

2 September, 2003

Caregiving –What’s it worth?

By

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40 years ago, life was about work. Young people took up their life’s work in their teens and most older people died soon after retirement. Today, young people spend up to 30 years preparing for their life’s work, and many of us will live for 30 years after retirement.

40 years ago, men worked for wages and women worked for the family. Today, men and women do much the same work outside the home, and are learning to share tasks in the home.

I call these massive shifts in the pattern of life Canada’s Great Social Transformation. The long-term impact is as important to us as the Great Depression, though the short-term effects have not been nearly so negative.

The trouble is we, as a society, are still locked into the basic assumptions of the 1960s, when most of our social programs were established.

If both men and women are working outside the home, as they are today, who looks after the children and the adults who need care and support? We expect them to buy the service. We have made caregiving a market commodity, when in fact it is a fundamental human need.

This is hugely important for an ageing society. We are undermining the capacity of working age people to be the best that they can be as productive members of society by **not** investing in care giving.

In most of Canada today, child care is available for families with high income and for those with the lowest incomes who have access to government subsidies. But, for ordinary working people, good child care can cost \$10,000 a year, except in Quebec.

Good social care for the elderly – that is providing personal care, supportive housing, and so on – is even scarcer and more expensive. Countless elderly people are dependent on overworked family members or living alone. Social programs only kick in when there is a medical emergency.

We need to update our thinking on social policies. Investments we make in child care and social care for the elderly have an economic payback. They enable working adults to be more productive and support their kids to become productive adults.

We need to rethink the balance of responsibilities to reflect 21st century patterns of living. Families, communities, governments, and the private sector all have a role to play.

Governments will have to invest more themselves and, at the same time, become much more proactive in supporting community and private efforts to establish more and better services. The key is to make these services affordable for ordinary working families as well as the poor and the rich.

Caregiving is a wonderful human endeavour. It also makes economic sense. Strangely, it is not what we are hearing about in this year's round of election campaigns. Let's give it the attention it deserves.