



a Canada West Foundation Publication

# Dialogues

Spring 2007

## **The NEXT WEST**

Young Adults, Democracy,  
and the Future of Canada



## Our Vision

A dynamic and prosperous West in a strong Canada.

## Our Mission

A leading source of strategic insight, conducting and communicating non-partisan economic and public policy research of importance to the four western provinces, the territories, and all Canadians.

Canada West Foundation is a registered Canadian charitable organization incorporated under federal charter (#11882 8698 RR 0001).

In 1970, the **One Prairie Province? A Question for Canada** Conference was held in Lethbridge, Alberta. Sponsored by the University of Lethbridge and the *Lethbridge Herald*, the conference received considerable attention from concerned citizens and community leaders. The consensus at the time was that research on the West (including British Columbia and the Canadian North) should be expanded by a new organization.

To fill this need, the Canada West Foundation was established under letters patent on December 31, 1970. The first Canada West Council was elected in June 1973.

Since that time, the Canada West Foundation has established itself as one of Canada's premier research institutes. Non-partisan, accessible research and active citizen engagement are hallmarks of the Canada West Foundation's past, present, and future endeavours. These efforts are rooted in the belief that a strong West makes for a strong Canada.

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Address correspondence to:

Robert Roach, Editor

Dialogues Magazine

Canada West Foundation

900, 1202 Centre Street SE

Calgary, AB T2G 5A5

Tel: 403.264.9535

roach@cwf.ca

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Advertising Enquiries:

403.264.9535

roach@cwf.ca

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# A Note From the Editor

Robert Roach, Director of Research  
Canada West Foundation

## Everything Old Is New Again

The aging of Canada's population is a hot topic. Back in 1996, one of the first papers I wrote for the Canada West Foundation was a piece on the policy implications of an aging population and the demographic bulge created by the baby boomers (those born between 1947 and 1966).

The baby boom generation has been a dominant social, political and economic force since Dr. Benjamin Spock (not to be confused with Mr. Spock from Star Trek) encouraged parents to develop their child's individual nature rather than focus on rigid rules. When the boomers were young, everything from television shows to social movements was affected. The same was true as the boomers entered middle age and tickets for the Eagles reunion tour went like hotcakes. This pattern is repeating itself as the boomers near retirement age and are about to be added to what is already the largest cohort of seniors in Canadian history. Less than 5% of Canadians were over 65 at the time of Confederation compared to over 13% today. It is not a surprise that the aging of the population is heavy on the minds of politicians looking for votes, real estate agents with resort property to unload and policy wonks trying to get a handle on future political trends and policy demands.

While this makes perfect sense, there is a danger that the generations coming up behind the boomers (roughly those under 40 years of age) will be overshadowed by the noisy demands of the older end of the age continuum. It is not likely that policy-makers are suddenly going to forget all about children, post-secondary students, and the thirtysomethings eyeing their jobs. Nonetheless, it worth taking special steps to make sure that we understand the opinions and aspirations of the generations that are following in the wake of the boomers.

To this end, the Canada West Foundation has been carrying out a number of activities aimed at understanding and engaging young adults. Last year, the Looking West Survey included interviews with 2,000 western Canadians between the ages of 18 and 34 years of age. The result is a treasure trove of quantitative information on the democratic behaviours and public policy preferences of what we have termed "the Next West Generation."

The picture of the Next West Generation that emerges from the survey is a group that tends to identify less closely with Canada than older western Canadians and that tends to see Canadian politics in rather negative terms. In regard to the latter, about 6 in 10 western Canadians between 18 and 35 years of age agree with the following statements: "elections rarely deal with the issues that I feel are important" and "there is no political party that I really agree with."

Interestingly, the findings are roughly the same for those over 35 years of age; the perceived relevance of contemporary Canadian politics to the average Canadian—be they under 35 or over 35—is alarmingly low. For those who believe that a strong nation, a healthy democracy and good public policy all require an electorate that is broadly engaged with the politics of the day, we have our work cut out for us.

Will this get worse or better as the Next West Generation gets older? Only time will tell, but the survey findings make it clear that forging a deeper attachment to the political process in Canada will have to overcome a large amount of skepticism among both the young and the old.

To help generate debate about the role of voting in a liberal democracy, we launched an essay contest that invited western



Canadian post-secondary students to write papers explaining why voting is or is not important. A \$5,000 cash prize was awarded to University of Calgary student Leanne Hosfield for writing the winning essay. Leanne's essay, and seven others chosen by a panel of judges to be the best of the best, appear in this edition of *Dialogues*. If these essays are any indication, the democratic spirit is alive and well in western Canada. The task at hand is to ensure that the thoughtfulness regarding the democratic process expressed in these essays is shared by all Canadians.

A second round of the contest asks students to write essays on the "hot" topic of climate change. In this small, but meaningful way, the Canada West Foundation will continue to engage post-secondary students in key policy debates and, at the same time, increase our understanding of how young adults view the issues of the day.

Two other activities focused on the Next West Generation are worth noting. The first is a major research report that will come out this fall. The report will draw on a series of focus groups held across the West with young adults earlier this year as well as the latest academic research. The result will be an informative and accessible report that will provide readers with a good sense of what makes the Next West

Generation tick in terms of political identity, democratic participation, and public policy preferences.

The second is a major conference taking place in October called *Generating Wealth: A Summit for Western Canada's Next Generation of Business Leaders*. The conference will bring together about 80 young business leaders and entrepreneurs from across the West. The purpose is to provide a forum in which the next generation of wealth generators can share their thoughts on the future of the western Canadian economy, how they want to shape that future, and what role they think that governments should play as they do so.

These specific activities are complemented by our ongoing engagement of young adults through the Canada West Foundation Student Intern Program and a wide range of research activities and events that involve a cross-section of western Canadians, including young adults.

Finally, this edition of *Dialogues* is devoted to generational change. If you have any questions or comments regarding the Foundation's work in this area, please do not hesitate to contact me at ***roach@cwf.ca***.



The Canada West Foundation 2006 essay contest invited students under the age of 35 attending a western Canadian post-secondary education institute to write short essays that explain why voting is or is not important. The essay contest is part of The NEXT West Project. Core funding for The NEXT West Project has been provided by Western Economic Diversification Canada and the Kahanoff Foundation. Additional funding has been provided by an anonymous foundation, the Canada West Foundation Founders' Endowment Fund, Petro-Canada Inc., Teck Cominco Limited and Canadian Western Bank.

## Grand Prize Winning Essay

# Three Reasons to Vote

by Leanne Hosfield, University of Calgary

**I have never** missed the chance to cast a ballot. Given that I have only been eligible to vote for three years, this should not be viewed as a major accomplishment. With that said, I like to think that I vote as a matter of principle and because it is important to vote.

If I am frank with myself, my "principled" approach to political participation likely stems from the fact that my parents and grandparents always voted when I was growing up and instructed me to do the same. While heading to the polls because of your role models "gets the job done," it is hardly adequate justification for exercising the most fundamental right of democracy. There must be some intrinsic value in casting a ballot that is not derived from the fact that those before us voted.

An argument frequently made in the Canadian voter-turnout debate holds that the youth of today do not vote because they have never experienced the fight for democracy. Democracy is all most young people in Canada have ever known, and there is an expectation that our system of government will prevail, no matter

what. As a member of the generation espousing this sentiment, I can attest that it is sometimes difficult to grasp the highly abstract possibility of a Canada in which democracy and the freedom to vote cease to exist.

But the fact of the matter is that democracy is not a state of nature. Throughout history, providing every person with a voice in the political process has called upon many to make brave sacrifices. We cannot allow the fact that World War I, World War II and even the Cold War are fading in the collective memory of Canada's youth to excuse us from our civic duty. Instead, we must recognize that, in support of the tradition of democracy, there is a need for the citizens who enjoy the freedom to vote to stand up and be counted.

In tandem with our recognition of the historical fight for democracy, it is also important for us to acknowledge that voting upholds the system of democracy in a global context. Insulated by modern material comfort, education and social services, we tend to forget that life in Canada as we know it is not representative of the global

status quo. In reality, much of the world is based on different values than our own. Some of these values even stand in opposition to our belief in democracy.

While there can be no guarantees that our privileged way of life will endure, one thing is certain: neglecting to vote forsakes the very foundations of democracy and discards an opportunity to show support for a cause that hinges on the devotion of all generations. To neglect to vote is to ignore the gradual development of democracy and its need for sustained nourishment.

Finally, voting is an important mechanism by which individuals are connected to their communities. In the age of personal computers, wireless internet and text messaging, the word “community” often refers to those on your cell phone or instant message list. However, our lives are connected by more than broadband. There are greater causes that bind people. In Canada, these include diversity, tolerance and the simple freedom to write an essay like this one. It is not through communication in cyberspace that we most strongly express our support for these values. They require us to carry out an action that meshes our own interests with the interests of the greater whole. They require us to vote.

By marking an “X” for one candidate or another, we are each forced to consider the way in which our own perspectives align with the direction of our society. In essence, voting draws our attention away from our immediate surroundings and toward the consideration of the collective good. It is often said that if you don’t vote, you can’t complain. The idea here is that those who do not make the effort to cast a ballot on election day forgo their right to criticize the direction of society to the degree that it is determined by politics.

I believe that voting is important for three reasons. First, voting is an act of recognition that acknowledges the historical sacrifices made by those committed to giving everyone a voice in government. Second, voting upholds democratic values in a world of competing interests. Finally, voting links us as individuals to the wider community, as the simple act of casting a ballot connects us all.

