

Scientific minds of the future ^[1]

Author: Anderson, Lynell

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EXCERPTS:

Saturday mornings I occasionally attend the Frontiers of Modern Physics lecture series put on by TRIUMF, the University of British Columbia and Simon Fraser University.

It's amazing what you can learn from a physics lecture. It's also interesting to see where your mind goes during those rare moments when you're not completely captivated by the thrill of scientific discovery.

My mind goes to people, starting with those in the room. Why are we here, I wonder?

One Saturday I counted 39 young people in the room, probably senior high school students. Why weren't they sleeping in or working at part-time jobs or just hanging out together like we used to do when I was in high school? Did they all give up their Saturday morning for the love of physics? Or were they here to study and take in as much as they can? No doubt we've encouraged them to believe that post-secondary education is essential to their future survival - even as we've made it harder than ever to attend with entrance requirements and tuition fees raised to the stratosphere. Then I wondered if they knew how much a degree will cost either them or their parents or both, or how hard it is generally for young graduates to find good jobs today.

Thankfully, before my thinking went too far down this increasingly negative path, I thought of the upside.

In my high school physics class, only three of 21 students were female, whereas women made up nearly half of the young audience gathered. Everyone seemed genuinely interested in the lecture, which could serve them well as, according to futurists, students who obtain science-related degrees will be more likely to find good jobs - including young women, thanks to improvements in some areas of women's equality over time.

My mind returned to the lecture, content with the vision of these brilliant young scientists working to address climate change, food security and other serious issues in our world.

The next time my mind wandered, it was to think about the lives of these young future scientists perhaps five, 10 or even 15 years later. A time in their lives when many of them may be thinking about having children.

Alas, the story takes another difficult twist here, as they now face the perfect storm of parenthood in Canada. Since two earners barely bring home today what one breadwinner did in the 1970s, we've gone from 40-hour work weeks to closer to 80-hour work weeks. The result? Generations raising young children are squeezed for time at home. They are squeezed for income because the extra hours of work don't make up for the fact that housing prices are nearly double - even when many young people live in condos or trade yards for time-consuming commutes. They are squeezed for services like child care that are essential for working parents, but remain in short supply and cost more than university.

These issues are daunting. But there are solutions - and they're not rocket science. They just require us to once again come together as a nation to respond to changes in our world that are beyond the individual control of generations X and Y, also referred to as Generation Squeeze.

A generation ago we created pensions and public health care, working collectively and effectively to address a pressing problem of the day: poverty among seniors. The result? As a group, seniors now have one of the lowest poverty rates in Canada.

To this day, Canadians rightly cherish these and other social programs that prioritize older generations. So why is it that since then we've been unwilling to narrow the generational spending gap by introducing new social programs to address the issues that are critical for younger generations today?

Multiple international reports show, for example, that when it comes to public policies for families with young children, Canada lags behind most developed countries. Our country isn't making it possible for most dads and moms to share 18 months at home with a new baby, find and afford quality child care services or access other work-life balance measures. Our poor international record reflects in part that our governments spend just \$12,000 per young person each year, compared to around \$45,000 per retiree.

That's why I'm working to make Generation Squeeze a priority in Canada and reaching out to my fellow baby boomers for help. I believe that most of us want to protect important social programs like health care and pensions, without sacrificing our children's present and our grandchildren's future. Working together again, we can achieve this better generational deal - one that gives all generations a chance.

Find out more at www.gensqueeze.ca and contact me at info@gensqueeze.ca [2].

Lynell Anderson is the senior community researcher for Generation Squeeze.

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