

## WITH ALL OUR PROBLEMS, WE MUSTN'T BE SILENT

Canadians are disengaged from the political process, and the timing couldn't be worse

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Published on Wednesday, Jan. 06, 2010 5:49PM EST

Last updated on Thursday, Jan. 07, 2010 2:28AM EST

It was the great American philosopher Lucille Ball who once said that politics should be the part-time profession of every citizen.

She was right, of course. Every one of us should be concerned about what our political leaders are doing, the direction in which they are taking us, the plans they have to respond to the great challenges of our times. And yet, in Canada at least, we are more disengaged from the political process than perhaps at any other period in our history.

Our timing couldn't be worse.

For the most part, I don't have much patience for prophets of doom. I don't believe the world will end in two years' time. Nor do I accept that we'll all be under two feet of water by the end of the decade unless we stop using our cars tomorrow. Yet it would be foolish, not to mention foolhardy, not to recognize that we are facing potentially societal-changing problems.

Set aside, for the moment, the general burdens of the world. Ignore a health-care debate in the U.S. that has confirmed the adage that politics has always been the systematic organization of hatreds and self-interests. Forget about Afghanistan for the time being.

Let's just talk about some issues that are sure to haunt Canadians this decade.

At current spending rates, 71% of the B.C. government's budget will be devoted to health-care spending by 2017. Annual spending on health care in B.C. is currently routinely three times greater than the rate at which the economy is growing. The situation isn't much different across the country.

The cost pressures become more acute every day as that great demographic cohort known as baby boomers ages. The health field is already seeing steady increases in age-related diseases such as heart disease, asthma, osteoarthritis and diabetes in particular. Diabetes alone has the potential to create complete havoc in the health-care system because the associated problems the disease creates require expensive solutions, such as cataract and coronary bypass surgery.

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Most health experts agree that the medicare system we have today can't sustain itself under these pressures. A vigorous private-sector alternative would help, yet politicians are generally afraid of mentioning the thought of it for fear of voter backlash. And Canadians aren't talking about the problem because, for them, it isn't one. Not yet anyway.

Meantime, this Christmas witnessed a wild buying binge at a time when household debt reached record levels. There is nearly \$1.4-trillion in total household debt outstanding, according to the latest estimates. The central bank is sounding the alarm over the pace at which consumer debt is rising while income growth slows. It is a matrix designed to cause a massive financial outage at some point.

The third pillar of our pension system – occupational pension plans – is crumbling. Many defined-benefit plans have failed or are failing. The inability of companies to meet their pension obligations is threatening to undermine the retirement security of tens of thousands of Canadians.

Many people already are being forced to hang on to jobs past the age at which they had hoped to retire. The trickle-down effect means there are fewer jobs for young people graduating from school.

The federal government responds to global concerns about climate change only when the U.S. does something. Much of the world, including China, is making the transition to a green economy and yet we don't even speak the language in Canada as we cling to our natural resources.

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In the face of such monstrous problems, you would expect some debate about our options. A wide-ranging discussion about the mess we are creating – or in some cases have already created – for future generations. A public dialogue that pushes governments toward sensible solutions.

But there is none. Canadians, for whatever reason, have tuned out. Which is why the Conservative government knew it could prorogue Parliament, despite the urgent issues and policies needing debate, without so much as a sniffle of public outcry.

The silence is eerie.

It brings to mind the James Baldwin quote that was a favourite of Ms. Ball's: "Not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed until it is faced." Funny how true that is.

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