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**Leanne Hosfield is a political science major at the University of Calgary.**

*Canada West Foundation Chair Jim Gray presents University of Calgary student Leanne Hosfield with the \$5,000 Grand Prize for the Foundation's 2006 Student Essay Contest.*



# Who should have the greatest responsibility for reducing Canada's greenhouse gas emissions: governments, industries or individuals?

## Canada West Foundation 2007 STUDENT ESSAY CONTEST

### Student Essay Contest Returns for 2007

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#### ESSAY CONTEST RULES

2007 Essay Question:

**Who should have the greatest responsibility for reducing Canada's greenhouse gas emissions: *governments, industries or individuals?***

The 2007 Canada West Foundation Essay Contest is open to students attending a post-secondary institution in BC, Alberta, Saskatchewan, or Manitoba as of December 1, 2007.

The essay must be between 750 and 1,000 words in length.

The essay must be submitted to the Canada West Foundation via email no later than December 1, 2007. The essay must be sent as a standard Microsoft Word file.

The essay must have a title.

The author's first and last name, mailing address, phone number, post-secondary institution and field of study must appear at the beginning of the essay.

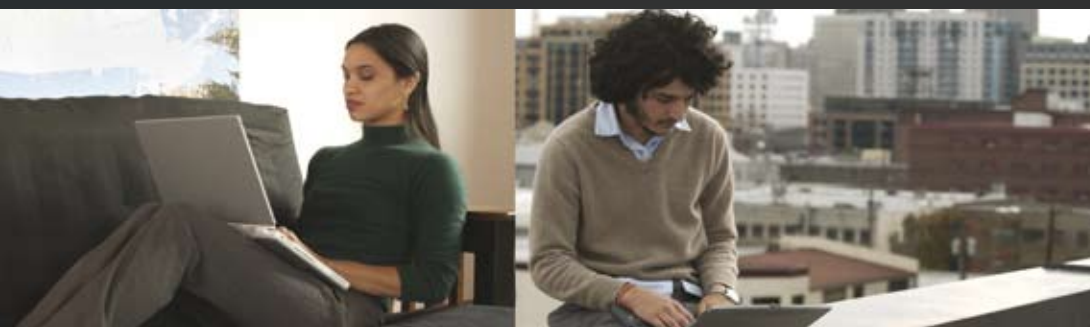
The best essays will be published in the Canada West Foundation's *Dialogues* Magazine.

The winning essay and runners-up will be chosen by a panel of judges.

The winner will be required to show proof of post-secondary enrollment.

Essays should be emailed to:

**Robert Roach**  
**Director of Research**  
Canada West Foundation  
roach@cwf.ca



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# Focus on Voting: Examining Democratic Governance in Canada

by Dominika Boczula, University of Calgary

There is a growing perception that “democratic dissatisfaction” has begun to characterize the political landscape of Canada as well as other parts of the world. While some people continue to work for improvements to existing government services and institutions, others have increasingly chosen to withdraw from participation in traditional political processes, including the voting system. The departure of public interest from public discourse, often manifested as a diminishing voter turnout, is one reason why it is crucial to address and re-examine the current state of democratic governance in Canada.

Casting a ballot in a provincial or federal election is not the only time in our lives that we are asked to vote. As citizens or members of a community, we might be asked to vote to elect the chair of a volunteer association or advocacy group. As members of a political party, we might be asked to vote for a party leader. As shareholders in a corporation, we are asked to elect a board of directors. In all of these circumstances, we are asked to elect representatives who will make decisions on our behalf. Elections of this sort form the cornerstone of modern democracies. Nonetheless, voting in political elections is the most direct involvement many Canadians will have with the political process. Clearly, the stakes are high because the election process determines who will form the government and, in turn, which policies will be pursued.

After the 2004 Alberta provincial election, Premier Ralph Klein said, referring to the electorate, “the bosses have spoken,” acknowledging that the power of the government to make decisions is delegated by the electorate. Through their vote, citizens legitimize or give authority to leaders to act on their behalf. Hence, a democratic government must actively encourage an engaged citizenry. On the

other hand, if we as citizens wish to keep our democracy alive, we must be informed and involved since we are empowered and entrusted with the task of building a just society (Flanagan 2005).

Citizenship rights are, by definition, equal. As Flanagan writes, “When we think of ourselves as citizens, a certain dignity is realized, a certain pride, and also a certain humility. Everyone has the right to vote, the right to have a say, to make input. Everyone has a right to the conditions which make citizenship possible—education, the amelioration of poverty. And everyone has only one vote” (2005).

Since inequality destabilizes democracy, it can be argued that the contribution of a strong public sector is fundamental to the implementation of equality in all aspects of society. Together with citizens at large, employees of the public sector, of which policy-making is a vital aspect, directly influence and control the state of social and economic equality in the province, and indirectly, in the country. Wong notes that individuals expect democracy to bring about greater socioeconomic justice as compared to other systems of governance (2004). For example, in a survey of Latin American and European citizens, respondents felt that the main attributes of democratic governance are the implementation and sustenance of social and economic equality among citizens of a country (Wong 2004). By reducing and eliminating unnecessary inequality in the most educated and efficient manner possible, the public sector is directly linked to the establishment and perpetuation of a vibrant democratic system. However, defending democracy as a vehicle for greater equity is not a straightforward task.

Given that elections represent such an important democratic event, it is not surprising that questions have been raised as to

whether the current electoral system adequately fits the Canadian political landscape. According to the Law Commission of Canada discussion paper entitled *Renewing Democracy: Debating Electoral Reform*, deciding on an electoral system involves choosing between competing values (Law Commission of Canada 2005). Four values which have been used to evaluate electoral systems in modern democracies include fairness, representation, equality and accountability. For many people, the present electoral system has performed favourably in terms of establishing a clear policy of accountability between the elected representative and his or her constituents. However, others suggest that Canada's current voting system is unfair because it helps produce disproportional results—in principle, a party can gain a majority of the seats in Parliament or legislatures with only a minority of the popular vote. At the same time, women, minority groups and Aboriginal peoples are under-represented in the existing system. Finally, critics suggest that the current voting system does not treat votes equally as those who do not vote for the winning candidate have essentially “wasted” their votes.

Does the current voting system adequately reflect the values that Canadians as a whole would like to see represented in such a system? If not, is there an alternative system that might better reflect these preferences? Clearly, there is more to addressing concerns about our democratic processes and institutions than simply changing what percentage of the populace votes. Open discussion of such an important component of Canadian political life is itself a way to maintain a healthy foundation of democratic governance. It is critical that Canadians join in this discussion concerning their voting system to ensure that their needs and values are reflected, as well as to maintain a political system “of the people, by the people, for the people” by actually submitting a vote when the possibility presents itself. There is no better investment than in maintaining and enhancing the very cornerstone from which we as a country originate, and through which we can exercise proven measures ensuring a responsible system of governance.

.....  
**Dominika Boczula is a graduate student in the Department of Sociology at the University of Calgary.**

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# Is **Voting** Important?

by Nick Dragojlovic, University of British Columbia

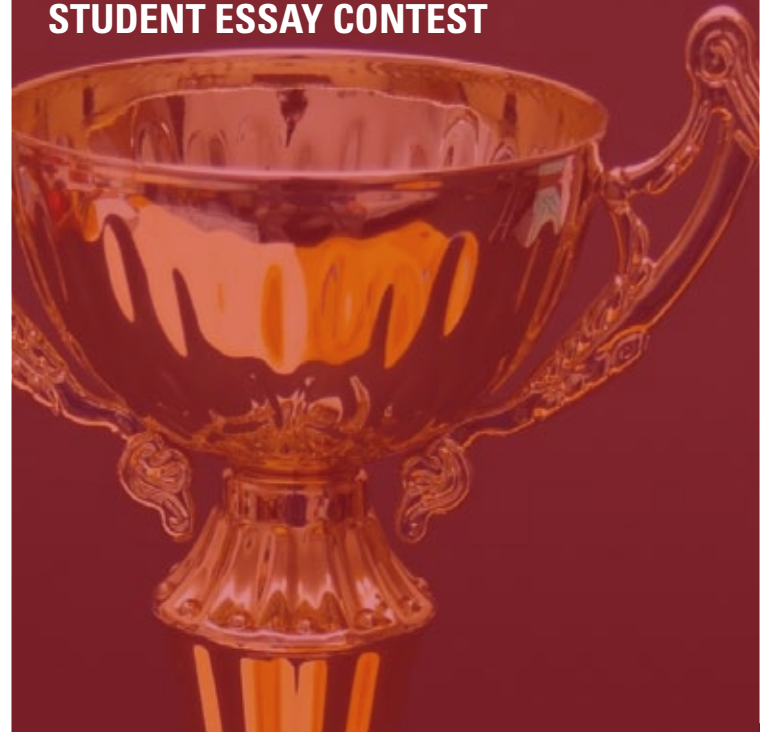
**Is voting important?** As a political scientist, I could argue both sides of the issue, picking and choosing the bits of the literature that support my points, and ultimately yielding a well-reasoned, if inconclusive, answer. Being fond of the discipline and fond of argumentation, I will begin this essay by doing so. I will go beyond sophistry, however, because, as a politically-engaged individual, my answer is rather simpler and unequivocal: yes, voting is terribly important.

The act of voting is much more than a simple expression of political preferences. It is, at its core, a symbolic action that both instantiates a democratic society and binds it together. It reveals and affirms our identities as citizens, as partisans, as neighbours, and as fellow human beings. This expressive element is what renders voting truly important.

