

COMMENT

I have so many things that I want to do, but can't because I'm too busy being mayor.

MISSISSAUGA MAYOR HAZEL MCCALLION, 93, WHO WILL STEP DOWN AFTER THIS TERM, WHICH ENDS WITH THE FALL MUNICIPAL ELECTION.

The myth of PM's job creation record

Many of us are living paycheque to paycheque, saving little and growing debt



ART EGGLETON

With close to 46,000 Canadians getting pink slips in December, Canadians are getting the picture that the economy is not as rosy as the Harper government says it is. We have been fed the myth that our economy is not only doing fine, but that we are world leaders. Unfortunately, we are not.

We know we shouldn't make sweeping generalizations based on one month. But the December jobs report caps off a very disappointing year for job creation in Canada. Except for the height of the recession, 2013 had the slowest job creation since 2001. We now have an unemployment rate that is above that of the United States.

In fact, we haven't been doing that well for a long time. Our employment rate of 61.6 per cent in December, the ratio of employment to working age population, is nowhere near the prerecession high of 63.5 per cent, reached precrash in 2008. Internationally, Canada ranks 20th out of 34 OECD countries in net job creation, with countries such as Germany and Australia better at creating jobs. (academicmatters.ca/2013/11/canadas-sluggish-labour-market-and-the-myth-of-the-skills-shortage)

As for the jobs that were created, much is left to be desired. Many of the jobs have been in typically low-paying occupations. Also, about four out of 10 jobs have been temporary or precarious employment — a type of employment that lacks benefits, pensions or job security. (www5.statcan.gc.ca/cansim/a03?lang=eng&pattern=282-0001..282-0042&p2=31)

We still have more than 1.3 million unemployed Canadians, with persistently high youth unemployment. And three million people living in poverty.

This poor jobs performance is creating a very rickety economy. Forty-two per cent of Canadians are living paycheque to paycheque. We continue to have stagnant income growth for the middle class. Combined with the rising cost of living this has led to record debt levels.

What are the implications for Canadians? Far too many Canadians face tough decisions such as paying the bills or buying food. Each month, more than 800,000 Canadians turn to food banks to put food on the table.

As professor Paul Kershaw from the University of British Columbia has pointed out, the typical full-time young worker has to save for 10 years to put a 20 per cent down payment on a home. That's twice as long as a generation ago.

On the other end, according to Jim Leech, president and CEO of the Ontario Teachers' Pension Plan, Canadians are only setting aside 5.5 per cent of their income for retirement — drastically lower than the 20 per cent Canadians saved in the 1980s. Combined with the 60 per cent of workers who have no workplace pension, the "golden years" don't look so golden. This will push some into poverty or limit others' ability to be full consumers when they retire. Both scenarios hurt families and the wider economy.

But don't worry — Jim Flaherty believes we have nothing to fear because our fundamentals are sound. Perhaps sound for some but not for the majority of Canadians.

It has been five years since the financial crisis and we've had very little progress. Where are the policies that create good jobs with benefits, job security and pensions?

We can't continue to have this mediocrity. Canadians deserve a government that understands the challenges that middle class families are facing — the challenges of stagnant income, unemployment, precarious work, record debt levels, pensions and increasing cost of living. They need better.

Art Eggleton is a former Toronto mayor, Member of Parliament, and is currently a senator.

Combined with the 60 per cent of workers who have no workplace pension, the "golden years" don't look so golden.

It's a be-mine field

Love may not keep you together but talking, respect, luck might



PAUL BENEDETTI

If this is Saturday morning and Friday evening has come and gone, then I have survived another Valentine's Day.

As most people know, this is no easy task. Of all the fretful celebratory days that seem to multiply across the calendar each year (do we really need a day for everything from parents to pets?), I think Valentine's Day is the worst.

If, like many people, you don't have someone to celebrate with, you pass the day slightly anxious and perhaps a little forlorn. If you do have someone with whom to celebrate, you're just anxious.

First, you have to actually remember it's Valentine's Day. Yes, 10,000 pink hearts in Shoppers Drug Mart will probably remind you it's coming but you still have to remember it that day. You WILL remember though — because not remembering is right up there with forgetting your anniversary or forgetting your spouse at the mall and driving home for a nap.

No, you WILL remember and then the problem is what to do about it. After several decades of frantic, last-minute gift-buying, I'll admit I'm pretty much out of ideas. Dinner out? Usually too tired. Anyway, too expensive. Flowers? Not bad, but predictable and expensive. And often smelly — especially lilies.

Chocolates? Delicious but fattening. Candy? Not as delicious and still fattening. Just a card looks cheap. A card and jewellery looks guilty.

Frankly, I yearn for the simpler days of Grade 1, or perhaps it was kindergarten, before notions of romance tainted the day, when every kid — boy and girl — simply gave a Valentine's card to every single other kid. No gender worries, no exceptions. Here's a little card: Be My Valentine. Everyone! Simple, almost unconscious love that moved in all directions

Who knows what keeps people together or what drives them apart?

You've heard of Jamaican bobsledders?

How about a Ugandan hockey team for the 2018 Winter Games?



THOMAS FROESE

KAMPALA, UGANDA OK, maybe it's too late for Sochi, but I hope you haven't forgotten about Olympic hockey in Africa. Yes, dear members of the International Olympic Committee, I'm before you to personally share the good news of a Ugandan ice-hockey team.

