

SATURDAY OBSERVER

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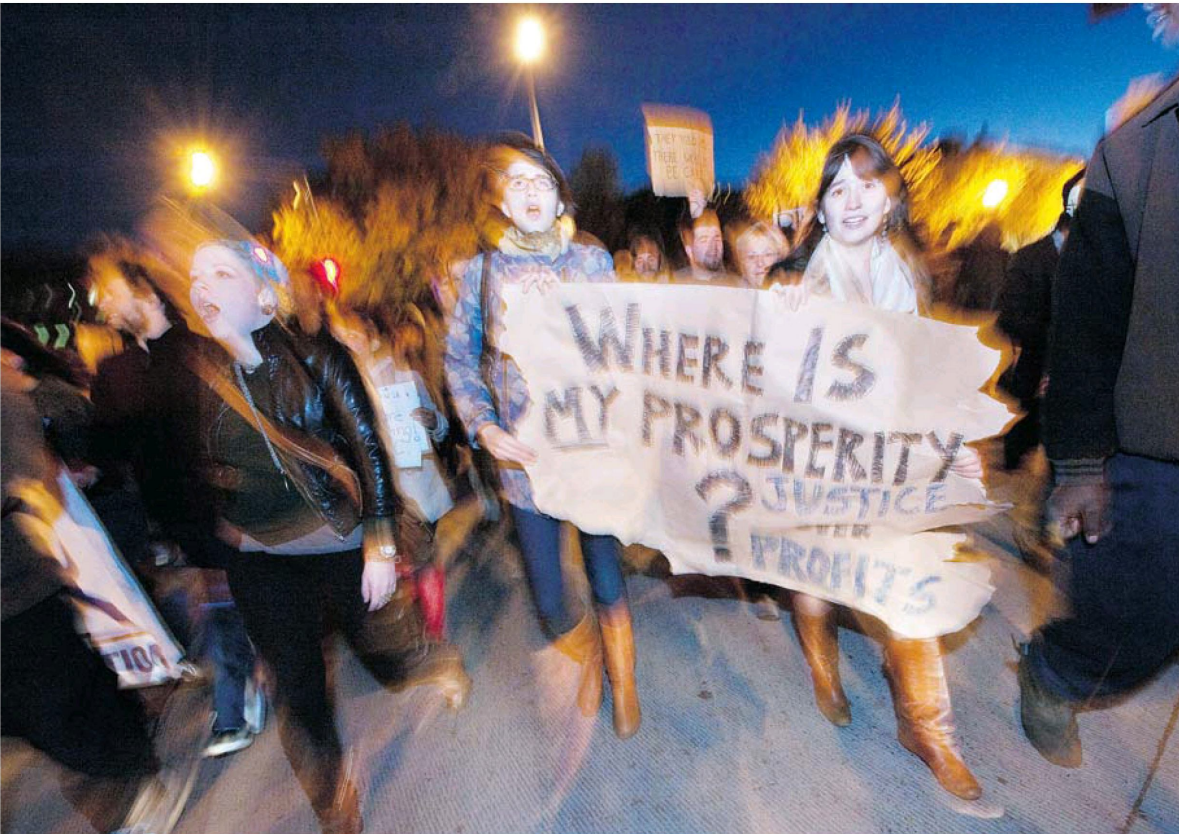
BREAKING NEWS AT OTTAWACITIZEN.COM

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PROTESTERS WITH THE OCCUPY DC MOVEMENT MARCH IN WASHINGTON LAST MONTH. NICHOLAS KAMM, AFP/GETTY IMAGES

Generation lie

When the Occupy Movement’s battle lines were drawn, it wasn’t just the 99 per cent against the one. Another popular matchup was that of the baby boomers versus ‘the screwed generation.’ The only trouble with that one? It’s complete fiction, says **ROBERT WRIGHT**, who knocks down some myths about the evil boomers, too.

The Occupy Movement that swept across North America this fall was widely criticized for lacking focus, for having no firm demands, and for its refusal to coalesce into a structured political organization. As a result, the various encampments attracted all manner of protesters, objectors, and social outsiders. But one constantly recurring sentiment has been the feeling of inter-generational grievance: that youth unemployment is at record levels, that student debt is skyrocketing, and that this generation of kids will be “the first generation to do worse than its parents.”

It has been more than a decade since North American educators and other sympathetic observers began sounding the alarm on the chronic downward mobility of youth and young adults. In those days, the plight of marginalized, impoverished and debt-ridden kids was exacer-

bated by the propensity of older citizens to blame the mess on the kids themselves. When Canadian pollster Michael Adams dismissed 1.9 million Canadian youth as “aimless dependents” and “slackers without a cause” in his celebrated 1997 best-seller *Sex in the Snow*, he captured the Nineties zeitgeist.

