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Political Values and the Nuclear Generation

by Deborah Coyne

The post-war, baby-boom generation is now in its most critical phase as its members pass through the 25 to 45 year age bracket. These are the years in which any generation should be at the peak of its creative and innovative potential, and when it should have the most far-reaching and lasting effect on the future shape of Canadian society.

But, in Canada, this generation — my generation — shows every sign of refusing to face the future and of adopting an ostrich, head-in-the-sand approach to the seemingly insoluble problems of the day: the escalating arms race, possible nuclear war, the deterioration of our environment, youth unemployment, social injustice, rising crime and terrorism, and eventual economic decline. Why?

This post-war generation is unique in many respects. First, it is more appropriate to call it the nuclear generation — the first generation to grow up in a world of relative international stability, but in the shadow of Armageddon.

Second, another significant difference from earlier generations is the totally unrealistic level of expectations that was built up during the years of economic boom. Consequently, as the Canadian economy and society eventually and inevitably failed to meet these expectations, a sense of disillusionment, cynicism and insecurity has set in and has colored the attitudes and outlook of an entire generation that had no previous experience of such limitations.

The result of this upbringing and expectations was a "me-first", "you can have it now" generation. One distinctive group in particular — the yuppies or young, upwardly mobile professionals — is now commonly portrayed as having no social conscience and few political values, being susceptible to trends and fads, and having few goals in life but the pursuit of financial self-interest, self-absorption and self-indulgence.

This focus on the individual and self-interest has led to a decline in the shared sense of community spirit and has prevented the nuclear generation from collectively and constructively addressing the serious social and economic challenges of the day. It also engendered a *sauve qui peut* attitude that has obscured the moral obligation to assist the less fortunate in society and to set the direction for future generations.

To date, the most notable impact of the newly affluent nuclear generation is confined to such areas as the boom in yuppie electronics such as quadraphonic stereos and Sony Walkmans — the ultimate in individualized pleasure; the proliferation of health clubs and the concern for physical fitness; vastly increased expenditures on fast food, restaurant meals and commercial household services; and the spectacular drop in the birth rate as working couples increasingly apply cost-benefit analysis to raising a family.

In terms of their political involvement, this massive segment of the electorate is highly volatile. Faced with a world in which the social, economic, and political climate has deteriorated since the blissful days of our youth, and the threat of nuclear Armageddon is at an all time high, the nuclear generation is cynical about the political process and our political institutions. And no political party has yet been able to spark their creative spirit and channel it into demonstrably constructive pursuits.

Politics is no longer viewed from the broader moral-ethical perspective as a worthy career and a means by which we can better the world. Our political involvement is increasingly limited to participation in single-issue political fights and the survival of certain narrow interests rather than any community interest. As the recent general election confirmed, we prefer to avoid the open discussion of national issues of profound social and economic significance and will vote for the leader who simply makes us feel better, and provides the illusion of security. For example, attempts by politicians to raise the issue of the size of the federal deficit and to draw analogies to mortgaging the future failed to elicit concern from this generation.

At the moment, the nuclear generation appears to have beached its vote with the new right. This reflects the tendency to avoid facing the future and to seek safe answers in what are perceived as the halcyon, more secure days of the past. And it confirms the overwhelming emphasis on protecting our individuality and self-interest and further obscures our sense of moral obligation to assist the less fortunate in society and to promote greater social justice.

The most revealing evidence of the twin failure to promote greater social justice and to accept responsibility for the future, is the widening gap between rich and poor incomes despite our ostensibly enviable social security system, and the extremely high unemployment rate among today's youth, particularly in the 18 to 25 year age bracket. These latter Canadians, in particular, who are the younger

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brothers and sisters or children of the newly affluent, are justifiably cynical about their elders' commitment to facilitating their full participation in the Canadian society and economy. And unless this cynicism, alienation and frustration on the part of our youth is dispelled, it will have unforeseen and highly adverse implications for the Canadian socio-economic fabric.

This lack of concern for broader social issues and for the future was not always characteristic of the nuclear generation. In 1968, we were clearly inspired by the calls of Pierre Trudeau for the just society. But when Trudeau failed to create a coherent moral-ethical framework within which his just society could flourish, and failed to encourage and sustain the necessary community spirit among Canadians at the grass roots level, the philosopher-king lost his authority. The opportunity to light the torch of another generation was lost and resulted in profound disillusionment with the political process, and the dissatisfaction with the political parties and leaders of the day.

What can now be done to reignite the creative spirit of the nuclear generation and to spark the desire to advance beyond the status quo? The social, economic and moral challenges which we now face are enormous but should not intimidate us. They are at least comparable to those faced by the new dealers in the 1930s and the new frontiersmen in the 1960s, and we ought to be as forwardlooking, innovative and yet compassionate in dealing with these challenges as our predecessors. Unemployment, inflation, environmental degradation, coping with technology, arms control, social inequality — these are not new problems. Presidents Roosevelt and Kennedy, Prime Ministers Mackenzie King and Pearson, in particular, each faced up to them in their own way. And each of these leaders inspired a new generation of Americans and Canadians to join with them in their endeavor.

Our political parties and their leaders must play a leading role in spurring the new generation to assume responsibility for the future. They must foster the latent spirit of generosity and direct it into constructive, progressive pursuits designed to further such venerable liberal goals as social justice, economic equality, and improved quality of life.

In order to set this process of revival in motion, my generation must all somehow moderate our presently unrealistic and inflated expectations of both the economy and society, and recapture our self-confidence in our ability to shape events as the world approaches the 21st century. And we must then channel our creative and innovative potential into community-oriented pursuits designed to further the common good. Finally, we must restore our faith in the political process, and reexamine our moral-ethical values and then fully assume responsibility for the future direction of Canadian society.

