
OPINION-EDITORIAL

Seniors Advocate Responds to Globe and Mail Column

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Margaret Wenté's June 7th column in the Globe and Mail "[Time to Soak the Seniors](#)" was a generationally divisive and stunningly inaccurate generalization of a group of people based on their age. Had her vitriolic tactics been employed to describe a group of citizens based on their race, religion or cultural norms the Globe and Mail would have been deluged with protests and condemnation, as Chancellor of Sheridan College's Hazel McCallion so eloquently expressed in her Globe and Mail column- [Ageism is getting old.](#)

Ms. Wenté appears to be spending a great deal of her time sipping lattes with her "ladies who do lunch" crowd and drawing significant inferences about the lives of seniors in general based on the select non-representative sample of seniors she is "pumping iron" with.

There is no denying that many seniors in this country are thoroughly enjoying life on middle or high incomes, but this is true in the population at large as well. In fact, looking at the objective data of Statistics Canada, the median household income for seniors is in fact the lowest of any age cohort over the age of 25. In Canada, single people over 65 have a median income of \$26,000 (StatsCan 2013 Canadian Income Survey). This means that fully half of single Canadian seniors are living on *less* than \$26,000 a year.

Unfortunately, for columnists it isn't interesting or bombastic to write about the people I meet every day in my role as Canada's first Seniors Advocate. These are not folks who fly to Florida for the winter or see their Old Age Security as a great way to pay for more lattes. These are the 26% of single seniors in British Columbia who are indeed living in poverty. These are people who have no expectation of increases in income with new jobs, no mobility to move to more affordable rental markets (20% of seniors in BC are renters) and 35% do not live in urban areas where house values provide potential significant equity to access. Some may question entitlements offered to seniors based solely on their age with no consideration of income. However, in fact, almost all government subsidized entitlements for seniors are income tested.

The social spending bias against seniors continues to be expressed by other media and some academics who cherry-pick data and offer gross generalizations that take the economic conditions of some seniors and apply it to all seniors. Perhaps the most offensive part of these often hyperbole laced arguments is when medical costs are considered. The argument Ms. Wenté and others advance is that we should be counting the money we spend on fixing hips, knees and hearts as part of looking at government expenditures on seniors, and lump it in with OAS and cinema discounts to conclude that we spend disproportionately more on seniors than the population under 65 on a per capita basis. Not to let facts get in the way of a good story,

but we could slice out any number of discrete populations and show similar healthcare dollar disparities. Conveniently missing from the conversation on health care costs for seniors is the value of the contribution that seniors make to caring for their spouses. Before we go blaming seniors for the fact they need a new hip or bypass surgery, we should first thank them for the billions, yes billions of dollars they save the health care system by taking care of each other. Indeed I find it hard to believe that Ms. Wentz and her posse have spent any time with seniors living in residential care or receiving home care – the flip side of seniors on the tennis courts and golf courses of Toronto.

It will be very difficult to have a rational adult conversation if we keep trying to whip up generational warfare with incendiary statements such as one generation is “robbing” the other of their future. Currently seniors represent about 17% of Canada’s population and this is expected to rise to about 24% by the year 2031 at which point it will stabilize. By any estimation 24% is a minority of the population. Please let us give the respect to this minority that we would give to any other when we are discussing needs and entitlements, in other words, let us remain Canadian in our discourse.

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