

Don't Sweat the Small Stuff

Charles Cirtwill

President and CEO, Atlantic Institute for Market Studies

7 June 2011

Commentary based on a convocation speech delivered to Kingsview Academy in Halifax,
June 2011



It is a daunting task to lay out the future in any concrete way.

Indeed as the head of a public policy think tank I spend much of my day attempting to explain to reporters, politicians, public servants and their victims (that would be us) the level of hubris required to believe that anyone, let alone an entity as complex and conflicted as government, can predict the future and do so with sufficient accuracy to plan and prepare for it.

As a father of four, I also have some considerable experience in attempting to make sense of past and present events and put them in a context that is understandable to both a five year old and a twenty five year old...let alone understandable to me...whose age, while I will leave it unmentioned, seems to continue to get larger with each passing year...

Nevertheless, with each passing year I become more certain of one thing:

...the future will both barely resemble, and yet be remarkably similar to, the past...

Okay, that is two things, but there you have it.

And since I am piling on, there is a third thing: the future and the past are inextricably connected.

There was a wonderful car ad a few years ago that had a tag line that said "this is not your father's Oldsmobile".

It was an attempt to push a generation of adults into buying vehicles that they recalled, fondly or not, as something their parents drove – linking to the past while pushing toward the future.

To say your Canada will not be your parents or your grandparents Canada seems, to me, a bit of an understatement.

Yes, yes, this has been said of every generation that has come before you and will likely be said about every generation that comes after. It is trite, simplistic and generically true.

But for you, it will have real meaning – meaning in a way that it has not had in some time.

You see, sixty-six years ago, something remarkable happened – your grandparent's generation started to be born. For fifteen years births skyrocketed and the “baby-boom” was created.

That generation is responsible for the largest accumulation of wealth in human history. A level of wealth that has variously given us: conspicuous consumption, globalization, the environmental movement, Rock and roll, and the modern welfare state.

That collective prosperity has its mixed blessings. Our growing enthusiasm for everything IT such that EVERYONE should have an iphone/android or blackberry as it were, and indeed, in the darkest slums of our poorest cities, many do.

Or our collective level of indebtedness, with public and private debt at their highest levels ever, it is clear Europe has reached a tipping point, and the US is not far behind, yet we dare not forget that debt both constrains as well as creates opportunity.

Now, in the next fifteen years, as you start to define your own adulthood, this boomer generation is going to gift us with two last world shifting changes.

First they will place unprecedented demands on our health care system as they seek out new and innovative ways to extend not only life but quality of life.

For those of you with a passion for medicine or science or simply caring, this will be a huge opportunity.

But, eventually, boomers will also stop consuming; en masse, in sizable chunks and in large part, all at once.

This sudden decline in spending will reduce, at a stroke, the size of the consumer marketplace that has supplied the foundation for valuation of our homes, our businesses and our economies.

Meaning we will have debt larger than anything we have ever experienced while at the same time the value of our asset holdings, the security we think we have against those debts, will plummet in value. Think the US housing meltdown times five, or ten or twenty.

For those of you with financial acumen, with deal making skills, with a sense for global opportunity – this will be your chance to shine.

Arguably, this aging demographic and declining population is exclusively a western or developed world phenomenon – and indeed to a large degree it is – provided you include China and large parts of the rest of the “developing” world in your analysis as well.

Brazil, India and China are, in demographic terms, only slightly behind the western curve in terms of population peaks and aging, indeed because of the one child policy China will, by some estimates, “catch up” with the western rate of decline sometime in the next five to ten years.

Yet, we have all heard that the world's total population continues to rise precipitously, and that too is true.

But that growth is itself, problematic, and not just in terms of our total capacity to feed so many people. Where the population is growing, and where it is shrinking, causes possibly even greater and more pressing concerns.

The population (and birth rate) of the poorest among us grows, while the affluent decline – a recipe for larger and far more volatile challenges, locally, nationally and internationally, in the years ahead.

For those of you with the capacity to understand humanity, to balance feelings and to build relationships with and between others, this will be a substantial calling.

I talk to you about the past, because your adult years will be dominated by the reality of transitioning to a starkly different future.

You and your generation will not only be tasked with finding the creative solutions to sustain a level of collective care to which we have all become accustomed, you will also be tasked with balancing that demand against your own understandable desire to have something left for yourselves and to have something left to leave to your children.

This challenge is a good thing. Yes, a GOOD thing. Recall, what I said earlier about the positive impacts that conflict and adversity can have for humanity.

It is a remarkable time to be alive and a challenge to which I have no doubt you, and people like you across this country and around the globe, will relish and respond to.

But it is also one which, based on my admittedly limited exposure, I think Kingsview Academy has ideally prepared you for.

This global challenge will require creativity, ingenuity, and teamwork. It will require personal commitment and real effort.

It will require people with the flexibility of mind and the courage to see opportunity where others only see challenge. It will require leaders – elected, business, community, and family leaders that once again see their fellow man as, well, their FELLOW man.

It will require taking lessons from two or three or ten seemingly unconnected areas of knowledge and endeavour and applying them

with fresh eyes and energy to apparently insoluble problems.

It will mean taking responsibility for yourself, and for others, in a very singular way. It will mean that everyone, when seeking leadership, will have to look within themselves to find it, instead of looking to others.

To borrow shamelessly from your school's mission statement, it will mean balancing individual and collective best interests with dignity, style and grace.

Again, I congratulate you on today's success and wish you all the best in your pursuit of tomorrow's.



Atlantic Institute for Market Studies

**2000 Barrington St., Ste. 1302 Cogswell Tower,
Halifax NS B3J 3K1
phone: (902) 429-1143 fax: (902) 425-1393
E-Mail: aims@aims.ca <http://www.aims.ca>**