

Report from Queen's Park

"We need the skills of the elderly"

by Julian Reed
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There has been considerable discussion recently about the so-called "new North American

phenomenon" of the elderly and their role in society. To a great extent, this subject has be-

come one of widespread interest because of the age-to-youth balance of our populations.

In the early 1900s people 65 years of age and over made up a mere five per cent of the Cana-

dian population. By 1978 this figure had risen to nine per cent. It will reach 12 per cent by the year 2000. Two decades later it is expected to exceed 20 per cent. By the year 2031 there will be only three working adults for every person over 65.

What is not a new phenomenon—North American or otherwise—is the concept that older people have an important contribution to make to society.

Throughout history we find convincing proof that mental powers increase with age. Artistic and intellectual powers are intensified in later years. Michelangelo was still producing masterpieces at 89. Goethe completed the second part of Faust when he was 82. Handel was still composing beautiful music and Longfellow was still writing immortal poetry when they were past 70. Voltaire wrote Candide at 65.

In our own lifetime many older people have achieved success and fulfillment in what used to be considered the twilight years.

Winston Churchill led Britain and the Free World through the Second Great War when he was past "retirement age". He probably regarded the 65-year-old deadline as a German conspiracy since it had been originated by Chancellor Bismarck in the first place.

At 85 Coco Chanel was head of a fashion design firm. Pablo Picasso produced drawings and engravings at 90. There are countless examples in the field of classical music—Stokowski, Von Karajan, Sir Adrian Boult, Toscanini, Horowitz, all well past retirement age.

Leonard Bernstein is a comparative infant at 65.

The subject of mandatory retirement has been much in the news, of course, and in this connection there has been considerable polarization of opinion.

We are particularly concerned about the possible infringement of individual rights which is involved. Any attempt which may be made to remove the rights and alternatives of people over 65 drives them into a position where they are forced to seek other rights, because our whole society is based on the concept of rights and alternatives.

Let's consider first the economic situation of our so-called senior citizens.

Even those people who have all their lives been very thrifty and have provided for their futures will have done so at a time when the dollar was far more valuable than it is today. Having made considerable sacrifices throughout their working lives, they have found in many cases that their pensions are almost meaningless. Obviously, something must be done about their financial circumstances, their physical well-being and their security.

But over and above those concerns, there are others to which we must address ourselves.

Merely by reason of having lived a goodly number of years, these people have acquired tremendous knowledge, wisdom and understanding, from which we can all benefit. They can contribute to the guidance and stability which our whole society so desperately needs. But they cannot do this if they are segregated, "put out to pasture" or forced to be almost totally preoccupied with their own basic needs.

We have incredibly complex problems today. Enormous pressures are brought to bear on individuals and on governments. Just as we need the talents and abilities of our young people many of whom are frustrated because of high unemployment and lack of opportunity, so do we need the talents and abilities of our older citizens.

Just as we must be careful that we do not turn off our young people, so we must be careful that we do not turn off our older citizens. To illustrate this danger, I would remind you that in 1978, there was a SENIOR Citizens Week, for which the theme was "Reach Out". At that time many older people protested that the theme "Shut Out" was more appropriate.

This whole question of retirement must be reassessed. We need the skills and experience of the people who are forced out of the labor force because of mandatory retirement policies. Early retirement provisions also have considerable effect.