From a utilitarian perspective, elections are important because they are the ultimate guarantors of governmental responsiveness and accountability to the electorate's wishes. This past winter, Canadians repudiated the Liberal government that had held sway for 13 years, largely due to concerns about corruption brought to light by the sponsorship and income trust scandals. While the Conservatives admittedly ran a very disciplined campaign, the election was arguably more about dissatisfaction with the Liberals than about a resurgence of Canadian conservatism. In short, voters sought accountability and successfully enacted change. What's more, a number of races were decided by tiny margins, often amounting to no more than a fraction of a percent of the total turnout. In the Parry Sound-Muskoka riding in Ontario, for example, Conservative Tony Clement defeated his Liberal opponent by 28 votes out of more than 45,000 cast. Those 28 votes were important. Similar lessons could be drawn from the 2000 presidential election debacle in Florida and the recent congressional elections in the United States.

Any political scientist worth her salt, however, would also take the time to list the many reasons why individual votes usually have a negligible impact on electoral outcomes, let alone on governmental policy. For one, most races are not nearly as narrowly decided as the examples cited above. Active gerrymandering and the benefits of incumbency lead to a large number of "safe" districts where nothing short of an electoral cataclysm will unseat the incumbent. Scholars of rational choice delight in pointing out that, because the likelihood of one's vote changing the result of an election is so small, the most rational behaviour is to avoid the trouble of voting altogether. A second reason for the negligible effect of individual votes is the power of institutional obstacles. As Canada's conservatives learned to their chagrin in 1993, single-member plurality electoral systems tend to favour large, centrist parties. And if both parties hold similar positions on important issues, the possibility of expressing dissatisfaction with the status quo or holding the government accountable by means of one's vote rapidly diminishes. Votes in these districts are really not that important. Vote for or vote against, and nothing changes. So why bother?

Many have considered these arguments and come to the conclusion that, actually, voting really is not worth the trouble. And if this were all that voting entailed, I might be inclined to agree. The act of voting, however, is also significant at a deeper, symbolic level. It is wrapped—much like an onion—in several layers of social meaning. Superficially, voting expresses and reinforces the social identities that divide us. We vote for the candidate that is "one of us," whether she belongs to the same party, the same ideological orientation, the same socio-economic class, the same linguistic group, or even the same race or religion. Voting allows us to defend our tribe against the Other and empowers us as a loyal member of the larger group.



At a deeper level, the act of voting reinforces our sense of place. In electing our local representative to successively more distant assemblies, we confirm that we are invested in our neighbourhood, in our city, in our province, and in our country. When asked where they are from, voters can answer confidently, secure in the knowledge that they helped to determine who would rule over them and over their neighbours. At its deepest level, voting expresses the most basic political identity—citizenship. The act of voting brings to life the fundamental constitutive principle of the democratic state—that all members of the political community are equal. As such, it binds the community together by providing what, for many, is the only direct experience of the broader “Us” that unites all citizens. If the population does not vote, it forgoes this common experience, and the community begins to fall apart. This is why the act of voting itself—as opposed to who wins the elections and what policies they implement—is vitally important for the health of our democracy and of our political community.

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**Nick Dragojlovic is a Ph.D. Student in the Department of Political Science at the University of British Columbia.**

Runner-Up Essay

# Democratic **RESPONSIBILITY** by Benjamin Gill, University of Calgary

**Familiarity breeds contempt.** The freedoms for which people have fought and died are no exception to this rule. Our forefathers marched in the streets, stormed beaches, and fought against injustice so that we might enjoy the freedoms that we do. Now we take these freedoms for granted and believe self governance to be our God-given right. While we embrace the freedoms, we often fail to recognize our democratic responsibilities.

Voting is something that many of us take for granted, but like all such freedoms, it is one that has no more or less value than the sense of responsibility that comes with it. In recent years, voting has become synonymous with the idea of democracy. For many, the mere act of voting is to engage in democratic action. If this is true, then many tyrannical and oppressive regimes would also be able to stake a claim to democracy. To merely emulate democratic methods is not enough. It is for this reason that we often look upon such nations with disdain; for though they seek to clothe themselves in the trappings of democracy, we cannot help but see the hollow truth that lies beneath.

To rule democratically is to rule with the consent of the people. But such consent is not obtained by mere proclamation of victory in what often amounts to little more than a popularity contest. True consent can only be obtained if it is given willingly by knowledgeable participants that do so with a sense of responsibility. Too often our own democracy fails these tests; the willing are too few and the many are ill informed. Apathy and political gamesmanship conspire to keep the electorate blissful in their ignorance. All of these failures speak to one singular failure that has become pervasive throughout our democratic society: a lack of democratic responsibility.

The apathy and ignorance among the electorate is merely a symptom of this greater ill. Voting has become a process by which we can avoid responsibility and transfer it to others. When the ills of the world distress us, we have someone to blame. Empowered by our act of voting, we take comfort in claiming all the rights of a democratic society while forfeiting its responsibilities. For many, the act of voting has become merely an instrument to facilitate this transference of culpability.

The outrageous injustice of social policy, foreign affairs, and fiscal indiscipline are not our transgressions, but that of a vast ever changing faceless entity. After all, it is not our government that does these things; it is "the Government." This turn of phrase at once severs and denies all relationship between us and them; we renounce all culpability, pronouncing ourselves once again powerless until the next election, the next vote.

The government that represents the people is often seen as alienated from the very people it purports to represent—an institution separate and apart to which we are only linked through the ritualistic process of voting. A vote, any vote, is a vote for the status quo. We are offered more of the same or less of the same and accept such choices as if there are no others. It is a case of self-fulfilling prophecy, where our vote does not count because we do not demand that it count, in truth perhaps, because we do not want it to count.

And thus voting ceases to have importance, but that does not mean that voting should not be important. Of all our democratic processes, it should hold the greatest importance. As with the myriad things that comprise our democracy, such importance is not inherent to the instruments themselves, but is imbued through the ideals and ideas with which they are wielded. Democracy is not a trophy that, once won, becomes our right, but is rather a responsibility to each and every one of us who would seek to prosper beneath its banner. Each successive generation must struggle to preserve that idealism, be willing to champion its cause in action as well as in word and, above all, reclaim the personal responsibility that is in essence the basis of our democratic process. Only then will my vote, your vote, and everyone's vote reclaim the importance that they all so justly deserve.

.....  
**Benjamin Gill is a student at the University of Calgary.**

# Western Cities Sourcebook 2007

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# Social Capital

by Ashley Groenewegen, University of Calgary

**Is voting important?** The conditioned response is yes, of course. Everyone knows that voting is a right that should not be taken for granted, for which different groups, including women and Aboriginals, fought long and hard. It is our civic responsibility, the means by which we as citizens hire and fire our leaders, and it gives us the opportunity to influence the policy decisions that shape the world we live in, etc.

But according to a growing number of Canadian citizens, voting, though important in theory, is not important in practice. Or not voting is more important than voting. Or no good reason to vote is a good enough reason not to vote. For whatever reason, in less than 20 years between 1988 and 2006, voter turnout for federal elections in Canada plummeted by 10 percentage points. In 1988, just 24.7% of eligible Canadians chose not to vote; in 2006, non-voters accounted for 35.3% of all eligible voters. While Canadians, as citizens of a well-established and successful liberal democracy, are well informed of all the reasons why they should cast their ballots, they are increasingly choosing not to exercise their right to do so.

Politicians, along with many pundits and academics, are sounding the alarm on this 21st century phenomenon, offering all kinds of remedies on how to reverse the trend towards lower turnout, from mandatory voting to electoral reform. But perhaps a more insightful response to the question of whether voting is important would be to take a few steps back from the issue of declining voter turnout and widen the scope of inquiry. Perhaps not only the disconcerting changes within the current system, but the system itself should be examined. Perhaps consultation on the issue should extend beyond those who have vested interests in the current system. As Wendy McElron has pointed out, "First and foremost, politicians want you to sanction the process by which they acquire power and money because without that sanction, they have no legitimacy." Consider John Mayer's new album, *Continuum*, released in September 2006.

The first verse of the first song is telling:

*Me and all my friends  
We're all misunderstood  
They say we stand for nothing  
And there's no way we ever could  
Now we see everything that's going wrong  
With the world and those who lead it  
We just feel like we don't have the means to rise up and defeat it  
So we keep waiting, waiting on the world to change.*

According to John Mayer, voting is not a sufficient means by which to rise up and defeat everything that's going wrong with the world today. Interestingly, his lyrics do not suggest an attitude of *apathy*, but rather a feeling of *helplessness*. A number of factors may have contributed to this predicament, and have been identified by various writers.

Robert Putnam's book, *Bowling Alone*, laments the decline of social capital (the voluntary human networks that exist outside the mandate of the state), and the consequent political and social disengagement of citizens. Wayne Hunt suggests that a better educated and better informed public will continue to demand a greater say in decision-making. His writing fleshes out the main idea in John Mayer's song: "In the postmodern phase people demand more meaningful participation. Voting every four years does not, evidently, count as meaningful participation..." Hunt goes on to say that people are increasingly rejecting the mediating institutions that come between them and social action, including political parties, in favour of "people-to-people diplomacy," which includes everything from the proliferation of blogs to international partnerships between universities to more citizen assemblies such as the one held in British Columbia on electoral reform.

Perhaps the development of people-to-people diplomacy is the change in the world that John Mayer and his friends, and the citizens of the advanced industrial liberal democracies, including Canadians, are waiting for. Singer/songwriter Ben Harper puts it this way: "I can change the world, with my own two hands. Make a better place, with my own two hands..." That is, I can influence policy, not by voting for a party's policy platform, but by getting my own two hands on policy-making, and its implementation.

The question of whether voting is important is essentially a question about the relationship between citizens and political parties. Considering the recent trends in declining voter turnout, as well as some of the current literature and the lyrics of some contemporary songwriters, this relationship is losing relevance for the kind of democracy that citizens want to be a part of. The link between people and policy seems to be less and less the role of political parties, and more and more the role of social networks, citizen interaction, and collaboration that takes place outside of the traditional political realm of parties. Consequently, the focus should be on strengthening social capital, rather than increasing voter turnout.