Moderating our expectations of the economy and

society will involve translating into practice a new theory of social rights — a new rationale for the welfare state — one which will accommodate the legitimate concerns over our economic capacity to support social progress, but which will also promote much greater social justice. More specifically, liberals must recognize that our traditional goal of the greatest happiness for the greatest number is no longer sustainable, and that, instead, we should pursue the principle of maximum justice in society.

In the past, the commitment to the pursuit of material equality and the greatest happiness for the greatest number has led to the establishment of universal social programs which have, of course, benefited the less fortunate in society, but which have also greatly benefited the middle class, notwithstanding attempts to tax back some of these benefits. Indeed, the evidence now firmly establishes that our social security system has in fact contributed very little to narrowing the income gap between the rich and the poor. And yet our political leaders remain committed to universality as the basic organizing principle of the system. Why?

Unless the cynicism, alienation and frustration of our youth is dispelled, it will have unforeseen and highly adverse implications for the Canadian socio-economic fabric.

The answer lies in basic political arithmetic. In order to ensure that the majority of the electorate — the newly affluent — support the system, it is argued that we must appeal to their self-interest and permit them to benefit as well, rather than rely on their fickle sense of moral obligation toward those less fortunate than themselves. This explanation for the commitment to universality certainly highlights the moral-ethical crisis now faced by the nuclear generation. It is clearly time to seriously rethink what is meant by social justice and whether we are sincerely committed to seeking greater social equality. And we must also reexamine the question of the role of the state in the redistribution of income in terms of what is not only morally acceptable but also economically feasible.

The contemporary American philosopher, John Rawls, argues that the ultimate goal should not be the greatest happiness for the greatest number but, rather, maximum justice in society. To this end, all social policy must be evaluated according to how well it assists the needy in society and whether the net effect is the improvement of the relative position and prospects of the worst-off members of society.

In many cases, such a review will undoubtedly lead to the elimination of the universal provision of many existing social services and benefits, and the adoption of a principle of selectivity. Other cases will point to the need to integrate certain social security programs with a drastically simplified tax system — a tax system with enhanced progressive features, but also one of sufficient clarity and transparency to enable all taxpayers to demand greater and more meaningful accountability from the government for its expenditures.

The application of the principle of maximum justice to our social security system will also highlight the link between social policy and economic considerations as the key to concrete progress towards greater social justice. And this link is precisely what the nuclear generation has hitherto failed to grasp. More specifically, maximum justice will preclude the imposition by the state of new redistributive schemes that actually result in the poorest members becoming worse off through a poorly performing economy.

Conversely, the pursuit of maximum justice justifies efforts to build up the innovating strengths of a competitive economy in order to generate the resources available for redistribution. This will necessitate much greater emphasis on small business and smaller cooperative financial institutions as the source of the dynamism and entrepreneurial spirit that is now so sadly lacking among Canadians. And with some imaginative thinking, we must implement policies that will remove the dead hand of bureaucracy and encourage individual initiative, such as the total elimination of taxes for small businesses at least during the start-up years.

The focus on the small business sector is also one means of dealing with the most serious social and economic problem of our time — unemployment — since small businesses especially in the service sector are the greatest source of job creation. But attacking unemployment on all fronts will likewise demand innovative and imaginative thinking. For example, we must reexamine the traditional relationship between work and leisure, and must recognize that the tremendous advances in microelectronics, robotics, and so forth have opened new opportunities in our search for fulfilling and satisfying lives.

In terms of our employment and income expectations, however, these new opportunities will not permit every person to hold a full-time job. Instead, we must accept and accommodate much more part-time work (which can then be supplemented by volunteer service), cost-effective work sharing schemes, shorter work weeks, and flexible retirement. And we must each take urgent steps to discharge our moral obligation to our youth, the disadvantaged, and those displaced by technology. Unless we undertake a fun-

damental reorganization of the work place at the micro-level to accommodate more such employees and their training requirements, we will fail to deal with the growing alienation of a significant portion of our society and will do irreparable damage to the social and economic fabric of Canada.

Finally, we must focus broadly on grass roots organization and community action as the key to restoring to people the sense of control over their destinies and confidence in the political process. In particular, we need to organize society to make better use of voluntary effort and to develop an ethos that welcomes and rewards such spirit of service. And we must ensure that employers, educational institutions and governments encourage and support such voluntary service on a much broader scale.

This focus on the volunteer sector, and the need to foster community spirit, will have profound implications for social policy and the role of government in all spheres — health services, education, retraining, housing, old age security, pensions and so forth. And, in encouraging greater self-reliance and greater use of informal, non-bureaucratized networks for the delivery of social services, we will help to revive our shared sense of moral obligation for the less fortunate in society.

The nuclear generation is coming of age. At the moment, however, it appears to be marking time, preferring to deal with the present by reference to the past, and seemingly unable to accept its responsibilities for the future direction of Canadian society.

But the progressive, innovative spirit cannot long be stifled. The leader and political party that succeeds in enunciating an exciting and coherent vision of progress and can once again spark the desire to advance beyond the status quo, will undoubtedly also create a new progressive movement comparable to that of President Roosevelt in the 1930s and President Kennedy in the 1960s. The members of the nuclear generation who, given their education and affluence, inevitably will comprise the vanguard of such a movement, are looking for bold, innovative propositions for dealing with the social, economic and moral problems of the day. They are ready, willing and able to work together with a communitarian spirit to build a humane social order, provided that the central importance of human individuality and the ability to control our destinies is not forgotten.

The 1980s is clearly a critical decade in the life of the nuclear generation. We must succeed in raising our sights beyond our individual short-term concerns and toward the long-term welfare and prospects of future generations. The cost of failure is simply too great.