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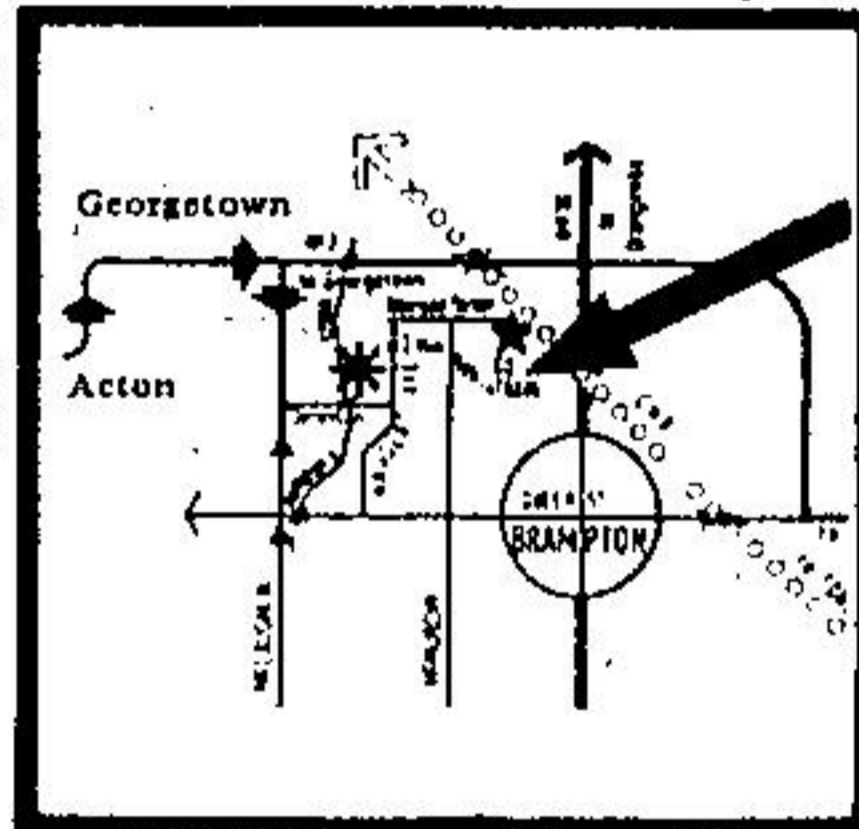
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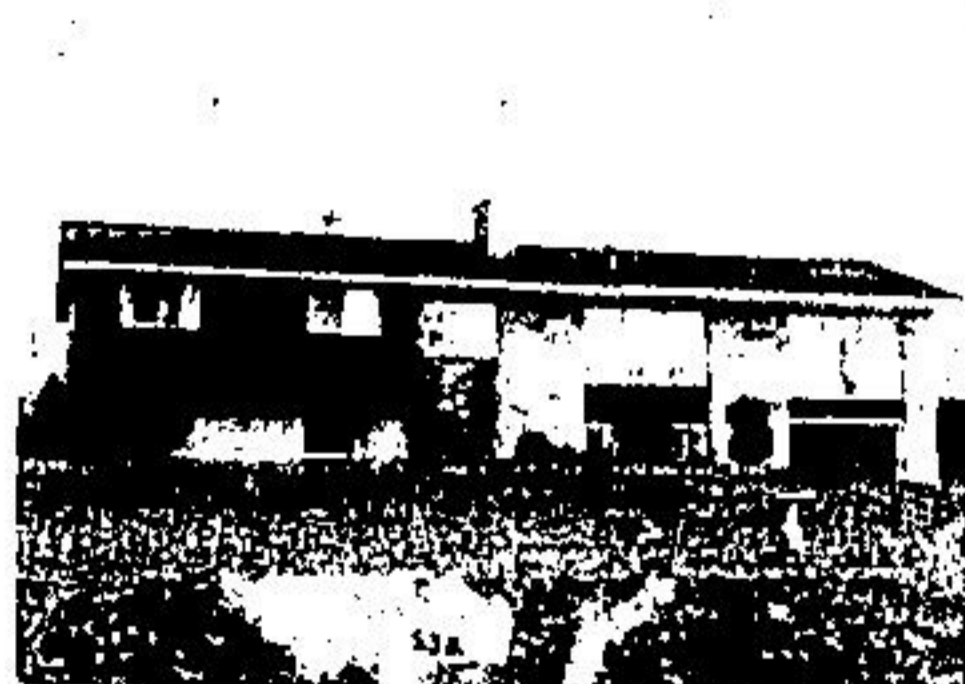
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