What has been perceived as chronic apathy among increasing numbers of non-voters may in fact be the coming to fruition of a social revolution whereby citizens, fed up with the ideological rhetoric manifested in partisan politics, choose to deny the legitimacy of political parties and pundits to monopolize the policy-making landscape by withholding their votes. The real concern is to ensure that social networks and Wayne Hunt's people-to-people diplomacy are fostered such that they maintain the vital link between people and policy.

All of this does not lead to the conclusion that voting and political parties will soon be obsolete, but rather that their importance and utility in facilitating democracy may be losing ground.



The party system is so deeply entrenched in Canadian democracy that it is difficult to imagine an alternative. However, considering how far democracy has come over time, from ancient Greece to today, it would be just plain ignorant to imagine that the current model has reached its zenith and that we are living in some kind of utopia. As the British singer/ songwriter, and former history teacher, Sting, instructs:

*If we seek solace in the prisons of the distant past  
Security in human systems we're told will always last  
Emotions are the sail and blind faith is the mast  
Without a breath of real freedom we're getting nowhere fast.*

.....  
**Ashley Groenewegen is a political science student at the University of Calgary.**

# Democracy in Canada? Lessons from Nigeria

by Temitope Oriola, University of Manitoba

**Voter apathy** is one of the unenviable features democracies around the world have in common. Despite the opportunity presented by peaceful, orderly and regular transfer of power through elections, many still prefer voluntary disenfranchisement. How important is voting and what factors may be responsible for voter apathy?

Voting can be a very uninspiring process depending on the issues at stake, quality of contenders, and performance of current office holders. For the first time in 18 years, federal election turnout in Canada increased. Elections Canada reports that 64.7% of eligible voters cast a ballot in the 2006 general election compared to 60.9% in 2004. The rise in turnout is a clear improvement, but it is unclear whether voters were more concerned with exercising their franchise or with making a statement on a Liberal party sinking under the weight of allegations of corruption. If the prelude to the US mid-term elections of November 7, 2006 is anything to go by, voters often turnout only when they are sufficiently frustrated by political office holders. Celebrating this manner of turnout is a monumental tragedy for democracy.

Citizens of a democracy owe their society the duty of participating in the determination of who governs them. It is ironic that those who have the opportunity to be part of such an epoch-making event as voting would choose not to take part.

In 1999, when Nigerians had the opportunity to vote after a 13-year military interregnum, the masses relished the thought. It is didactic that voter turnout was high despite the fact that a whole generation of young adults had never heard of general elections, both presidential candidates hardly approximated a real choice, and everyone knew that their vote was inconsequential to the result of the elections because of corruption. People voted because of their belief that democratic governance was better than military rule and,

as Onome Osifo-Whiskey argued, "under the Nigerian military we became a nation without standards, one in which men who could not have risen above the rank of staff sergeant became generals and heads of state, making us a plaything for the dogs" (TELL Magazine, July 3, 2006). People who have been deprived of democracy cherish voting more than those for whom voting is routine.

Nonetheless, voting offers the opportunity to be heard as both Canadians and Americans showed in January and November 2006, respectively. It is a reminder to holders of power to that they can be thrown out by voters. This is the pluralist perspective on power.

However, from a Marxian standpoint, voting merely results in choosing amongst equal evils. This, I believe, is one of the reasons people do not cherish the opportunity to vote. People refuse to vote because they are disappointed with the system, do not expect any improvement, are under the illusion that the issues are beyond them and have resigned themselves to fate.

Perhaps, we need to remind ourselves that voting in an election will not guarantee that all our expectations and desires will find fulfillment even if the party we supported wins. All of society's problems have a domain of solvability: some will be completely solved, a few will be solved but will resurface later, while others will linger for generations to come. Nevertheless, as citizens, voting is a civic duty, a restatement of our unflinching commitment to our nation and an attempt to bring about the improvement we want.

Whether or not the positive change we desire takes place is a different issue. I wish I could argue that voting will lead to more responsible and committed leadership and will guarantee that those entrusted with our collective mandate will always do what is best for society. However, voting is a way of setting direction in which we want our society to go.



Voting is a call to responsibility, a taken-for-granted privilege, the dream of people under totalitarian regimes. It is fraught with fraud and often glorifies charlatans. The happenstance that a representative will do well is about the same as chances of failure. The voter must adopt the approach of a farmer who buries precious seeds in the soil with the hope that the seeds will germinate into more precious seeds. The farmer is often fortunate, but sometimes

the harvest is unworthy of the labour. The farmer keeps hope alive season after season. The very idea of democracy requires a tremendous measure of hope. There is hardly an alternative.

.....  
**Temitope Oriola is a graduate student in the Department of Sociology at the University of Manitoba.**

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# Voting Binds Us Together

by Jason Rumancik, University of Regina

Whoever thinks much is not suitable as a party member: he soon thinks himself right through the party.  
—Nietzsche, *Human, All-Too-Human* #579

Over 2000 years of political theory and we still lack conclusive answers to the most fundamental questions of our social reality. Utilitarians argue with deontologists and subjectivists, relativists and nihilists about the “Good,” “Right,” and “Morality,” each postulating some abstract basis to ground their theory. Thankfully, we live in a time and a place where normative social values can be debated, each of these theorists can voice their position, provide a justification for their belief and accept or reject that of others. But within this liberal system with constitutional guarantees of our most primitive and fundamental freedoms, what role does the simple act of voting play, or more precisely, is voting important in a society that fails to agree on anything?

When confronted with the task of marking a ballot for one set of ideas or another, is there an authority or common understanding that we can appeal to for guidance? Those convinced of the correctness of their beliefs are alleviated from the burden of trying to make sense out of conflicting viewpoints. Their decision is simple: vote for the set of values that are most closely aligned with their own.

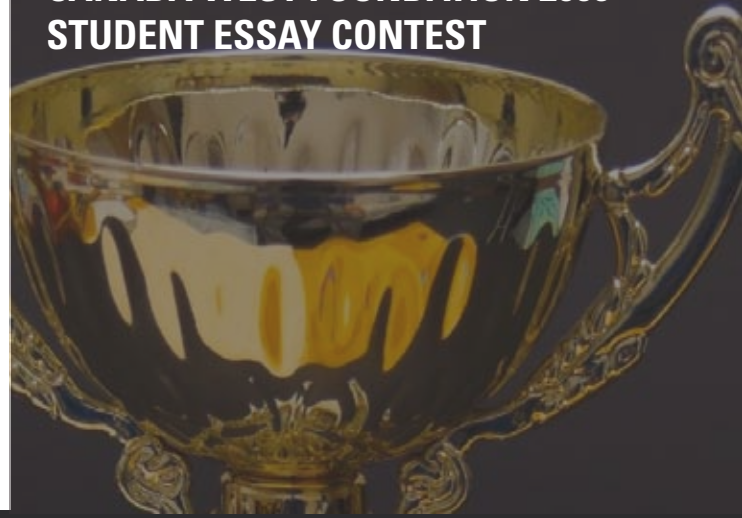
This act of voting, the physical process of marking the ballot, then, has significant implications for those convinced of the rightness of their choice and correctness of their system of beliefs. But what does it offer to those who agree and disagree simultaneously with each belief system and set of social valuations? What benefit does it afford those fortunate/unfortunate enough to recognize the validity of each argument or those that simply don't know the answer? Cynics and nihilists, those unable to create a set of beliefs, are the most unfortunate, for theirs is a position of hopeless abandon and reckless skepticism in anything believed to be of value. But for the rest, for those that knowingly create and recreate their beliefs, those

knowing that no party, no dogma, no ideology offers real answers, voting may still be important.

The right, the opportunity, the freedom to cast your ballot for whomever you choose may be the symbolic act that forces us to recognize the rights and freedoms of others. By affording each other the respect and recognition as rights-bearing individuals whose freedom is bound to this symbolic act, we force them to recognize us in that same way.

These deeper implications may be more fundamental than the simple act of voting. Whether one votes or not is secondary to whether one can vote, whether one is able to exercise this mode of self determination. The right to vote forces us to recognize the beliefs, values and ideas of others such that they are forced to recognize the beliefs, values and ideas of us.

When each of us is allowed to vote, an implied mutual respect for the other is adopted and becomes the bedrock of a social foundation. Recognizing the unique humanness of the other and forcing the other to recognize that in you, binds both to a shared cause and identity. It binds both equally to the collective actions of the governing body. By recognizing the other and granting them citizenship, they reciprocate this recognition back upon us, granting us the same citizenship back. By recognizing the other as a rights-bearing citizen, we recognize our self as a rights-bearing citizen whose rights are bound to this mutual respect. By recognizing the other as a citizen we recognize our self as a citizen within the collective body. Though we can disagree with the collective course the body takes, voting represents the recognition of each as an individual within the body—individuals to be respected in their own right.



Voting, then, is important for all individuals, but for different reasons. The act of voting allows those convinced in the correctness of their ideas to express them through the democratic process and lend a sense of legitimacy to the social direction. But the true importance of voting is not the act itself. The importance of voting is the implied recognition of the other as a unique and rights-bearing individual who is forced to reciprocate this recognition back upon each of us and how this recognition binds us to each other. Voting is not important because we vote, it is important because we can.

.....  
**Jason Rumancik is a student at the University of Regina.**

**Runner-Up Essay**

# Voter Turnout is Not the Issue

by Sara Shand, University of Victoria

Voting is an essential part of democracy. Thus, the question "is voting important?" can be translated into the question "is democracy important?" This leads to more questions, such as: what makes democracy better than other forms of government? Voting provides states with ways for governments to be overthrown smoothly and peacefully, which distinguishes democracy from other systems.

