

A conversation about Canada working for all generations ^[1]

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Source: Vancouver Sun

Format: Article

Publication Date: 19 Sep 2011

EXCERPTS

Does Canada work for all generations?

No. Canada has become a far more difficult place to raise a family.

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1. The average household income for young Canadian couples has flatlined 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 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.

- reprinted from the Vancouver Sun

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