That was before the Great Recession and Occupy Wall Street. Now, instead of slackers we have a new pop-demography zeitgeist: boomers versus “generation debt” or “the screwed generation.” But here’s a news flash: However appealing this model of Canadian society may be to tabloid journalists, opportunistic cool-hunters, overpaid cyber-gurus and angry young job-seekers, it is a complete fiction.

Thanks to pop demographers like David Foot (remember *Boom, Bust and Echo?*), we have been fully conditioned to think of ourselves as card-carrying mem-

bers of various birth cohorts — Boomers, Gen-X-ers, Millennium Kids. For Foot and his countless imitators, the only social dynamic that matters is generational competition, where each cohort occupies a distinct social, cultural and especially economic space that must be continually staked out and defended vis-à-vis the others. Generational conflict displaces all other forms of social struggle, pitting parents against children, middle-aged boomers against both the elderly and the young, even the living against the unborn. In this brave new world, Canadians have vested interests rather than traditions. Far from having anything of value to teach each other, each cohort lives in a world of its own making, deeply suspicious of the others and concerned only to prevail in a world of shrinking resources and growing demand for them.

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Going Dutch

An appeal court decision expected early next year could decriminalize prostitution in Canada, putting us on par with the Netherlands. Experts there say it’s the best way to protect women, but officials in Sweden, where they have a zero-tolerance policy, say it would be a big mistake.

CLAIRE TREMBLAY looks at the two approaches to see what Canada can learn.

Det.-Insp. Kajsa Wahlberg, a middle-aged woman with short blond hair, exudes an air of policing officialdom. As Sweden’s National Rapporteur on Human Trafficking, the seasoned

dictates that drag drugged women en masse into anonymous hotel rooms across Europe, Wahlberg has seen it all.

And as the Ontario Court of Appeal considers a case that could

human trafficking to soar.

“If Canada adopts a model of decriminalizing sex buyers, prostitution will explode. It will become like the Netherlands,” says Wahlberg. “The sex buyers will require

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people, solutions



Rising tuition fees is a popular grievance among Occupy protesters, including those at Berkeley, above. There's no question students are burdened with debt, but boomers can't be blamed for failing to save for their kids' education when they believed it would remain a bargain, Robert Wright says.

In truth, far from rapaciously exploiting the ever-widening social safety net in the Canada of their youth, many boomers today concede that they completely missed the boat. Take university education. By the late 1970s, tuition was virtually free, and government grants and loans were extraordinarily generous. Nobody knew that the party would not go on forever. Boomers who misread the tea leaves and opted not to go to university have been kicking themselves ever since.

Their regrets extend to their debt-burdened children. The best evidence that nobody thought much about saving for their kids' education is that there was no government-subsidized Registered Educational Savings Plan nor any demand for one. Boomers can hardly be blamed for failing to save for their kids' education when everyone believed it would remain a bargain.

Finally, where do Canadian kids themselves stand, those who ostensibly camped out in the nation's parks as part of the Occupy movement's 99 per cent? Last month, the B.C. Securities Commission published the results of a remarkable poll. Three thousand recent Canadian high school graduates en route to post-secondary education were asked about their financial futures. They told pollsters that they believe they will be earning \$91,000 per year within a decade, that they will own their own homes within the same period, and they will have their student loans paid off in half that time. Groping for an explanation for why young Canadians appear to be so utterly deluded, the authors of the report concluded bluntly that they must be financially illiterate.

Maybe. But there is another explanation. Maybe these kids have been so well sheltered by their parents' largesse and generosity that they expect it to continue indefinitely. Maybe boomer parents will continue to provide their children with free room and board, childcare and a sympathetic ear, as well as money for tuition, tuition debt, home purchases, car payments, insurance, transit, grad school, startup business costs, cellphones, whatever.

In the past, when youth problems were perceived to be "out of control" (delinquency, crime, unemployment, social tensions, drug problems), governments stepped in to restore stability. This time, although young Canadians are obviously

facing enormous challenges, the indicators of social tensions, particularly violent crime, are actually receding. Is it possible that the net effect of Canadians' family survival strategies are creating a more conservative society overall? Is it possible that young Canadians' identification with their parents' economic interests, combined with a lifetime of deferred gratification, explains why they are less rebellious than their parents?