Of course, in Canada nobody says "ice" before "hockey" because Canadians realize hockey's natural state is with ice, even the frozen-pond variety.

Uganda, on the other hand, is a place where some poor soul with a hockey stick in hand might yell out, "We're Manchester United!" before informing you he's a "striker." But I'm working on this and I'm happy to report remarkable progress.

Pardon me?

Yes, I'm the Canadian who brought hockey to Uganda. I built Uganda's finest hockey pad. Well, it's the only one, I guess, the one behind my house, a ball-hockey pad for now, a thrilling work, really, that took several years and just a small land encroachment. Now to figure out outdoor ice.

Why do I believe Ugandans can play Olympic-level hockey?

Why not? Remember those Jamaican bobsledders? And Eddie the Eagle? Besides, it's hard to keep those NHLers in the Olympics. If you lose them for 2018 in Pyeongchang, South Korea, what happens to the Games' showcase event?

Now imagine Team Uganda 2018. You have to admit, it has a rather beautiful ring to it.

I can tell you at the moment the locals are playing better than American expatriates in Uganda. In fact, after many seasons, the mighty Yanks have all but quit our weekend games. This, after someone's big toenail finally came off.

"This isn't a game. It's a blood-sport!" is how one of their youngsters put it. This, during a kids' game, boys against the girls Canadians, Americans, Ugandans all together — when the girls beat the boys, who, naturally, didn't want this in any newspaper.

Maybe our U.S. friends are still sore from Vancouver 2010. It was 2 a.m. in Uganda when Crosby

— light hearted in the true sense of the words.

It's so much more complicated today. Relationships are complex and challenging. For years I thought we, my circle of close friends, lived in a kind of lucky bubble, untouched, it seemed, by marital strife. We had dinner parties and summer cottaging and raising kids and the occasional trip together and it all was good. If people drifting into middle age were no longer "madly in love," they certainly seemed, well, "solidly in love."

I know now, that was mostly just a trick of time. Wait long enough and trouble comes. As the years passed, the calls — not too many, thankfully — did come. You know, the ones that begin, "Did you hear about ...?" or the more painful, "I'm just calling to let you know that ..."

And what is there to say? You mumble, "I'm really sorry" and wonder what happened and why. Often it is impossible to know why — even for the people involved.

And wondering about fault or blame is even more pointless. No one really knows another couple, the things that pass between two people, sometimes not even the couple themselves. And if you need to find fault, then it's good to remember that a couple is a dynamic, a tricky dance of giving and taking and taking and giving. As my mother often wisely says, "It takes two to tango."

Who knows what keeps people together or what drives them apart? I don't, though I have come to trust a few things. I know talking is better than not talking. Though too much talking can be a problem, too. Respect is important. It's the grease in the gears of a good working relationship. And, I have come to believe that luck plays a big role.

Accidents, sickness and tragedies of all kinds can and do come crashing in, sending us in directions and on journeys we never imagined.

Perhaps love is like gravity — hugely powerful and strangely fragile — holding two people together in an orbit while the ever-spinning universe does its best to fling them apart.

It is finally, I think, impossible to know. You muddle along the best you can in the face of it all. And as anyone who has lived long enough knows, it will be difficult. As my 86-year-old mother reminds me, being positive helps.

And don't forget the flowers.

Paul Benedetti lives in Hamilton. He is a former Spector reporter and now teaches journalism at Western University.



BRIEFLY

Short and excerpted comments sent to letters@thespec.com

Good Samaritans receive her thanks

On Jan. 14, I was on my way to the Town Centre Plaza in Dundas with my partner when I fell on the sidewalk, fracturing my hip and was not able to move. A gentleman rushed over and called 911, a young lady offered her coat for warmth and another man came over to stay with us and offered assistance while waiting for the ambulance, which arrived within minutes. I was taken to the Juravinski hospital, operated on that evening, then transferred to St. Joseph's hospital for rehab. I do not know the names of any of the Good Samaritans who came to my aid but I hope they read this and accept my deepest thanks for their kindness. You will not be forgotten.

ARLENE NICHOLS, HAMILTON

Hudak's quote doublespeak?

Quote from Conservative leader Tim Hudak: "We will introduce paycheque protection so union members are not forced to pay fees toward political causes they don't support." We as union members democratically elect our leaders based on their views, just as the public elects a premier. Therefore Hudak's statement could just as easily read: "We will introduce a taxpayer protection so the tax-paying public is not forced to pay taxes toward political causes they don't support."

DOAK MACPHERSON, HAMILTON

Our athletes deserve more money

I was disgusted to hear that we only reward our Olympic gold medalists with a pittance of \$20,000, and to hear that poorer, less-populated countries give upwards of \$100,000 per gold medal. Surely our athletes are worth much more than a token. Economists indicate Canada is in good financial shape. Can't we cut back on big payouts to the CEOs of Olympic committees and Senate gross entitlement spending and give it to the people who really work for a living, the athletes?

KATHIE MURRAY, HAMILTON

When Cootes isn't actually paradise

So George R. Allan School has a new name. Did the board really think seriously about this choice? Coot has more than one meaning, besides being too easy to convert into cootie. What great ammunition for future rivals of the school. How do the students feel? In paradise?

NORMA ALLAN, GRIMSBY