

## Unit Four: Assignment 8: Generational Perspectives

### Introduction: When Your Parents Were Young

Imagine asking your grandparents what it means to be Canadian and getting a completely different answer than your parents would give. Now imagine asking someone your age the same question and hearing yet another perspective. This isn't just a difference of opinion—it reflects how major historical events shape each generation's understanding of what Canada is and what it's becoming.

The people who lived through the October Crisis, the patriation of the *Constitution*, and the Quebec referendums see Canada differently than those who grew up with the *Charter of Rights and Freedoms*, free trade, and 9/11. Meanwhile, today's young Canadians have been shaped by social media, climate change activism, and debates over reconciliation with Indigenous peoples that previous generations barely discussed.

By examining how **Baby Boomers** (born 1946-1964), **Generation X** (born 1965-1980), and **Generation Y/Millennials** (born 1981-1996) view Canadian identity, we can understand how historical events create lasting differences in values, priorities, and expectations. The question isn't who's right or wrong—it's how Canada can bridge these generational divides while building a shared future.

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### Background: The Events That Shaped Each Generation

#### The Baby Boomers

Baby Boomers experienced Canada's transformation from a British dominion into a modern, independent nation during their formative years. This generation witnessed Pierre Trudeau's vision of a "just society" and the implementation of official bilingualism, while also living through the intense French-English tensions that erupted during the October Crisis of 1970. They watched Quebec come dangerously close to separating during the 1980 referendum, creating a lasting understanding of Canadian identity as inseparable from the ongoing challenge of keeping Quebec in Confederation and the idea of "two founding nations." The patriation of the *Constitution* in 1982 represents a defining moment for this generation, as they lived through the creation of the *Charter of Rights and Freedoms*, which many Boomers view as Canada's true independence from Britain and proof that the country can be both unified and respectful of diversity—a "middle way" between American individualism and European socialism.

Boomers also witnessed Canada's official embrace of multiculturalism in 1971 and watched waves of immigration transform Canadian cities throughout their adult lives. This experience reinforced their pride in Canada's reputation as a "cultural mosaic" where people can maintain their heritage while becoming Canadian. During their peak earning

years from the 1980s through 2000s, this generation benefited from sustained economic growth, rising property values, and expanding social programs. This economic security often reinforces their belief in Canadian institutions and the effectiveness of gradual, peaceful change as the "Canadian way" of solving problems.

### **Generation X**

Generation X came of age during a markedly different period characterized by economic uncertainty and political upheaval. As teenagers and young adults, Gen Xers experienced the failures of both the *Meech Lake Accord* in 1990 and the *Charlottetown Accord* in 1992, followed by the terrifyingly close 1995 Quebec referendum that nearly broke up the country. Unlike Boomers who viewed constitutional debates as exciting nation-building exercises, Gen Xers often experienced these crises as exhausting distractions from practical problems that needed solving. The early 1990s recession hit just as many Gen Xers were entering the job market, exposing them to higher unemployment rates, reduced benefits, and increased competition for good jobs. This economic insecurity created a more skeptical attitude toward government promises and a preference for practical rather than idealistic solutions.

Generation X also witnessed the fundamental transformation of Canada's economy through the Canada-U.S. Free Trade Agreement in 1989 and NAFTA in 1994. They saw manufacturing jobs disappear to Mexico and the United States, making them acutely aware of Canada's economic vulnerability and dependence on global markets. During the 1990s, Jean Chrétien's Liberal government implemented dramatic cuts to social programs to eliminate the federal deficit, and Gen Xers experienced the direct impact through higher tuition fees, reduced healthcare services, and cuts to unemployment insurance. These experiences created a more pragmatic, less trusting view of government capabilities and a strong focus on fiscal responsibility. Simultaneously, this generation experienced the birth of the internet, personal computers, and cell phones, making them technologically literate and globally connected, but also more aware of how small Canada appears in the broader world context.

### **Millennials**

Generation Y, or Millennials, have grown up in an era of rapid technological change, global connectivity, and heightened awareness of social justice issues. Their worldview was fundamentally shaped by the September 11, 2001 attacks, after which they experienced increased airport security, the "War on Terror," and ongoing debates about balancing personal freedom with collective safety. As true digital natives who grew up with the internet, social media, and smartphones rather than adapting to these technologies later in life, Millennials possess a global connectivity that makes them less focused on traditional Canadian-American differences and more aware of international issues like climate change and human rights violations.