It does not have to be this way, of course. No one wants a lost generation of young adults delaying house-buying and child-bearing into their 30s and 40s. As Paul Kershaw of UBC has said repeatedly, many of the challenges confronting young Canadians, particularly young parents, can and ought to be addressed politically, as matters of public policy. Kershaw wants government to help out young families by introducing a \$22-billion "New Deal" that would include a national childcare strategy and more generous federally funded parental leave provisions.

He is right. These are things a rich country like Canada can and should do. We could also make tuition affordable and tuition debt manageable. We could make more of an effort to redistribute wealth on a national scale and to redress the trend of worsening wealth polarization — priorities the Occupy movement has put squarely on the national agenda. We could also find some creative financial mechanisms for redistributing wealth within families, so those with big homes full of adult children can "downsize" while providing their kids an entrée into the real estate market. We could do what we said we would do almost two decades ago and end child poverty.

The next decade is going to be difficult, everyone agrees on that. Austerity is once again the watchword in the industrialized West, as we wrestle our deficits and debts to the ground and try to rebuild our floundering economies. Now is not the time to engage in silly pseudo-demography about competing generations, as if this alone accounts for the myriad problems facing young Canadians. It is time for serious people to start thinking about serious solutions, and the kids themselves know it.

Robert Wright is Professor of History at Trent University in Oshawa, Ontario

hear him roar



Founder of Americans for Tax Reform Grover Norquist.

"There's no compromise. One wins. One loses."
"But what about the people in the middle?" I whimper gamely, approaching the big cat himself. "What about the social costs of slashing the size of the government and firing hundreds of thousands of workers who have nowhere else to go?"
"This isn't Robin Hood stuff, this is Sheriff of Nottingham stuff," Grover Norquist snaps back. "This is taking FROM the lower-income people and giving to the HIGHER-income people. Public-sector workers are LOOTING the lower-income workers. They're getting paid \$400 billion MORE than private-sector

Taxes, cutbacks, layoffs, the deficit: here is the 2012 election reduced to gazelle and cheetah.
The unreformed Harvard liberal Barack Obama, Grover Norquist says, "is sitting in the White House with class hatred, envy and greed as his campaign slogan."
But Republicans, he guarantees, have the advantage of an ironclad guarantee: "You take the pledge, you break the pledge, you lose."
The Democratic Party, roars the tax-eating tiger, "is Mau Mau-ing everybody who doesn't get out of the way."
Warily, I scan the veld for warriors. But I can only see one.

BLACKBERRY ROUNDTABLE
DIRTY TRICKS AND WOOKIEE MISTAKES

It was an episode of Roundtable: CSI this week as the gang turned its forensic skills to a government on the defensive. But from the dirty-tricks call centre in Mount Royal to the free ride given to Peter MacKay, the verdict is that Canada's political culture might have been permanently Harperized. Andrew Potter twiddled his thumbs while Scott Reid and Kady O'Malley debated the meaning of it all. BlackBerrys at the ready ...

AP: When Montreal Liberal MP Irwin Cotler heard that someone was making phone calls to his constituents suggesting that Cotler had resigned and that there would soon be a byelection in the riding, the Conservatives didn't deny that it was their doing. Instead they sent Peter Van Loan to chum the waters: First he noted that since rumours were always swirling about Cotler's possible resignation, it was incumbent upon the Tories to bring the matter up with his constituents. Besides, he added, it's a matter of free speech. In politics as in sports, the best defence is a relentless offence, but surely sportsmanship is still a guiding moral code in both. Is this normal, or has Canadian politics become the MMA of public life?

SR: Let's start by paying the obvious: This is unprecedented. That matters because every time someone lowers the watermark for acceptable political behaviour, the reflex response is "well, everyone's doing it." Actually that's not so. But if we don't blow the whistle, scream "stop" or otherwise halt the descent into pure partisan amorality, everyone will be doing it. Because political parties are rewarded for one thing and one thing only: winning. So if something isn't declared off-limits, the lesson everyone else learns is to imitate. It's a brand of Darwinistic Political Ethics — the crown falls to he who shows the least shame.

The Conservative response on this is risible. They claim they're merely ID-ing their vote. Right. By systematically spreading a falsehood about a sitting MP. Meanwhile, Irwin Cotler is submitting amendments to the crime bill that the government is humiliated into acknowledging it should embrace. Except that — presumably too distracted from terrorizing its opponents three and a half years before the next election — they shut down the committee process and now are forced to submit his changes in the Senate. The contrast between Irwin and his opponents could not be more clear. This whole thing is a freaking disgrace.

