



Divided we stand on guard for whom?

If America is a sermon and Britain a seminar, Canada is a conversation — the various chambers of its vast, collective mind thrumming with tolerance.

It's not the brutal winters that lure humanity to the Great White North's diverse rural and urban landscapes. It's the absence of intellectual straight-jackets. We manifest the simple proposition that rational accommodation is the one enduring gift a true civilization bestows on its members.

Lately, though, this nation of 32-million souls has been losing its deft touch. Our emerging solitudes, displaying both American intensity and British stratification, are now almost too numerous to count: East versus West; rich versus poor; resource industries versus manufacturing ones; the over-educated versus the under-skilled, both unemployed.

Precisely when this happened is hard to know. But it is clear that our major media have, for some time, mongered intergenerational warfare to divide and conquer the watching, listening and (even occasionally) reading public and, of course, the advertisers who follow them. A recent edition of Canada's leading organ of preening self-regard sharpens the point.

"We are the gilded generation," columnist and professional provocateur Margaret Wentz writes about her fellow baby boomers in the *Globe and Mail*. "Things have always gone our way . . . Should we . . . feel guilty about this? I think so. We like to say we earned it, and I guess, in part, we did. But we also won the birth-year lottery. Perhaps we shouldn't cling so stubbornly to our entitlements . . . Perhaps it's time we pay it forward."

It's too late for that, declares her 20-something opponent Dakshana Bascaramurty in mock outrage. She's a so-called "millennial" who "resents" the fact that she and the rest of her cohort "already have to start saving for our retirement, even as we pay for the mistakes of the older generation . . . For the most part, the boomers will keep enjoying what they've always enjoyed." The conclusions from both sides of the debate — which occupied two full pages of prime editorial real estate — are no more fortifying than a face full of plastic glitter. But that is the point of the exercise, after all: To inflame, rather than inform, public opinion.

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In fact, the *Globe's* calculating masters don't seek a solution; they want an argument. And, in this, they, and others like them in the Fourth Estate, have learned their lessons from political tutors who have, over the past 10 years, decided that Canada is no place for a reasonable conversation.

Premier of Ontario Dalton McGuinty screams blue murder over the deleterious effects of Alberta's oil sands development on the Canadian dollar, whose value, he complains, is now too high to secure his province's competitive edge in export markets. He doesn't bother to mention that Ontario already receives tens-of-billions of dollars a year in industrial benefits from the western bitumen boom.

Alberta Premier Allison Redford responds in like, petulant fashion, claiming that the durable future of the Canadian economy lies in the land of the setting sun and implying, to the delight of her gritty, chippy electoral base, that this new natural order of things is as welcome as it is overdue.

Meanwhile, Prime Minister Stephen Harper and his cavalier of cabinetees continue their remorseless, relentless project to replace the very underpinnings of Confederation — to, in effect, set the provinces free to fight each other for the ever-dwindling attention and resources of the federal government — as they cut spending on programs Canadians need in favour of those they don't.

How can procuring 65 new fighter jets in a time of relative peace or erecting new prisons in an age of falling crime rates compare in importance or relevance to improving access to health care? You may ask this, but don't expect a thoughtful rejoinder. In Canada ver. 2.0, you are more apt to be reviled as a traitor, terrorist or worse, tree-hugger — such is the level to which public discourse has sunk.

In a society that is becoming increasingly tribal in its obsessions, it's easy to overlook the fact that we no longer elect people who have our best, or even basic, interests at heart. And the only conversation they want us to carry on is the one that echoes in our small, divisive, intolerant minds. | **ABM**

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