The question "is voting important?" can also be applied on an individual level in terms of whether or not it is important for each eligible voter to cast a ballot. This is an increasingly debated subject due to the downward trend in voter turnout.

In democracies, new governments come into power through elections. This allows power to change hands without destabilizing the state. In some countries, governments come into power through violent means, such as revolution or civil war. These ways of overthrowing the government cost lives, money and resources. Often, they also destabilize the state's social structures and institutions, which can take years to rebuild or replace. For example, schools and factories may be bombed or closed, children may be left without parents, and communication and transportation systems may be destroyed.

In a democracy however, the financial costs of an election are not debilitating, and social structures and institutions are left intact. For instance, after an election in Canada, most everybody returns to

their usual routines, without even considering that the change in government could have disrupted them—except, of course, for the ousted government officials and their aides.

In mature democracies, voting becomes a normal way of solving disputes, and violence becomes pathological. Elections change from being a way to avoid violence to being a way to equally represent everybody's interests. Therefore, low voter turnout, in a mature democracy, produces the worry that large portions of the population do not have their interests adequately represented, and brings the legitimacy of the government into question. Two reasons given for why non-voters did not vote are that they distrust politicians and that they believe that every party is bad, so no party is worth voting for. These reasons are false, and people use them as an excuse for not voting, because the truth would make them seem lazy.

The truth is that non-voters are allowed to be apathetic because their interests are represented. The government represents the interests of non-voters, as well as voters, because they know that if they do not represent non-voters' interests, that non-voters will become voters in the next election, and will not be voting for them. If non-voters' interests were not being represented, they would be voting. Despite the faults that our government and systems may have, Canada is running so smoothly that people can afford not to care about elections. A low voter turnout is a sign that many people are content with the way things are and trust the government.

Given the time it takes to be educated on the issues, candidates, and parties, it is not efficient for everybody to vote. Many voters are politically ignorant, and rely upon a friend or relative to instruct them on how to vote. Likewise, many non-voters recognize that other people know a lot more about politics than they do, and believe that those people are in a better position to decide who should win an election, so they do not vote. Just like people trust that their cars will work without knowing how, and without contributing to their design, people trust that the government will work without them knowing how, and without being a part of it. Moreover, just like it would not make sense for everybody to be an automobile engineer, or a mechanic, it does not make sense for everybody to be a political scientist.

Voting is extremely important, and is fundamental in providing stability and vitality to democratic states. It is also important that everybody can vote, and anybody, with the skills and drive necessary to be a strong leader, can become the leader of a democratic state through peaceful means. Furthermore, it is important that people study politics and vote. However, it is not important, nor is it efficient, for everybody to do so. In a mature democracy, like Canada, low voter turnout is not problematic, but signifies that our governmental system is working well enough for a large portion of the population to be able to ignore it.

.....  
**Sara Shand is a student at the University of Victoria.**





# IF I HAD A HAMMER: Building Capacity and Engaging Canada's Youth

by Mary Pat MacKinnon and Judy Watling

**Canadian youth may** be disengaged, but they are not *disinterested*. Canadian Policy Research Networks (CPRN) recently hosted a workshop with a diverse group of young people and academics talking together about what it means to them to be active in society. The youth were frank about the practice of politics turning them off, but also noted what turns them on about helping out in their communities or participating in social action networks.

They offered great ideas on how to tear down barriers they face to becoming more actively involved in Canada's civic and democratic life. We were struck by their angst about the future. They feel a great weight stemming from what they perceive to be adults' expectations that today's youth must solve the big problems created by older generations. And yet many do not feel well prepared to take on such responsibility. One youth participant stated it bluntly:

"Hearing things like 'You should be taking care of this, you are our last chance,' puts lots of pressure on youth when we are already facing a lot.... We are told 'You are the next

generation—you have to fix it,' but they never give us the tools. They say 'Maybe you need three nails,' but they never actually give us a hammer. These are tough things for a young person to deal with."

We heard similar opinions from many of the 144 randomly recruited 18-25 year old participants at CPRN's National Dialogue and Summit, who gathered in Ottawa in November 2005. For three and a half days they talked about, argued over, and ultimately agreed on a vision for the kind of Canada they want. And while they had a clear vision, they were not so sure about how to achieve that vision.

Participants were anxious about the state of the physical environment they will inherit, the challenges they face when moving for education or jobs and the costs of sustaining our health system. They worried about completing school without the thinking skills and knowledge necessary to navigate government and confidently participate in democracy. They don't feel that our political parties and democratic institutions do a good job of inviting or encouraging their participation.

For example, they spoke about:

- Remote politicians fighting to score media points instead of focussing on real issues with the people who elect them (a real turn off).
- Political parties being boring, old, excessively partisan and reactive in dealing with society's challenges.
- Over-emphasis on the obligation of voting without inviting engagement between elections.
- Superficial and negative media coverage of politics.

These criticisms of political institutions and practice (echoed in the March 7, 2007 workshop) should not be dismissed as typical youth alienation that will dissipate with time. We all—but especially political institutions, educators and parents—have to do a better job of equipping our children and youth with the tools and confidence they need to be active citizens. If they are to live up to the expectations we have imposed on them, we have a responsibility to give them a better foundation in citizenship.

We have been inspired and encouraged by the energy, enthusiasm and wisdom these young people demonstrate at CPRN dialogues and workshops. The diverse young people we have engaged dispel any notion that today's youth are apathetic. To the contrary, given meaningful opportunities to learn and think deeply about important public questions, they are quick to engage and have a lot to offer.

In the 2005 Dialogue, it was impressive to see them gain confidence as they deliberated on policy directions for education, work, health, environment and democratic participation. They connected the challenges facing society to their everyday lives. They created a vision for Canada and spelled-out what they and other actors in society need to do to help achieve that vision. They came out of their dialogue with a much better understanding of how they could participate in civil society and political life, and could articulate clear views about the need for changes in democratic institutions and practice.

So how is CPRN acting on their advice? Our current research series on youth civic and political participation seeks to fill some

gaps in our understanding of opportunities for, and barriers to, youth participation. Later this year, the papers and a synthesis report with policy actions will be available online. In the meantime, young people have drawn much of the roadmap. Here are some of their recommendations:

- Change our democratic practices to be more inclusive of the views of Canadians and engage people in substantive policy discussions between elections.
- Our democratic institutions must better reflect our diversity—women, Aboriginal people, youth and our ethnocultural population.
- Youth need to have real responsibilities and opportunities to influence decisions. Token engagement only leads to frustration and alienation.
- Political parties need to proactively reach out to youth and politicians need to meet them face-to-face, in their communities.
- Increase transparency and accountability to build public trust in government and transform the culture of intergovernmental bickering to one of collaboration guided by the public interest.
- Stop making decisions driven solely by short-term political expediency. Policies should reflect preventative and long-term approaches, factoring in the impacts of decisions on future generations.
- Ensure the education system prepares and supports students for active citizenship, focusing on responsibilities as well as rights.
- Learning by doing works better than lecturing. As one workshop participant noted, "You cannot educate an interest—you can only nurture it."

The full results of the Youth Dialogue and Summit and the workshop can be found at [www.cprn.org](http://www.cprn.org). We encourage you to learn more about what these young people have to say. We don't think you will be disappointed.

Mary Pat MacKinnon is Director, Civic Engagement with CPRN and Judy Watling is Assistant Director. Judy and Mary Pat co-lead CPRN's National Youth Dialogue and Summit project and currently are overseeing the youth civic and political engagement research series.

# The Next West Generation: A Case of Arrested Political Development?

by Kari Roberts

**Are young people** really as uninterested in politics as their turnout at the polls suggests? Are they apathetic, disengaged, and alienated from the political system? Are they simply lacking the politics gene?

At first glance it would seem so. Young western Canadians between the ages of 18 and 34—the Next West Generation—are voting less than previous generations. It is often assumed that, in a democracy, your vote is your voice. If a significant proportion of the population is not engaged in the process, and its voice is therefore silenced, how can we be confident that public policy reflects the true will of the people? Youth comprise an important component of our social fabric and, surely, without their inclusion in the democratic process, the fabric will become frayed.

To be fair, democratic participation cannot be measured by voting alone. Our democratic system is complex and dynamic. Elections are an important component of contemporary democracies, but so are interest groups, NGOs, public rallies and demonstrations, blogs and other forms of political expression.

But even though there are various forms of political expression, voting remains an important marker of participation. And young people are doing less and less of it. The Canada West Foundation's *Looking West 2006 Survey* found that people under the age of 35 were much less likely to report voting than people over the age of 35, even though they expressed a sense of obligation to vote, and an interest in the political issues of the day.

So what is going on here? The Next West Generation, also labeled "generation y," "generation me," or the "wired" or "net" generation (referring to the unprecedented extent to which technology influences their lives and social interactions), is said to differ from previous generations in important ways. According to Dr. Jean Twenge's book *Generation Me*, this group is said to be a generation of young people unapologetically focused on the individual. Twenge argues that members of this generation have been consistently taught to put their own needs above the needs of others, and the result is a less visible attachment to duty or community.

Another possible explanation for why today's young adults do not take full advantage of their right to vote may be the trend toward "delayed adolescence." Put simply, young people today are living at

home with their parents longer than the previous generation in the pursuit of higher education.

This may mean that, unlike previous generations, members of the Next West Generation are waiting until later in life—their late 20s to early 30s in some cases—to be fully self-sufficient. Perhaps it is little wonder then that, if young adults are not taking full and independent responsibility for their lives until later in life, their political development may also be delayed or "arrested," and thus their attention to citizenship and its attendant political obligations are not a primary focus. In other words, if young people are not taking full responsibility for themselves, how can we expect them to be good citizens?