Economically, Millennials face challenges that previous generations didn't encounter: significantly higher housing costs, increased student debt loads, and a more precarious job market characterized by contract work and reduced benefits. Many feel that the economic

promises made to their parents—including homeownership, job security, and comfortable retirement savings—are no longer realistic expectations. This generation has driven national conversations about Indigenous reconciliation, LGBTQ+ rights, climate change, and systemic racism, making them more likely to view Canadian identity through the lens of social justice and to be highly critical of Canada's historical treatment of marginalized groups. Unlike previous generations who saw environmental issues as one concern among many competing priorities, Millennials often view climate change as an existential threat that should fundamentally reshape all political and economic decisions. Having grown up in multicultural schools and communities, they are generally more comfortable with diversity and less likely to view immigration as a threat to traditional Canadian identity.

### **How These Experiences Shape Different Views of Canada**

These generational experiences created distinctly different perspectives on fundamental questions about Canadian identity and priorities. Regarding national unity and Quebec, Boomers often continue to see Quebec as a "distinct society" that requires special constitutional accommodation to keep Canada together, while Gen Xers are more likely to view Quebec separatism as a settled issue and prefer focusing on other priorities. Millennials may be less concerned about traditional French-English tensions and more focused on Indigenous rights and reconciliation as the primary national unity challenge.

The role of government reveals another generational divide. Boomers generally support activist government and expanded social programs, having personally benefited from their creation and expansion during the 1960s and 1970s. Gen Xers demonstrate more skepticism about government efficiency and tend to prefer balanced budgets over program expansion, having experienced both recession and the painful but necessary deficit elimination of the 1990s. Millennials want government action on climate change and inequality but express frustration with political institutions' apparent inability to deliver meaningful change quickly enough.

Economic priorities also differ significantly across generations. Boomers tend to value economic stability and gradual progress, having benefited from decades of sustained growth and rising property values. Gen Xers prioritize fiscal responsibility and job creation, having directly experienced economic recession and corporate downsizing. Millennials are more willing to accept economic disruption if it addresses climate change and inequality, viewing short-term costs as necessary investments in long-term sustainability.

Views of Canada's place in the world have also evolved. Boomers often see Canada as a middle power that can effectively bridge divides between larger nations through diplomacy and peacekeeping. Gen Xers view Canada as economically dependent on the United States but culturally distinct, requiring careful navigation of this relationship. Millennials see Canada as part of a global community where traditional concepts of sovereignty matter less than addressing shared challenges like climate change and pandemic response.

Finally, Indigenous relations reveal perhaps the starkest generational differences. Boomers may support reconciliation efforts but generally prefer working within existing Canadian institutions and legal frameworks. Gen Xers approach Indigenous issues more pragmatically, viewing land claims and self-government as complex legal and economic matters requiring negotiated solutions. Millennials are more likely to view reconciliation as fundamental to authentic Canadian identity and to support major systemic changes to address historical injustices.

**Questions to Think About**

For all the following questions, you must use the introduce, illustrate and conclude approach. Each question has a specific word count range. Work within that range if you want to earn full marks for the assignment.

1. Based on what you've read, which generation do you think has the most realistic view of what Canada can achieve in the 21st century? Consider their different experiences with economic challenges, constitutional debates, and social change. (150-250 words)

2. Do you think Canada's generational differences strengthen or weaken national unit? Use specific examples from the background reading to support your answer. (100-200 words)

**Final Task**

Conduct brief interviews with one person from each generation (e.g. Boomer, Gen-X, Millennial) about their views on Canadian identity. Record each person's unique response to each of the following questions:

1. What does being Canadian mean to you?
2. In your opinion, how do other countries perceive Canada?
3. What is the biggest challenge facing Canada today?

End the assignment by writing a paragraph in which you compare and contrast the views of Canada presented by the different generations. Your paragraph should be in the 100-300 range. Consider using the introduce, illustrate and conclude format.

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