

II. THE DEMOGRAPHIC ENVIRONMENT

Canadian society is an aging society, and during the remainder of this century and beyond will be a rapidly aging society.¹ After ranging between 4.7% and 5.6% during the first three decades of this century, the proportion of the population aged 65 or more had grown to 7.7% by 1956, 8.7% by 1976, and approximately 10.5% by 1986. A Statistics Canada study projects that, on the assumption of continuing low birth rates and relatively low immigration rates, by the year 2006 approximately 15% of the population will be over 65, a proportion that will have grown to 27% by the year 2031. Under the same assumptions, the proportion of the population aged 45-64 will grow from 19% in 1986 to 28% in 2006.

Rising numbers of the aging and elderly present only one element of the demographic transition faced by an aging Canadian society. The 18-24 age group, which provides the most entrants into the labour market, peaked at 13.5% of the population in 1981, and its numbers are now projected to diminish steadily during the time-frame in which projections are available, to 9.4% of the population by 2006, and to 7% by 2031. While increased birth rates could produce a more gradual decline, a continuation of the present low birth rates will result in a pronounced shrinkage in the proportion of the population aged 0-17 years. This group will diminish, on current projections, from about 25% of the population today to 18.7% by 2006 and to 14.9% by 2031.

The combined effect of increasing numbers of the aging and elderly, and declining numbers of the young, will be a substantial increase in the median age of Canadians. If low birth, death and net immigration rates continue, the median age of Canada's population will increase from about 30 years today to 41 years by 2006 and to 48 years by 2031.

Statistical trends and projections provide only a general indicator of the net effect various more specific developments will bring about. Progress in health care, for example, will foreseeably increase the proportion of the aging and elderly who remain vigorous as well as merely increasing longevity.² As one witness noted in support of arguments for expanded opportunities for those aging Canadians who wish to continue to perform productive roles in the workplace: "More Canadians are living longer, healthier, more active lives."³