So what can we expect from this generation as it ages? If the society in which they live really has had a transformative effect upon the way in which young people view society and their role in it, can we expect their disengagement from the electoral process to be permanent? Or, can we anticipate a lifecycle effect—that is, a political "coming of age" as the demands of job and family later in life prompt an interest in politics? The latter seems the more popular and desirable view.

But we must be careful not to draw such a simple conclusion and leave it at that. There may be more to it than simply waiting for young people to grow up. It is possible that the views and practices of the Next West Generation actually reflect a permanent and significant generational change and that engaging this group in the political process could usher in new forms of civic engagement and perhaps even a new slate of policy issues and approaches that will have a transformative effect upon the quality of our democracy. Young people may (and I suspect they do) have a different set of ideas and perspectives, which could add colour and substance to existing policy debates and perhaps even introduce new ones. The under-participation of Canada's youth contributes to our democratic deficit and inherently weakens the policy debates in this country.

Thus, policy-makers need to understand the ideas and voting patterns of youth in order to attempt to remain ahead of the curve—they must figure out a way to reach out to and engage young people. Even if this generation of young people does grow up and participate more predictably in the political process, their views, interests and priorities *now* are still important.



All Canadians have a stake in this. While it may be true that it is not solely the responsibility of government to engage youth (young people also bear responsibility for their own action/inaction), it should be of concern to our political leaders. We all suffer when any voices are left out of the national conversation and we all bear some measure of duty to fix it.

Policy-makers must begin to tap into what matters to young people if they hope to represent them adequately. Simply to chalk it up to “no vote, no voice” is inadequate. We must find incentives for young people to let their voices be heard at the ballot box in addition to demonstrations, blogs, and advocacy. Votes, or their absence, get the attention of policy-makers and Canada’s youth may be missing an opportunity to speak up when it matters most—on election day.

The alternate channels through which young people may be politically active suggest that the assumption of arrested political development may be flawed. Furthermore, greater attention must be paid to the views and issues most important to young adults—they are, as the saying goes, our future. It could be the ticket to engaging young adults further—an “if we build it they will come” approach. The trick is figuring out what to build and how to build it.

So how do we reach young people? Should we offer Starbucks gift cards as incentives for voting? Or cool shirts that boast “I voted for PM?” (A similar tactic was reportedly used in the 2004 Russian Presidential election.) Do we allow voting by text message? To what extent is peer pressure a factor? Can young people encourage each other to vote? These are big questions and the solution, like the root of the problem itself, is likely not an easy one, nor is it as simple as offering coffee in exchange for showing up at the ballot box.

The *Looking West 2006 Survey* indicates that some of the issues important to young people may not be radically different from those of the rest of the population (e.g., human rights and post-secondary education), but young people may have something unique to say about how these issues should be prioritized and addressed. We must find a way to ensure that their views are given due and proportionate attention. The views of all Canadians must be taken into account.

.....  
**Dr. Kari Roberts is a Policy Analyst with the Canada West Foundation.**



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# Civic Engagement in Canada

by Salima Ebrahim

Canada is currently at a crossroads in terms of that famous question we all ask at least once in our life: “what do I want to be when I grow up?” As a country, we are still very young and we are still grappling with our identity, particularly on the international stage.

A group of young people called Canada25 wrestled with this question for over two years, driven by the overriding concern that we did not like the direction Canada was heading; namely, a country where few people have the ability, desire or opportunity to engage with others on civic issues and where many people reject notions of common civic values

that cut across non-civic forms of identity—be they religion, ethnicity or regionalism. We were concerned about a country where political parties are becoming more about the politicking than the policy making, where nonprofit organizations are being under-resourced yet asked to take on more on a daily basis, where public space is undervalued, and where insularity and lack of direction are becoming characteristic of our international policy.

These findings, confirmed by hundreds of young Canadians we talked to, ultimately led us to declare the simple yet seemingly challenging

statement that good things happen when people engage with others. So began Canada25's fourth and latest report, *Canadians and the Common Good: Building a Civic Nation Through Civic Engagement*. We brought together hundreds of young people over two years to debate the idea of civic engagement, and the wider concern that Canadians are becoming increasingly detached from each other with respect to civic issues. Such a path, we concluded, would ultimately lead to undesirable social and political consequences as more people feel detached from their surrounding community.

Civic engagement, therefore, is arguably one of the most pressing underlying issues our country is facing, and will become even more important as Canada becomes a more diverse, multi-lingual, multi-ethnic, and multi-religious country. Canada is growing by an average of 230,000 immigrants a year, and to ensure our diversity remains our most valuable asset, we need to provide all those coming to this country a shared sense of purpose, hope, and values—ultimately leading to a country where people appreciate common civic values and celebrate an identity based on such values.

Civic engagement not only brings “enrichment, empowerment, and a sense of belonging, but also innovation, a purposeful democracy, inclusiveness, and unity” (*Canadians and the Common Good*, p. 5). These are important attributes in a world where borders are becoming more porous by the day.

The issue of identity is a particularly relevant and complex one for Canada, with discussion of a “national identity” proving to be contentious in the best of times. An individual by the name of Leon Litvack sums it up perfectly when he says that unease about the lack of such a collective identity is what defines Canadians the best. In our report however, we decided to approach identity by turning the equation upside down and asking what makes us similar as opposed to diverse, and looked at the unifying powers of civic values such as small-l liberalism and pluralism. From there, we came up with concrete recommendations for how Canada can get to a point where we all share a common understanding of civic identity. For example, we suggest holding coming-of-age



ceremonies for eighteen-year olds, orienting the ceremony as celebrating Canada as a nation, incorporating provincial/territorial involvement, and honouring all Canadian citizens and permanent residents. In essence, making turning eighteen into a “celebration of an age where one can enjoy the full scope of civic rights and responsibilities, and communicating the importance of these rights and responsibilities” (*Canadians and the Common Good*, p. 12).

Ensuing discussions revolved around a number of other themes such as the intersection of religion and education, however few issues prompted stronger emotion than challenging the status quo on exclusion. While Canada is becoming a more prosperous and affluent country on an individual level, our country is failing some of its people. Individuals working in jobs for which they are over-qualified; crime rates disproportionately affecting certain communities; homelessness; and the living conditions of many of Canada's Aboriginal peoples are just a few examples. For all of us, these are glaring examples of Canada leaving a number of its citizens

behind, not only economically, but also civically, as those who do not feel like they are sharing in Canada's prosperity are less likely to feel as attached to the country. To us, this only underlines the importance of fostering a population that feels a common sense of belonging.

In this increasingly interdependent world, brought together by movements of people between countries, no community and no society are islands unto themselves. Newcomers to Canada adapt to and influence their new environment, leading to a vibrant culture that is constantly changing as individuals bring the sum total of their community experiences—geographical, cultural, group, family—to the table. Change is inevitable. It is already happening. Our challenge is to build a community in which all members of the society—new and established citizens—participate in some form and where we function as a true nation, knowing that we are all tied to each other intrinsically just by being Canadian.

Salima Ebrahim is an Issue Strategist with the City of Calgary and a long-time Canada25 member. She can be reached at [salima.ebrahim-alumni@lse.ac.uk](mailto:salima.ebrahim-alumni@lse.ac.uk). More information on Canada25 can be found at [www.canada25.com](http://www.canada25.com).

# Could the Standard of Living of **Future Generations** be at Risk?

by Brett Gartner

In the 20th century, successive generations of Canadians were fortunate enough to experience a higher standard of living than their forebears. Canada's standard of living—as measured by real GDP per capita—increased by about 2.6% per year from 1936 to 1996. By the turn of the century, Canada's standard of living was roughly five times higher than it was in 1936. There were some rough patches—the recessions of the early 1980s and the early 1990s and, of course, the Great Depression. Some regions and provinces have fared better than others. Furthermore, a persuasive argument can be made that Canada's economic performance could have been better. Productivity growth—an important aspect of growth in living standards—continues to lag behind the US. Nevertheless, in the eyes of the world, Canadians enjoy an enviable standard of living.

However, Canada is facing some unstoppable shifts in demographics. These changes to the composition of the population will be unprecedented and will have widespread impacts on the labour market, public finances and social programs like health care, education and social services. Although Canada's population is younger than other major industrialized countries, the aging process will quicken as the first of the baby boomers turn 60 this year. Decreasing fertility levels and longer life spans add to the mix. In 25 years, the share of seniors in the population will be nearly double what it is now. On the other hand, working age Canadians will shrink as a share of the total population. The working age population will get older as well. Population growth will become dependent on immigration as the natural increase (births minus deaths) turns negative.

As a result of these inevitable changes, economists and other experts have expressed doubts that coming generations will enjoy a higher standard of living than their predecessors. Declining or stagnant labour force growth, aging of the labour force and other

factors such as lower national saving will certainly affect the economy. While there is uncertainty over what the precise effects will be, there is evidence that the demographic shifts facing Canada are not conducive to rapid growth in living standards. The OECD expects that aging populations will slow growth in living standards in most industrialized countries. A 2006 Canadian economic study took a look at the link between an aging workforce and productivity. This research found that an aging labour force has a direct negative impact on productivity. While the effect was found to be moderate, productivity growth is expected to fall in coming decades. A 2005 economic study conducted under the banner of the federal government's Skills Research Initiative concluded that an aging population would have a significant impact on real GDP per capita in the long-term. Specifically, real GDP per capita is predicted to fall by 11% by 2050.

