

Suppose they threw an election and nobody came

The youthful Spectators see mainstream Canadian society share few goals with it.

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This story is part of the [2013 Atkinson Series: Me, You, Us](#). Journalist and author Michael Valpy has done an investigation into social cohesion in Canada — what binds us together, what draws us apart.

His name is Andrei Mihailescu, he's 22, and he stands on the lip of one of the biggest chasms Canadian society has ever known, symbolizing a profound fracture in the country's social cohesion.

He fits into a population cohort that David Herle, one of Canada's best known political strategists and a corporate consultant on branding and reputation, has labelled the Spectators, so-called because its members aren't engaged — at least in traditional ways — with the society around them, and see little point in trying to influence the course of events unfolding in their country and the world.

Mass media, built on the assumption of shared values and aspirations in society, don't reach them.

Civic engagement, which assumes that people working together can change society for the better, doesn't attract them.

Their engagement has been branded "clicktivism" — social involvement confined to the click of a mouse or the tap of a track pad.

They are inclined to see mainstream Canadian society as alien. A pack of cards. A sham. According to Herle's research, they share few if any of the life goals or aspirations as their fellow citizens.

They have little sense of belonging to a community. Says James Edward Lee, 27, a liquor-store clerk who feels detached from the greater Vancouver community of New Westminster where he lives: "You go to your block and every house is the same, everyone has the same yard, the same coloured house ... it's just depressing seeing rows and rows of blue wooden houses."

They tend to dislike their work and do it only for the money.

They put a higher value on being alone than other segments of Canadian society — a finding that has resonance to recent research showing Canadians are shifting out of their more traditional collectivist society toward a more individualistic society.

At the core of the Spectators' alienation, says Herle, is a feeling of a lack of control over the direction of their lives. They do not think that life has offered them many opportunities, and they do not feel

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they can influence their financial or personal direction. “They see themselves as corks bobbing in the water, pushed and pulled where the tides take them,” Herle wrote in *Policy Options* last fall.

The Spectators — who comprise as much as 25 per cent of the population — are the extreme end of a profound faultline in Canadian society defined by age and education.

On one side of the divide is a de facto governing gerontocracy of older Canadians — another 25 per cent of the adult population — with social conservative values, a strong sense of moral certainty and an inclination toward religiosity. They march militantly to their polling stations on federal election days to vote for Stephen Harper’s Conservatives (and, in the future, perhaps Justin Trudeau). Canada never before in its history has had such a high proportion of old people, leading perhaps to a culture of wisdom but also to a culture of fear and crankiness. How Canadians collectively will deal with this demographic tilt is unknown territory.

In the middle of the divide are the remaining cohort of older Canadians, but predominantly the great majority of the population under 45. They deeply distrust government (nearly three-quarters of Canadians think the Harper government is moving in the wrong direction) and Canadian politics in general. In sum, they are withdrawing from formal participation in Canadian democracy and think social conservative values such as respect for authority are irrelevant. This view is particularly pronounced among those who are young, university-educated and Quebecers.

In less than a decade, the percentage of Canadians calling themselves non-ideological has shrunk from 50 per cent to 30 per cent, leaving 70 per cent polarized between small-c conservative and small-l liberal (the latter being as much as double the size of the former).

The impact on social cohesion can be imagined.

An EKOS Research poll done for this series shows only 15 per cent of younger Canadians trust the older generation, and only 25 per cent of older Canadians trust younger Canadians. The poll also shows that 40 per cent of young Canadians (and 36 per cent of all Canadians) would consider breaking or ignoring federal laws with which they disagreed. Forty per cent also indicated that whatever public life Canadians have in common is determined by its elites. Seven out of 10 young Canadians report they have little or no influence on their communities.

And while Generation Y, the so-called Millennials born after 1980, are the largest cohort to come along since the post-war Baby Boomers, they are still a relatively scarce resource — as well as a valuable resource — and, to say the least, it makes no sense to have them sitting on the sidelines while their older fellow citizens run the country in their own interests.

