

OPINION

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EDITORIAL

Help citizens grow old with dignity

It's surprising what a poor job we do of using demographics to help our society function better or plan for the future.

In particular, recent developments would suggest we're not doing a very good job of looking after our aging population. In the meantime, a census report this week says we may be running out of workers to help care for older Ontarians who are poised to retire in the next decade.

We know how many people are born each year, how many die, how many immigrate to this country — even how many move from one province to the other. It should be easy to paint a picture of what our population will look like even decades from now.

Unfortunately, in the same way we might find ourselves needing bifocals or hankering for a nap in the afternoon, this change sneaks up on us. Soon we discover we have scores of elderly people who need to be cared for and not enough people or money to do it.

The problem was highlighted last week by Health Minister George Smitherman's dismal attempt at humour when confronted with the fact elderly people in nursing homes are forced to sit in soiled diapers because there is not enough staff to change them. Mr. Smitherman offered to test out the diapers himself as part of his research into the problem.

(Dubbed by some as Furious George for

the way he dealt with health-care providers who insisted their hospitals were underfunded, perhaps he should stick with that persona — Humorous George somehow doesn't cut it.)

Mr. Smitherman's lack of a sense of humour aside, it's hard to know what research is required. He would or should know staffing levels and how many people need care. He should have a plan to tackle this problem, which will only get worse in the ensuing decades — our aging fellow citizens and how we look after each other. In short, he should consult his demographers.

No one is immune from the ravages of age. Premier Dalton McGuinty and Mr. Smitherman will be old some day, too. Fortunately for them, their parliamentary pensions will mean they will be able to afford private care if they have difficulty in their "golden years". But others will not and deserve better. It's a simple matter of dignity.

In the shorter term, they should be worried by the fact elderly people still have the right to vote and tend to do so in large numbers.

If they think the province to which they have paid tens of thousands of dollars in taxes to over the years does not have a plan to help them in their old age, they might adjust their bifocals and start looking around for a government that does.



We need to learn how global warming works

There has been a lot of talk in Canada lately about the need to develop technological innovations that address global warming.

After all, since humans cause global warming by burning too much fossil fuels such as coal, oil and gas, as well as destroy natural ecosystems that absorb and store carbon, it's up to us to fix it.

Of course, replacing traditional sources of energy we've come to rely on so heavily is no easy feat. It requires big effort.

But here's the good part: most of the technologies needed to usher in a clean and sustainable future are already available.

Even better, many of these technologies are being developed right here in Canada.

By supporting innovative solutions, we can phase out the older polluting forms of generating energy that contribute to global warming and thus create a cleaner world. These innovations will create new jobs and boost our economy.

For too long, the environment and economy have been treated

as two separate solitudes, but they aren't. We can protect and conserve the environment and have a vibrant economy.

But first, bear with me for a little climate change 101.

In order to put reasonable, practical solutions in place, we have to understand how global warming works. Not all scientists agree when certain things will happen, but most scientists agree on the basic mechanism that is warming our planet. It's really pretty simple.

Heat from the sun comes down through the Earth's atmosphere and some of it bounces back into space.

The atmosphere acts similar to a cozy blanket, thanks to certain atmospheric gases that act as a layer of insulation to hold some of the heat.

But, over the last several centuries, as the Industrial Revolution has taken place, humans are burning more and more fossil fuels to meet our energy needs.

Thanks to our cars and factories, we have released more of these heat-trapping gases than the biosphere can reabsorb so they build up and thicken the heat-trapping blanket of



David Suzuki

With Faisal Moola

insulation around the Earth.

Human land use practices, such as the destruction of tropical rainforests, also release carbon dioxide into the atmosphere.

The heat builds up, the globe warms and the atmospheric balance that keeps the climate stable is disrupted.

Global warming is more about a mechanism that gets destabilized and broken, such as a thermostat that goes haywire.

It doesn't work the way it should and this results in extreme weather effects around the globe.

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As we now know, according to the UN's blue-ribbon panel of scientists who studied global warming, it's happening right now.

Ten of the warmest years on record have occurred since 1980.

Scientists have closely observed the results of this thickening blanket and corresponding rise in global temperatures.

The effects are impossible to ignore: rapidly melting glaciers and ice caps, warmer temperatures, stronger storms, and even the migration of tropical diseases, animals and plants into temperate regions.

The loss of Canada's boreal wilderness? The disappearance of Canadian icons such as the polar bear and caribou?

Scientists tell us this could very well happen if global warming continues unabated due to personal and political inaction to seriously tackle the problem.

There is broad agreement global warming results in more negative

consequences than positive ones.

So, the best course is to make practical choices that reduce the drivers of climate change.

We all need to meet the challenge directly to ensure against the worst outcomes. And we can do this through innovative technology.

This brings me back to my original point. We don't have to wait for some brilliant inventor to create an Earth-shattering technological wonder.

Several years ago, the David Suzuki Foundation released Power Shift that showed with technology already available, Canada could reduce its greenhouse gas emissions by more than 50 per cent over 30 years.

For example, we could increase the average fuel efficiency of today's automobiles, one of the world's major sources of heat-trapping gases.

There is already a great deal of momentum around the world. Japanese automakers are required to improve the fuel efficiency of their vehicles by 20 percent by 2015.

Together, we can make Canada a global warming problem-solver, not a problem-maker.

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