However, some economists say that the economic costs associated with Canada's aging population have been overstated and point out that the inevitable shift in Canada's demographic landscape can have economic benefits that will offset the costs. For example, with reduced labour force growth and a relative shortage of labour, wage rates will increase in the future. As a consequence, future young Canadians will have greater incentive to invest in human capital. The economic benefits of investment in human capital are well known. Education and skills training play a key role in economic growth and improvement in the standard of living.

At the individual level, young people will have an opportunity to benefit from the aging of the population. They might, however, need some encouragement and guidance. Labour shortages cause wages to rise. And higher wages can entice young people to join the labour market rather than invest time and money in education. This scenario is currently playing out in Alberta, where





high wages and plentiful jobs are a strong draw. Too many young people are foregoing education to take a good paying job.

Most importantly, the opportunity to offset the costs of an aging population requires some serious action on the part of policy-makers. It is imperative that Canada's leaders do more to seize upon the importance of education and training for economic growth. Canada West Foundation Chief Economist Todd Hirsch offered some pertinent recommendations on education and training in his paper "Shaping our Future: Creative Ideas for Transforming Western Canada's Economy." Adult literacy must be substantially reduced, as should the high school drop out rate. The capacity of post-secondary education institutions should be increased to ensure that no qualified student is turned away because of a lack of student spaces. Resources should be directed

towards building first-rate centres for education and training and attracting world-class faculty and graduate students.

These are only a few recommendations that should be pursued to transform Canada's education system to meet the challenges and take advantage of opportunities presented by shifts in demography. But if Canadian living standards are to continue to grow, it is essential that action is taken now.

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**Brett Gartner is an Economist with the Canada West Foundation.**

# Understanding Generation Next: The Looking West 2006 Survey

by Loleen Berdahl and Robert Roach



People often make assumptions about today's young adults, particularly with respect to their involvement in civic life. Some of this is likely rooted in nostalgia among aging boomers for the old days of Abbie Hoffman, the (original) Woodstock and spirited disagreements with “the Establishment” about Vietnam. If they don't see this kind of civic engagement mirrored in the current crop of young adults, they may assume that it is a sign of political apathy.

Others may assume that a protester smashing the windows of a McDonald's during a G-8 Summit or a videogame addict are typical young adults. Are these and similar assumptions accurate?

To get a better understanding of young adults, the Canada West Foundation's *Looking West 2006 Survey* asked 2,000 western Canadians age 18 to 34 their opinions on a wide range of political topics. The survey included questions on political and social identities, democratic actions and beliefs, public policy priorities, and expectations for the future. The result is a portrait of western Canada's next generation of leaders and taxpayers.

Most young adults in western Canada see themselves as political centrists (with perhaps a slight left-ward lean) and most are more concerned about international issues than are western Canadians age 35 and over. They are a little less likely than their elders to closely identify with where they live, but still identify closely with Canada, western Canada, their province, and their city, town or rural community. They tend to be cynical about Canadian politics. And, reports of political apathy to the contrary, most of them have at least a moderate interest in politics and most have recently engaged in some sort of political activity.

The survey results also point to a number of scenarios that may profoundly affect the future of the region and the country.

First, Quebec has preoccupied Canadian politics for decades, but 3 in 10 young adults in western Canada say that they do not care if Quebec remains part of Canada, and another 1 in 10 state that

Quebec should separate. In other words, 4 in 10 western Canadians under 35 are either indifferent or negative toward Quebec's place in Confederation. This is somewhat higher than for those over 35 and suggests that there is a strong feeling of indifference toward Quebec among a significant number of young western Canadians.

As a result, future national unity efforts designed to keep Quebec in the national fold such as increased transfers or special constitutional status may continue to be a hard sell in western Canada.

It would strike Americans as very odd indeed if a large proportion of voters said they don't care if the country breaks up—that Texas should leave if it wants or who cares if New

York separates. In Canada, however, it seems as natural as sunshine for people to talk about the threat of Quebec separation and for a large number of people to state that they don't really care one way or the other. Whatever your stance on Quebec's place in Confederation, you must admit that this indicates that we have some work to do to bind this country together.

A second potential scenario suggested by the results of the *Looking West 2006 Survey* is rising democratic disengagement. Young adults have always been less likely to vote than their elders. The problem is that this has been getting worse over time. Some hypothesize that young non-voters are participating in Canadian democracy in other ways. However, the survey results suggest that this is not the case. It is voters—of all ages—who tend to participate in democracy in other ways (e.g., signing a petition or contacting an elected official).

Non-voters, on the other hand, tend to abstain from other facets of democratic engagement. Voting and other forms of democratic participation go hand in hand, as do non-voting and general political apathy. Hence, because voting rates are lower among young adults than they used to be, we may see a decline in overall democratic

engagement in the years ahead as this less engaged generation of young adults matures.

If we want to arrest this trend, now is the time to do something about it. One place to start is at the party level. The survey shows that many young adults feel that the existing political parties are not in tune with their concerns. Paying more attention to the aspirations and concerns of young adults and reflecting this in provincial and federal party platforms would be a step in the right direction. This may not change the outcome of the next election, but it would

certainly set the stage for greater engagement on the part of the young adults.

The snapshot of the current crop of young adults provided by the *Looking West 2006 Survey* indicates that there is a significant disconnect between young adults in the West and political parties as well as a strong strain of indifference toward keeping Quebec satisfied within Confederation.

Generational traits, however, are not fixed; people change as they age. It is in the interest of all western Canadians—regardless of age—to identify ways to address and reduce the relative political disengagement of

today's young adults and to think hard about what it means that so many of them don't care if Quebec stays part of Canada. The health of Canadian democracy is at stake.

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**“It would strike Americans as very odd indeed if a large proportion of voters said they don't care if the country breaks up—that Texas should leave if it wants or who cares if New York separates. In Canada, however, it seems as natural as sunshine for people to talk about the threat of Quebec separation and for a large number of people to state that they don't really care one way or the other. Whatever your stance on Quebec's place in Confederation, you must admit that this indicates that we have some work to do to bind this country together.”**

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**Loleen Berdahl is a Senior Researcher and Robert Roach is Director of Research with the Canada West Foundation.**

# Recent Publications

*Western Cities Sourcebook 2007* by Jason Azmier

*The Lay of the Land: An Inventory of Federal and Provincial Land Stewardship Policy in Western Canada* by Geneva Rae and Bethany Beale

*Looking West 2007: Segment 3 - Urban Transportation* by Loleen Berdahl

*Looking West 2007: Segment 2 - Urban Policy Priorities* by Loleen Berdahl

*Reasons for Optimism: Saskatchewan Economic Profile and Forecast* by Todd Hirsch

*Looking West 2007: Segment 1 - Urban Environment* by Loleen Berdahl

*You Get What You Pay For: Comparing Public and Private Sector Salaries* by Brett Gartner

*Dialogues - What is TILMA? Examining the Trade, Investment and Labour Mobility Agreement Between BC and Alberta*

*Equalization and the Fiscal Imbalance: Options for Moving Forward* by Ken Boessenkool and Evan Wilson

*Leading the Way: The BC/Alberta Economy* by Brett Gartner

*Open Spaces and People Places: Transfer of Development Credits* by Bethany Beale and Chris Fay

*Holding Steady: Manitoba Economic Profile and Forecast* by Todd Hirsch

Canada West Foundation Publications are available in electronic format at [www.cwf.ca](http://www.cwf.ca)





# The Geography of Loyalty for Young Western Canadians

by Jason Bristow

In March, the Canada West Foundation conducted focus groups in Vancouver, Calgary, Edmonton, Regina, Saskatoon, and Winnipeg with young adults (aged 24-35) to understand their views on Canadian democracy, public policy preferences, national unity, their political behaviour, and their political geographic identity. This qualitative or “depth” research complements our *Looking West 2006 Survey*, which quantitatively sampled the same topics.

The most interesting subject is political geographic identifications: *which* political geographic grouping people identify with and *why* they attach to that grouping. The young adults were asked to pick the group they “identify with” and “belong to” from the following series: the world, North America, Canada, western Canada, their province, their city, and “other.”

This gauges the substance and salience of political geography and is an important indication of the legitimacy, disconnection, and potential fractures found in any democracy. In Canada, it is essential to study the multiple and shifting loyalties, and their underlying reasons and feelings, given that the federal structure of government promotes competitive identifications and that the regional, bilingual, and multicultural character of the country introduces further complications and, it must be said, antagonisms. “Salience” means the priority of one grouping over others, and “substance” is how one defines oneself—the answer to *why* they attach to that group.

Forty-five young people picked Canada, 41 picked their city, 35 picked the world, 34 picked their province, 20 picked western Canada, 18 picked “other,” and 6 picked North America. The raw numbers are less important than the pattern of explanation behind the numbers, because that is where the meaning of identity is found.

Canada was picked most often and the pride young western Canadians had derived from Canada in the world, rather than purely domestic accomplishments: both how the country was respected abroad and for the peace-making, foreign aid, and development work the country had done and is doing.

Cities were picked second most, and provinces were ranked fourth, but they should be grouped together because the underlying reasons were identical. The focus group participants said that they experienced cities and provinces directly and daily. One young man said “I chose Calgary because it’s real, it’s tangible, I can see and feel it. Anything bigger than that is just conceptual.”



The world ranked third, picked for climate change and global warming reasons, because “collective problems require collective solutions,” and with a vision of “breaking down borders” to promote harmony between peoples. Vancouverites picked the world far more than residents of any other cities, an awareness likely shaped by living at the edge of the Pacific Ocean.

This ranking—Canada, then city-province, then world—is not random or the result of a simple popularity contest. Identifications, however vague they seem, have coherent reasons and feelings as roots.

