
**Labour pains: stunning silence around issue of birth rates in Canada.
It stands in stark contrast to the forward-thinking approaches of
most other industrialised nations with low birth rates**

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People in industrialized countries are not having as many children as they used to. It's a fact of life. Whether this is the result of personal choice, or limited circumstances the product is a rapidly ageing workforce. Many nations have been seriously studying and debating the challenges and possible solutions. Most countries recognize that a *mix* of policies needs to be implemented to secure a sustainable population level optimal for economic and environmental stability.

In Canada the public and political debate has been limited to non-existent. We have come to believe that immigration will solve most of our labour supply problems. Any remaining problems can then be addressed by tinkering with the retirement age and encouraging older workers to continue to work well beyond their 6th decade. Yet these strategies become less than ideal when examined more closely.

Recent cohorts of immigrants are not being successfully integrated into our economy, stories of over-qualified taxi drivers and doctors working for minimum wage in service jobs abound. In addition, our immigration system favours older workers; in 2001 the median age of immigrants was 46, an age distribution which only serves to magnify the baby boom effect. And in order for immigration to compensate for the ageing effect we would need to welcome nearly 3.5 million immigrants per year more than ten times our current rate.

Given the evidence that immigration may not solve our problems, some propose that a later retirement age is the solution. Currently the average retirement age is 61 years. Do we want to rely on an increasingly older work force to lead us into the 21st century? Do Canadians want a society where there are few children and many, many seniors? And will this be a vicious cycle? ... the more seniors we have, the fewer schools we need, the more health care resources we must have, the fewer daycares we can afford, thereby further reducing the support for Canadians who want to have children..

So how are other countries, facing similar demographic realities, responding to the challenge? Across Europe low birth rates have engendered serious and concerted attention from governments for a decade or more. Countries have responded in a range of ways, some looking at increasing immigration from historically small numbers and others also look to retirement ages as part of the solution. However the most attention has been paid to the plummeting birth rates of European citizens. The European Union has been studying this "crisis" for many years

and has produced volumes of evidence. Most studies show conclusively that Europeans both want to have more children and are prepared to have them, given sufficient support. Australia and Japan have also come to this conclusion.

Do *Canadians* want to have more children? According to The World Values Survey, an on-going multi-country survey, Canadian men and women, when asked, say that between two and four children is the ideal number. That's a far cry from the actual rate of 1.5.

Ah, you say, but Quebec tried offering cash incentives to have more children, and it didn't work. Nothing could be further from the truth. In fact, the Quebec experiment with The Allowance for Newborn Children *did* have an impact, however the results may have been too modest compared to the cost. Yet no one has asked: what is the cost of the alternative? ...the cost of fewer and fewer babies being born? ...the cost to society and younger generations of paying taxes to support a growing retired population?the cost to our economy and competitiveness of insufficient numbers of young workers? Furthermore, Quebec has now instituted a universal, affordable childcare system that provides support to working parents. While availability is still a problem in Quebec, this approach to family-friendly policies has been proven, in countless studies, to be more effective than cash incentives.

So what do we make of this? Are we to assume that encouraging women to have more babies is feasible and desirable? What of their career aspirations? What of gender equality? What if they don't want more babies?

The evidence continues to mount in favour of such an approach. Studies have shown, for example, that European countries with the highest labour force participation of women also have higher birth rates. It seems contradictory. How is this possible? Upon closer examination, nations such as Denmark and Sweden have adopted a mix of policies to support families with reasonable parental leaves, affordable, reliable child care and tax incentives. They have also ensured that employers provide meaningful opportunities for part-time work to parents of both genders, while they have children in the home. So, clearly women can and do want to have careers and children too.

So, if Canadians would like to have more children and evidence has shown it is feasible and possibly desirable to support this outcome, why has there been no national debate in Canada to examine these matters? The stunning silence around the issue of birth rates in Canada stands in stark contrast to the forward-thinking approaches of most other industrialised nations with low birth rates. Isn't it time to look at this issue?

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