

The magnitude of the demographic transition facing Canada was a recurring theme among witnesses who provided evidence to the Committee, serving as a backdrop both for comments on age discrimination and older workers, and for comments on age discrimination and the elderly. In the words of Dr. Neena L. Chappell, of the Centre on Aging at the University of Manitoba:

“The demographic changes we are facing in our society are new. The proportions of elderly that societies are facing are new. It is going to be the first time in history [that societies face such a transition] ... So looking to the past is not going to help us.” (18:35)

Members of the Committee share with witnesses the recognition that Canada faces a demographic transition of unprecedented magnitude and direction. This transition will require major adjustments — some of which are already underway — in our institutions, practices and our view of ourselves and other Canadians. The importance of the need for the latter component — changed attitudes towards the aging and elderly — cannot, indeed, be emphasized too much. Unless Canadians change their attitudes towards these groups, changes in institutions and practices are likely to occur only on a piecemeal basis, in response to crises which have already developed, and thus at substantial social and human cost. Unless Canadians change their attitudes, they are in danger of failing to meet the challenge posed by the coming transition in demography.

Many of the current attitudes and practices to which witnesses have drawn the Committee’s attention would appear to fall short of human rights standards to which Canada has committed itself — standards which, by their nature, apply to the aging and elderly as much as to other groups. To the extent that demographic change may increase the number of Canadians who experience an erosion of fundamental rights as their age advances, an investigation of Canada’s human rights practices concerning the aging and elderly is now particularly timely. The presentations of witnesses before the Committee suggest, however, that present realities by themselves amply justify such an investigation.