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Canada's mandatory long-form census was restored—many here will remember—approximately eighteen months ago. At the time, The Honourable Navdeep Bains, Minister of Innovation, Science and Economic Development, asserted that Canadians were “reclaiming their right to accurate and reliable information” on the basis of which they would be able to make sound decisions about their personal and national futures. Then last August, with the 2016 Census of Population complete, the nation's Chief Statistician, Wayne Smith, pronounced it the “best Census ever,” with an overall response rate of 98.4%.

A few weeks ago, at the start of May, Statistics Canada released a second series of data derived from the Census, this time bearing on the age and sex of the Canadian population, and the report made big news. The reason was what the 2016 Census had revealed—namely, that Canada has in the last few years undergone a very significant generational shift: “As a result of the rapid increase in the number of people 65 years of age and older since 2011, 2016 marked the first time that the census enumerated more seniors (5.9 million) than children 14 years of age and younger (5.8 million).”

What does this mean? One thing it tells us is that the Canadian population is aging—not that we didn't already know that, in a crude sense—but the census story is all about changing proportions. For the first time since Confederation in 1867 the seniors' share of the population now exceeds the children's share; and the group in between (15 to 64 year-olds) is shrinking as a proportion of the total population.

I know I have a right to this kind of information, but to be frank I never know quite what to do with it. The StatsCan report tells me that such knowledge “will be especially helpful for adapting social programs for children, adults and seniors to the new demographic reality,” but I wonder about that. Undoubtedly it will help us identify and understand “the new demographic reality,” but what it will mean to “adapt” to that “reality” is much more than a statistical question.

Implicit in the phrase “demographic reality” is an assumption that certain consequences must inevitably follow the shift: for example, that funding for health and social programs will now move proportionately to favour the aging and the elderly, even as the working population that must pay for those programs is shrinking. That may be logical, and providing proper care to the elderly, no matter how numerous they are, should be a non-negotiable requirement in a civilized nation; but there are nevertheless vitally important questions we must still ask about the condition of, and prospects for, the younger generation in this scenario.

These are especially important questions to ask in 2017, as Canada marks 150 years as a nation. Anniversaries like this provoke retrospection, and they also sometimes provide an opportunity for jingoism and mindless patriotic fervor. I dare say we will see some of that in Canada when July 1st rolls around, but so far this country has taken note of its special year in a fairly muted fashion, recognizing—especially on university campuses—that while there is much to celebrate in our history, there is also much about which we should be thoughtful and critical.

Our sesquicentennial is also an occasion to look into the future, imagining what Canada will become in the next fifty or one hundred years; and it is in that context that the 2016 Census results are so thought-provoking. We are being told that a far-reaching and unprecedented “generational shift” is happening right now, just as we’re running up the anniversary flag. Interestingly it is a shift that sends us back to our last big national event, the centennial in 1967.

It is interesting because that year coincided with another very significant and related generational shift. The middle of the Sixties is generally understood to be the end-point of the baby boom, the population surge which began in 1946 after the end of the Second World War; and it is the aging members of that generation whose entry into the ranks of seniors over the last few years have given rise to the demographic changes that the 2016 Census recently revealed.

I am a baby boomer, and it was my generation that seemed so incomprehensible to our parents that a special term had to be coined to describe the phenomenon: this was “the Generation Gap.” One experienced the Gap as significant and sometimes profound differences of opinion about music, politics, personal values and a host of other topics. Families like my own became cultural battlegrounds—I remember my father inexplicably (to me at least) being plunged into a red-faced fury when he discovered in my elder brother’s clothing drawer a pair of blue jeans with an extravagant floral design and a shirt with—of all things—puffed sleeves. [I think you all know enough about Sixties fashions to picture these apparently offensive garments!]

My own differences with my parents were less sartorial than political in nature; but as I have reflected on those times I have come to understand that those two categories of resistance were for my generation not really separable: to a degree not since seen in the West, how—or indeed, whether—one clothed one’s body was contested terrain between the generations, a language through which other, sometimes deeply divergent, views expressed themselves.

The Generation Gap was a term invented by sociologists, building on the theory of generations developed by Karl Mannheim in the 1920s. For Mannheim, a generation was not simply a cohort of people born and achieving maturity between specified years; it was such a cohort for sure, but also one upon which certain major historical

events had registered an impact. A generation was in other words shaped by its particular historical experience: mine was, for example, post-war and post-Hiroshima, but definitely not post-nuclear, as we lived in daily apprehension of a nuclear apocalypse. My wife remembers that as a child in school she was trained to climb under her desk and cover her head in anticipation of an atomic blast. It would be indeed surprising if such practices had not left an indelible mark on the generation for which they were routine and normal.

While the 2016 Canadian Population Census seems to confirm that we are in the midst of a decisive generational shift, it is obviously far too early to speculate on the qualitative dimensions of whatever gap might open up between your generation and mine. Indeed, it is entirely possible—notwithstanding Mannheim’s implication that some sort of “generational consciousness” must inevitably emerge—that dislocation and discontinuity will not define the ways in which we relate to each other.

There will certainly be economic and other consequences of the aging of the Canadian population, and today as I speak to an auditorium full of graduates from the Faculty of Health Sciences I am acutely conscious of some of them, most obviously the increasing strain on the health care system as seniors come to outnumber children and the active wealth-producing workforce shrinks. Looking into the future, as one does on occasions such as this, and as our nation will do on July 1st, it is obvious that significant challenges lie ahead as the torch passes from one generation to the next.

But I am profoundly hopeful about the future because of my faith in all of you. The well-known anthropologist Margaret Mead published in 1970 a serious study of intergenerational relations—*Culture and Commitment: A Study of the Generation Gap*—in which she beautifully captured the service which every new generation performs for its society and for humanity at large. “The young,” she wrote, are “free to act on their initiative [and] can lead their elders in the direction of the unknown.” The young “must ask the questions that we would never think to ask,” and through creativity, curiosity and innovativeness find answers that their elders cannot imagine.

I have worked in universities for more than forty years and have always—indeed increasingly—been invigorated by the way in which students have sought to challenge received wisdom and to advance the human intellectual and social project. If there was ever a gap between us—and I suppose, following Mannheim, that there must always be at least some intergenerational discontinuities—I have strained to hear your voices from the other side, to learn from what you have had to say and from what you have done.

Margaret Mead felt that while the young should be free to act on their initiative, they

also needed somehow to re-establish trust with their elders “so that the elders will be permitted to work with them on the answers.” According to that vision of generational shift, then, your future is a project on which we collaborate, my generation providing what knowledge and wisdom we can, but depending on you to surpass us in making this a brighter world.

I haven’t dwelt on the challenges you will face—except, of course, for the looming healthcare problem in our country—and I haven’t talked more broadly about the role of my generation in creating some of them. This is meant to be an upbeat occasion, after all. But if you need to trust us in order achieve the solutions you seek, we need to admit our failings and shortcomings and trust to your energy, creativity and positive values.

I became an educator four decades ago not just for something to do, but for something I wanted to see created: a better, more just society. The wellbeing of people and of the communities they comprise has been my preoccupation. And unlike many of my peers I do not believe that my generation was unique in its idealism, altruism and social conscience. I know from working with many of you that those three things are as much if not more alive amongst you than they ever were amongst my peers. And that is in its own way a bit of a miracle, given the state of the world that we’re in the process of handing over to you.

We delight in your success, we are in awe of your talent, and we are excited to see where you will take us.

Good luck.