

We as Canadians hold the key to improving our productivity

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What's the top-of-mind issue for Canadians? Would it surprise you to learn it's health care? What happens when we look beyond the issue to the big picture?

A recent poll commissioned by the College of Family Physicians of Canada found two million Canadians tried but failed to find a family doctor in the past year.

How can we change this? What's the secret to better health care in Canada?

We are. As Canadians we hold significant power for one reason – we vote.

It's clear that health care isn't the issue – it's our ability to pay for it. And our ability to pay for high quality health services is tied to our economic performance – above all, to our productivity growth.

Canada's overall productivity gap with the United States is now about 20 per cent. If we continue to lag behind the U.S. in productivity growth year in and year out, this gap will grow to perhaps 40 per cent by 2020. We need to demand that governments take action to bolster productivity to protect Canada's standard of living and ability to finance health and other services.

Governments are keenly aware of the need to improve productivity, defined as the value of economic output or production per worker. But they're reluctant to act because they fear Canadians don't understand the issue and may punish them at the polls.

While productivity growth is a technical concept, we don't need to understand all of its many complexities to recognize its impact on us.

Take my husband's knees.

They are prone to the occasional twinge and while this isn't an issue today, if he follows in his family's footsteps he could need a knee replacement in 14 years. If we don't boost Canadian productivity, by then he is likely to wait even longer for a new knee than he would today – or he might not be able to get one.

Only the wealthiest nations have pockets deep enough to fund first-rate health care systems. Switzerland, Norway, Finland and the Netherlands enjoy the world's best health care because of their vibrant economies. Significantly, all have a higher level of productivity than Canada.

Like these countries, Canada needs an economy with high levels of productivity and steady productivity growth to fund better public services.

Last summer I took my four-year-old niece to the Vancouver Aquarium and asked her what she thought of the whale show. "Those aren't whales," she corrected me, "they're baby belugas!" Obviously a child this intelligent needs the best education possible but what can she expect in 14 years when she's ready to start university?

Universities are a global business and hire from the same pool of talented faculty. They need financial resources to attract top faculty and fund expensive programs like engineering and medicine. If our living standards continue to decline, our economy won't have the financial resources to enable our universities and colleges to be globally competitive, thus eroding the quality of Canadian post-secondary education.

My niece loves pummelling crayons in little pots, so she may choose a career in pharmacy. If she does – or graduates in engineering, medicine or computer science – she will be recruited to work in the United States where her real income will be significantly higher than at home.

High quality health care and education underpin our Canadian way of life. How can we exercise our power to safeguard them?

Write, fax or e-mail your Member of Parliament today and demand to know what initiatives he or she believes must be implemented to improve Canada's productivity.

We can play to win. Like the Olympics, our productivity matters only in relation to how we perform against other countries. Over the past decade, Canada ranked 18th out of 24 industrialized countries for average labour productivity growth – well behind Ireland, Turkey, Austria, Greece and Iceland. We greatly improved our athletic performance at Turin a year ago. We can do the same for productivity by injecting the same enthusiasm and energy we invest in the Olympics.

Canadians have the ability to tackle the productivity challenge. A dozen years ago Canada had a huge problem with government deficits and ballooning public sector debt. Today we are widely seen as the most fiscally successful G7 country, largely because Canadians demanded that governments balance their books.

The secret to better health care is within the power of Canadians.

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