KOM: Like all the best/worst slo-mo political car crashes, watching this story unfold over the last few weeks has been equal parts fascinating and horrifying. With the exception of the ministers and MPs sent up to defend their party's tactics in the Commons, I truly believe you'd be hard-pressed to find any MPs, in any party, who aren't at least a little bit uncomfortable with this tactic, despite the fact that it really is, for all intents and purposes, the natural next step in the permanent campaign. After all, with the majority having removed the conveniently constant threat of an Unnecessary and Expensive Election™, the Conservative party needs something to keep itself occupied. This, at least, is something — so why not do this? Well, other than that it may very well hobble their efforts to actually win the very-much-still-occupied seat in question, as this is the sort of tactic that goes over like gangbusters in the war room, only to plummet like a titanium zeppelin among normal human beings.

SR: If there are government MPs who feel uncomfortable they're doing a helluva job of concealing it. John Williamson and Peter Van Loan have mounted arguments that are so weak they defy satire. This may be the first time that it's actually difficult to make fun of PVL.

AP: We've seen some great pop-cultural legal strategies over the years: the Twinkie defence for example (junk food leads to diminished mental capacity), the Shaggy defence (it wasn't me), and the Chewbacca defence (anything follows from an absurdity). But I'm trying to figure out the strategy Peter MacKay will use to sidestep charges that he called in a search and rescue chopper to ferry him from a ritzy fishing camp to a political ribbon cutting and then "misled Parliament" about it. Do we need to send out a search party for the minister's moral credibility?

SR: By and large I hate these kinds of stories. Why should we spend on Challenger jets to fly the PM and GG safely? How dare an overseas diplo-

mat order a glass of wine with dinner? Why can't the PMO extreme-coupon its way to a break-even budget? It's penny-wise, pound-foolish claptrap that only serves to debase our political discussion and distract from issues that truly matter. But I have to say the apparent bald-faced falsehood at the centre of MacKay's story gives one pause. I wish he had just turned to his critics and said, "Hey, I'm the defence minister and I asked for it — now let's have that argument." I would have been there for him on that. But to pretend it was the armed forces who organized it when in fact the armed forces raised flags and resisted is kinda cowardly. Man-up, Peter. Don't make the military wear this.

KOM: You know, if this was any minister other than Peter MacKay, I'd say this was curtains, but that man has a downright preternatural ability to strongjaw his way past even the most glaring demonstrations of utter logical and narrative inconsistency. It's kind of amazing, actually — and what is even more so is the PM's apparent tolerance thereof. MacKay is, as far as I can tell, the only minister permitted to do so without any attempt by PMO to micromanage his defence strategy, possibly because it works *every single time*.

AP: When the story went around last year that Stephen Harper had issued orders that all communications out of Ottawa should herald the plans, programs, and achievements of "the Harper government," he dismissed the notion as laughable. And yet after struggling for nine months to get the relevant documents, the Canadian Press discovered that "Official Harperization" was well under way. In response, the Harper Government resorted to strategies that combined the Shaggy defence (wasn't us) with the Grade 7 defence (Liberals do it too). But what is the real issue here? Every party tries to remake the government in its own image. As for concerns about the politicization of the public service, didn't the barn door slam shut on that decades ago?

SR: As I learned from watching the gay divorcee who lived two doors down when I was a mere whelp of 12, it's remarkable what you can get away with when you don't care about what people say. The Harper PMO doesn't give a rat's ass if we think their defences are plainly disingenuous. He came to Ottawa convinced that most of our central institutions (i.e. the public service, press gallery, courts) were opposed to his agenda. So don't be surprised when he forces them to bend the knee.

Ironically, I didn't think the move to call it "Canada's New Government" or "The Harper Government" was out of line. They won. The public service is there to operationalize their instructions and agenda. What's the big whatever? But it riles me when the government denies the obvious. First, I think it's lame to just lie to people's faces. Second, it tells me that they thought they were doing wrong otherwise they wouldn't try to conceal it.

But here's the thing again that should cause concern: opposition parties are watching. They see it works. They see the gay divorcee that is "The Harper Government" doesn't care what all the neighbourhood wives think when it behaves badly. So guess what? They're going to do likewise. It's a race to the bottom without referees.

AP: If we really are in a race to the bottom, politically, how do we stop it? When you're in an arms race, no amount of moralizing about the evils of WMDs is going to stop the up-gunning of the combatants. So we need some sort of arms-limitation treaty to force everyone to turn their nukes into noodles. Are there institutional constraints or legal fixes we can implement?

KOM: Sure: Parliament could address this particular tactic by making it an offence to make false or misleading claims about byelections, or, more generally, amend the Elections Act to impose spending limits outside the writ. I'll just be over here holding my breath.



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