

VI. CONCLUDING REMARKS: AGE DISCRIMINATION HUMAN RIGHTS AND AGEISM

A recurring theme in the comments of witnesses was that negative images of aging and the elderly abound in our culture, and are pervasively reflected in the behaviour of individuals with whom the elderly interact. Some witnesses spoke not so much of age discrimination as of "ageism": a prevailing acceptance of negative stereotypes of the aging and elderly. The pervasiveness of ageist attitudes in Canada was a constantly-invoked frame of reference for witnesses presenting evidence on the diverse forms of age discrimination. The Committee would add that the prevalence of negative stereotypes in the media and elsewhere is only one dimension of the problem, which is also apparent more covertly in our easy tolerance of requirements for the disclosure of age on a vast array of government and other information forms, suggesting public acceptance of a correspondingly wide reliance on the use of age criteria in decision-making.

The Committee was invited to contrast the underlying values of Western industrial societies, where a focus on the production and consumption of material goods and the pursuit of affluence may appear to define the central basis upon which we find value in other human beings, with those of more traditional cultures. As a supplementary submission of one group of witnesses observed: "Were we as a people less materialistic, we might look to our elderly for wisdom and insight. We might consider them a treasure, not a liability; and their economic situation in life would reflect this."²⁹ Comments such as these are a worthwhile reminder to Canadians, who so justifiably take pride in their collective human rights record in many areas, that every culture not only supplies people with values, but directs their attention towards some areas at the expense of others in applying these values.

It is the view of the Committee, and a fundamental *raison d'être* for this study, that the time has come for Canadians to redirect their attention towards our collective assumptions about the process of aging, as well as towards the role of the aged and elderly in this society, and towards our treatment of these people. In particular, it is time for the baby-boom generation, which spawned the rise of a youth-oriented culture in Canada during the post-war period, to come to terms with the reality of aging. Changed attitudes towards the aged are necessary if Canada is to better fulfil human rights commitments made to all Canadians.