Economic Pessimism

Hand in hand with political mistrust is economic pessimism — the fear of middle class and young Canadians that their futures are dark, that the Millennials will be the first generation of Canadians to http://www.thestar.com/news/insight/2013/12/08/suppose_they_threw_an_election_and_nobody_came.html

do worse economically than their parents. And, as a corollary, that inequality is becoming the norm in Canada, with a small group of uber-rich grabbing an ever-increasing share of the country's wealth while everyone else either goes nowhere or slides backward.

In its most recent survey of Canadians' values, EKOS reports that for the first time in the history of its research, economic issues are twinned with concerns about fairness and inequality.

"These are not the traditional and more modest concerns we have seen in the past about the gap between rich and poor. This new and more potent linkage is the perceived gap between the uber rich and everyone else, and nowhere is this dynamic more evident than in what can only be described as the crisis of the middle class," the EKOS reports says.

This is a society losing its glue. How far down the road before it bubbles to the surface? British sociologist Michael Mann once wrote that social cohesion is not marked by a society of common values but by a society that can tolerate conflicting values.

"Can I be very brutally honest?" Spectator exemplar Andrei Mihailescu, an odd-job worker with a community college degree in sound engineering, asks in an interview. "Our generation are pussies.

"I mean, think about it. When we go out for, say, Occupy or whatever protest there is ... we just go to a certain place and hold up a sign and yell. Great. But they have tear gas, riot gear, those rubber bullets they shoot into crowds. So you got to think about it from a very basic point of view. How much is a sign and a voice going to (win the) fight over (someone) with weapons they aren't afraid to fire?

"I'm a strong believer that our system has gotten to such a point — the North American system and generally in the world — that (people) are caught in a yoke by the richies ... The gap between the rich and the poor is getting bigger and the rich are putting in mechanisms to stop anybody else from getting rich."

John Zabala, 20, who lives in Mississauga with his parents and has plans to go to culinary school, has a similar view: "As they raise your wages up, they raise the cost of living up . . . the rich keep getting richer and the middle class keeps getting smaller."

Research reflects that these are not the rantings of isolated social misfits.

The values and goals of mainstream Canada do not intuitively appeal to Spectators. They are not generally happy. They don't feel particularly optimistic about their own lives or the lives of future generations. If they worry less than others about falling behind, it is because they do not expect to get ahead. Their lives have not been filled with opportunity.

According to Herle's study, Spectators are under 35, mainly male, mainly living in the suburbs of large metropolitan areas and mainly third-generation Canadian or beyond (Mihailescu is in the so-called 1.5 generation but otherwise fits the template rather well).

What's truly interesting — and even spooky — about them is that, for the most part, it is not apathy, not ignorance, not the generational aberrations that accompany being young, that shape their beliefs and values but a concrete rejection of established social institutions coupled with fear that the Western idealized dream of progress forever is dead and that what's coming down the road toward them, economically and socially, is not nice.

Samara, in its study on the politically disengaged in Canada ("The Real Outsiders"), has found a widespread parallel feeling of powerlessness and rejection of the current institutions of Canadian democracy as effective instruments of the people's voice.

James Lee of New Westminster doesn't vote. He says: "It's hard to see how electing somebody different makes any substantial changes over time. It's hard to see how the votes mean anything."

And like others interviewed as Spectators, he is not involved in his community.

"Honestly, all my spare time is taken up by practising guitar and playing music. I don't want to make time to volunteer for stuff. I could, but I don't want to. I'm so driven by my music. I did think about volunteering for an animal shelter once, but it was kind of one of those things where you get distracted and a few months goes by . . ."

Graves predicts that the voting rate among the young may slip into the teens-percentage in the next couple of elections and never recover. Moreover, he suggests the ranks of the young and the economically insecure and precariously employed may soon coalesce.

(Young Canadians' unemployment rate is resolutely stuck at more than twice the national average, they're humiliated with unpaid internships, they're told on a regular basis they have the wrong skills and education for the jobs they seek and many increasingly fear they'll never be able to afford to live in the cities where they grew up.)

Herle asks: "What does it mean for democracy when so many people believe any attempt at making a difference is pointless and lack faith that political change can create meaningful outcomes?"

For one thing, it makes the interview responses from Luc-Olivier Boulet, 22, and Louis-Philippe Dumas, 27, two web developers who live in the suburbs of Quebec City, a rarity. They fit the Spectator template in so many ways but not when it comes to voting.

