and less than 50 per cent in Ontario's last provincial campaign. This alleged trickery is understandably fuelling even more cynicism among Canadians who are already too apathetic about the political work involved in citizenship.

A new Statistics Canada study confirms that voter apathy is especially high among Canadians under age 45, and among those with preschool children. Readers of my column will know I believe apathy among these groups is ironic and self-defeating. It is precisely this demographic that suffers a bad generational deal. Incomes have stalled for young families, even though far more young women contribute employment income than a generation ago. With stalled household incomes, young Canadians pay far higher housing prices. And UNICEF ranks Canada among the worst industrialized countries for investing in the generation raising young kids. What accounts for our poor ranking? It costs parents the equivalent of a second mortgage to share a year at home following the birth of a new baby, and a third mortgage to pay for child care services thereafter.

While it is difficult to tackle high housing prices or transform the wage system, it is well within our grasp to change family policy so that the cost of parental leave and child care services don't exacerbate the time, income and



JULIE OLIVER/POSTMEDIA NEWS

**The WTF movement is seeking policies that are family friendly.**

service squeeze on young people. But policy change won't happen by itself. Canadians under 45 must demand change to create a new deal for families. Regrettably, by all measures, we are either lousy at using our political voices, or feel too busy, tired or apathetic to search for political solutions.

In the face of this democratic deficit, I long for citizen heroes – people committed to enriching public dialogue, and renewing interest in the political processes that underpin the health of Canada's population, economy and environment. Thankfully, last week I found two heroes in the East Kootenays. Keri Rinehart and Patricia Whalen run the Success by Six and Children's First organizations in the region. I believe these two may go down in history for hosting the first ever WTF (Where's the Family?) party in Canada.

The WTF party aimed to rekindle the energy that inspired the "sex, drugs and rock 'n' roll" generation of the '60s, an era of that connected partying and politics in debates about war, civil rights and gender equality. According to Keri, "it's time to mobilize all Canadians, especially Generation Squeeze, to rediscover fun ways to use our voices." So they invited the community to join a party at Cranbrook's Heritage Inn. The Columbian

Basin Trust donated money to hire DJ James Weir to set the mood to music, Keri and Patricia provided subsidies for people's child care to free them up for the evening, and 52 people came to mingle, share a drink, dance if they dared, and yes ... talk politics. Not a bad turnout for a snowy Monday evening in small-town B.C., when many had to drive some distance, including Joanne, Monica, Kristi and her baby Lucy from Golden who travelled three hours each way to attend.

No one talked partisan politics. It was just people finding fun in talking about what we all can do to address the declining standard of living for young Canadians by creating a better policy deal for the generation raising kids.

WTF Party-goers (including some boomers and retirees) got creative, imagining alternate names for Generations X and Y. Suggestions included Gen Duped, Gen Shafted, and Generation Over and Out (Overworked, Overtired and Out of money). But the name that struck me was Generation Shame. Many signalled that they are embarrassed. They work hard at home and on the job, but just can't get their young families to the secure footing their own parents enjoyed just one generation ago when wages were higher relative to the cost of housing, and most families had more parental time at home.

Before talk of Gen Shame sparked a spontaneous rendition of "It's my party and I'll cry if I want to," WTF partygoers proposed alternate theme songs for their generation. Bob Marley's *Get Up, Stand Up*, and Sister Sledge's *We are Family* were among the favourites, moving some into a conga line before the night was over. These songs are also fit for a WTF rally, some suggested, where marchers could carry placards reading "Sure we like sex, but we're tired of being Gen Screwed." Or "If you want grand-kids, then support a New Deal for Families."

Anticipating the next WTF party, groups proposed Gen Squeeze cocktail concoctions. My personal favourite was "Tough Medicine." Two parts lemon, to leave a sour taste in your mouth; one part vodka, because it hits you when you're not expecting it; Red Bull, because who has energy when struggling to balance work and family; and prune juice, in deference to the aging population. All infused with crushed rosemary, to capture how many under age 45 find their dreams for a young family crushed by a declining standard of living. Tough Medicine would be accompanied by a chaser of formula, I was told, because many families can't breastfeed for as long as they would like!

The amazing thing about what Keri and Patricia did is that others left the party wanting to host their own events. Angie Wagner is offering WTF? T-shirts for the first 50 people to attend the next party in Cranbrook. And Joanne McCullough, proprietor of the Golden Taps in Golden has offered her pub as a venue for a WTF party in her community. Large or small, these gatherings can help citizens find the fun in using our political voices to support a Canada that works for all generations.

WTF parties are just the tonic to heal our ailing democracy, and to address the declining standard of living for Gen Squeezed. When faced with growing political apathy, especially among citizens under age 45, it is heartening to see that some Canadians have found a way to respond. To maintain momentum, I welcome all WTF party ideas on my blog ([blogs.ubc.ca/newdealforfamilies](http://blogs.ubc.ca/newdealforfamilies)). And I'll do what I can to attend personally from coast to coast to celebrate everyday efforts to rejuvenate Canadian democracy in the face of political assaults like the robocall scandal.

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