The basis for attachment to Canada was external (international) and abstract (the respect held for the country) more than it was domestic and concrete. There are incredibly compelling domestic reasons for picking Canada—a history free of civil war and authoritarian forms of government, a land of personal freedoms and economic opportunity—but not one person referenced any of these. The basis for municipal and provincial attachment, in contrast, was entirely concrete. While

some said they could directly experience their city, they said that Canada was too big to grasp. And the basis for world identification was future-oriented and prescriptive. Unlike for Canada, for which the basis was what the country had done or was doing, the basis for the world was what they wished for or expected, and so by identifying with the world, they felt more empowered to bring about change.

Beyond this pattern of primary identifications, four other trends emerged.

First, federal-provincial and national-regional antagonisms were conspicuous by their absence. While a couple young adults said that Toronto stories dominated the media, there was not one expression of what used to be called western alienation. This could be a temporary aberration; after all, western Canadian politicians now form the Government, the Prime Minister's riding is Calgary South, and the wild economic boom does distract the public conversation away from entrenched political grievance. Or it could be early signs of a permanent change in attitude—it is too soon to tell.

Second, western Canadians existentially identify with country, not province. French-speaking Quebecers tend to see themselves as *Quebecois*, an ethnic designation based on ancestry. Whereas young Canadians from the four western provinces see their province, or western Canada as a whole, as where they and their extended family live or as a common landscape, they see Canada as their *imagined* community. They feel connected to Canada and, almost always, tremendously proud to be Canadian.

Third, national identity is starting to be defined in positive terms. For far too long, national identity was formed by relying on a negative (or relative) definition: Canadians are not Americans.

While a few western Canadians used this relative approach, several young adults described their attachment without any envy, resentment, misgivings, or any relation whatsoever to the US. One young woman from Winnipeg said "I chose Canada because I'm Canadian. And I'm Canadian not because I'm not American or not German." The shift from a negative to positive formulation, however incomplete right now, is a big step forward in Canadian national development.



Fourth, national attachment is shifting from symbols and institutions to values and attitudes. Research shows middle-aged Canadians identify with institutions and symbols: the Queen, the RCMP, the CBC, even the Canadian Pacific Railway and maybe, at one time, Eaton's. Young people draw identity from "our humble nature," "our quirky view on things," "our tolerance and open-mindedness." While symbols serve as convenient reference points for a shared sense of belonging, common values and attitudes are a stronger bond for society because they emerge internally and naturally.

The fourth point fits with the third. These shifts—from negative to positive definitions, from symbols and institutions to values and attitudes—reflect a common undercurrent: developing national self-awareness.

If the identity and attachment of political geography seem elusive, it is because they are. Harvard political scientist Samuel Huntington writes "the concept of identity is as indispensable as it is unclear."

Although findings on political geographic identity should not be seen as actionable intelligence (in the world of espionage) or a triple-A bond rating (in the world of Standard & Poors), our results do imply some interesting things:

- the Canadian federation is stronger than it appears, at least when viewed from the West;
- deeper Canada-U.S. economic integration does not imperil Canada, because the roots of patriotism can adapt to liberalized trade and investment; and
- against the dour voices of pessimism, Canadian identity is not merely surviving, but flourishing.

Our findings on the substance and salience of political geographic identity among young western Canadians will be discussed in depth in a research report that will be published this fall, as will our findings on traditional and non-traditional political behaviour, attitudes toward Canadian democracy and voting, and public policy preferences.

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**Dr. Jason Bristow is a Senior Policy Analyst with the Canada West Foundation.**

# Through the Other End of the Telescope



Dr. Roger Gibbins  
President and CEO  
Canada West  
Foundation

I am writing as someone who has just turned 60, and therefore is at the cutting edge, dull though that edge might be, of the baby boomer generation.

It is easy for those of my advanced and advancing age to be dismissive of younger generations, to assume that their new ideas and even lifestyles will fade when confronted with the brutal realities of employment, children, mortgages and pets.

Yes, we say or wheeze, I too was once young and crazy, and I marched against the war (a different war), at least talked of free love, and laughed at the thought that I would ever go on a cruise, buy a tux, or vote Conservative or Liberal. But then stuff happened, and here I am a proud and rock-solid part of the establishment. Despite all my plans to do otherwise, I have become “the man.”

And yet, it would be a mistake to dismiss the possibility of very real and significant generational change, to assume that new generations will follow faithfully in the footsteps of the boomers, for the world has changed in profound ways.

My youth of economic security, a handful of television stations, slide rulers, vinyl records, the Vietnam and Cold Wars, the Berlin Wall and folk music is gone. Dead, kaput. New generations are being shaped by a radically different social, economic, political and technological context, and that different context will have a lasting impact on values, identities and beliefs.

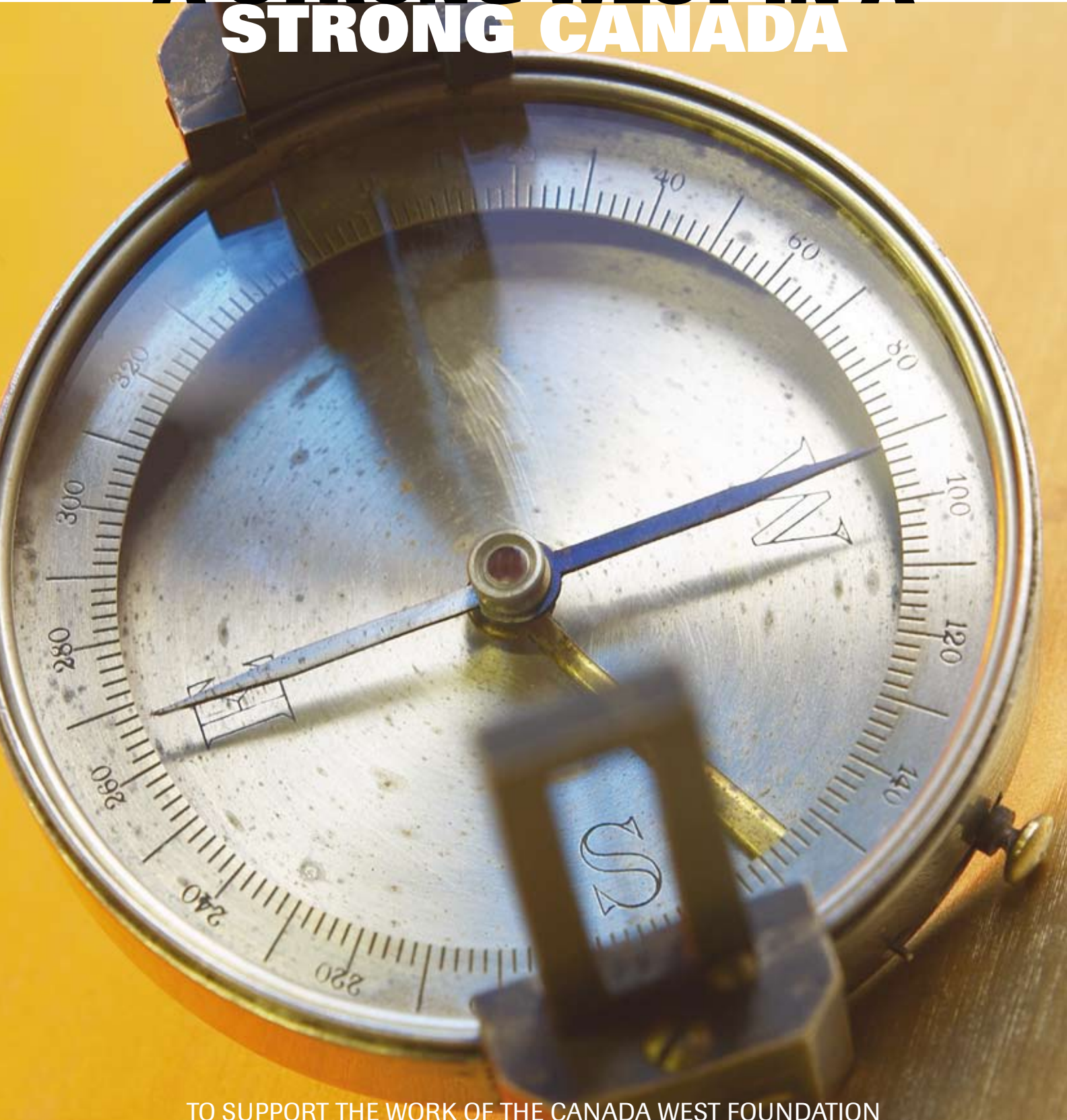
In the introduction to this issue of *Dialogues*, Robert Roach warns that “there is a danger that the generations coming up behind the boomers will be overshadowed by the noisy demands of the older end of the age continuum.” I share his concern, and urge a broader generational perspective.

We can assume that the boomers will have sufficient demographic, economic and electoral clout to look after themselves. However, I would argue that the fate of many public policy issues is shifting into the hands, perhaps unwilling hands, of their younger peers. The primary action is moving elsewhere.

The issue of global warming exemplifies, although by no means exhausts, this intergenerational transfer of leadership and responsibility. How this issue is addressed and ultimately our success or lack thereof in doing so, will be determined in large part by those much younger than me.

It is no wonder, therefore, that the Canada West Foundation is interested in generational transformation. The West, after all, is no more than a geographical container; what brings it to life is the relentless flux of its human population. The West will be different tomorrow from what it was yesterday because its residents will be different, exposed to new circumstances, values, threats and opportunities. Thus the Foundation’s work on the determinants of economic prosperity and quality of life must address generational transformation, and this issue of *Dialogues* is a step in this direction.

# A STRONG WEST IN A STRONG CANADA



TO SUPPORT THE WORK OF THE CANADA WEST FOUNDATION  
contact Julie Johnston (Director of Fund Development)  
[johnston@cwf.ca](mailto:johnston@cwf.ca) • 403.538.7355