They vote.

They've voted in the past; they intend to vote in the future. Boulet is certain he's voted in every election in which he's been eligible. Dumas thinks he may have missed one.

Why do they vote? "Because it is a citizen's duty," says Boulet, "even if I think that my vote might not make a difference among thousands of others. It is mostly a privilege in our country, so I make the most of it."

Dumas echoes this: "Duty. Luc-Olivier gave a great answer. What more is there to say?"

What perhaps was most revealing — and depressing — about the EKOS poll results for this project was that so few Canadians — young and old — felt they had the same values as their fellow citizens.

Keep in mind economist Judith Maxwell's definition of social cohesion: The process of "building shared values and communities of interpretation, reducing disparities in wealth and income, and generally enabling people to have a sense that they are engaged in a common enterprise."

Scant signs of that.

Only 14 per cent of poll respondents felt the federal government represented their values — and the gulf was massive between younger and older Canadians — and 37 per cent said they would be likely to break any law that morally offended them.

Or as Mihailescu put it: "To be honest, I don't think it would be breaking the law. Morality is a different issue. (And) when you look at how many laws have been broken, how many constitutional rights have been completely swept aside in the name of money ... at the scale we're being stolen from all the time ..."

He spends 60 hours a week producing electronic music. He "warms up my brain" in the morning playing online strategy games and "cools down my brain" in the evening doing the same thing.

Herle found that Spectators — the Clicktivists — spent more time than the average Canadian online. "(But) our research showed that ... they are not using that time to connect to causes or organize for change. Many of those online remain stubbornly beyond the lure of politics or social activism."

A case in point: David Speare, 23, who lives in Barrie and has a college computer-programming degree but works as a janitor in a resort, plays video games four hours a day on weekdays and all day on the weekends.

The actions that Mihailescu and Speare and others like them take over the next two decades will shape the country's state of mind, its political stability and the future of its democratic behaviour in ways Canada almost certainly hasn't experienced before.

Canadian society has two groups withdrawing from formal democratic participation — the young and the economically vulnerable — while changes are rapidly taking place that impact negatively on their lives.

In this century, second-generation immigrants have rioted in the suburbs of France. The young have rioted in London. The middle class have rioted in Brazil.

What happens if Mihailescu and his cohort take to the streets 10 years down the road and feel the need to do more than just yell and hold up signs?

There are roughly four times as many votes registered by seniors as by younger voters. This effect is compounded by dramatic differences in political preferences with seniors being more than twice as likely as younger voters to favour conservative choices.

“In a decade or two,” says Graves, “the younger voters will be in the prime of their lives and paying for the political choices of their now departed grandparents which are not likely to reflect the priorities or, one could speculate, the needs of next Canada.”

In other words, the young — or youngish — Spectators who now dismiss as severely flawed and even irrelevant the country’s political and democratic institutions may likely possess a vengeful hostility toward them 10 or 20 years from now.

“In the case of the economically vulnerable,” continues Graves, “disengagement from the political world no doubt worsens their positions of relative privation. Dealing with the burgeoning gap between rich and poor has clearly not been a priority for upper North American governments over the past 30 years and that inequality has escalated beyond the levels seen in the gilded age of the early 20th century.”

For the young, the prospect of years of stagnant economic growth (or worse) due to global economic troubles may make their current economic difficulties a more permanent problem.

The purpose of Herle’s project was to poke into Canadians’ values and aspirations and segment them into groups that would help marketers shape their selling pitches: “Much of marketing communications,” wrote Herle in *Policy Options*, “is based on aspirations considered to be universal. If a group doesn’t share those aspirations, how can we create advertising that finds affinity with them?”

Which was precisely the problem with the Spectators. They don’t believe in status buying. Or consuming for the sake of consuming. They also don’t believe in many of the touchstones of Canadian society — like democracy. And Parliament.

And so Herle lamented: “Where are we headed when a quarter of our population, whose incomes are roughly in line with those of the rest, tell us that the Western ideal of progress is not making them happy or satisfied?” (They don’t believe in progress, either.)

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And then the clincher: “The problem is we don’t know what to say to them.”

That’s the chasm.

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With research from Vicky Fragasso-Marquis, Luke Savage and Liz Vossen.