IT'S 2067 AND CANADA'S MINISTER FOR LONELINESS IS WORKING OVERTIME

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As Canada marks its 200th birthday in 2067, loneliness will undoubtedly be one of the greatest challenges facing our nation. A variety of forces, from technology to demographic shifts, through to the changing nature of political discourse, will have created a society whose members feel isolated and disconnected from each other.

The resulting health problems, economic cost and inability to rally Canadians to common causes will make fighting loneliness a priority for Canada's policy makers. By 2067, the problem will be so serious that Canada will by then have a full-time Minister for Loneliness, undoubtedly the busiest person in cabinet.

Linking loneliness with a significant Canadian anniversary is not as strange as it seems. The theme of Canada's great centennial exhibition, Expo 67, was "Man and His World" – a title taken from the memoir *Terres des Hommes* by the famous French thinker Antoine de Saint Exupéry. In the book, Saint Exupéry used his experiences as a pilot to explore the human condition, particularly our sense of solitude, and the role that friendship and solidarity play in helping us overcome it.

Inspired by this theme, it was decided that Expo would celebrate humanity's ability to better the world through a growing sense of interdependence. As the Quebec novelist Gabrielle Roy, one of those charged with developing the Expo 67 idea, explained: "Each one of us remains alone, yet not immune for long to his brother's plea for help or

need for company. Is it mere coincidence that solitary and solidarity, the two words that express the essence of our human condition, are similar?"

Expo's message acknowledged the dangers to human progress created by urbanization, new technologies, "the fantastic accumulation of knowledge" and other forms of modernity. However, we were told that by working together, we could address these challenges, including overcoming the barriers of loneliness that they were creating.

A little over a half century later, an announcement out of Britain seemed to indicate a certain naiveté on the part of Expo's visionaries that loneliness could be so easily overcome. In January 2018, British Prime Minister Theresa May announced the appointment of a national Minister for Loneliness. A recent report had indicated that over 9 million adult Britons were "often or always lonely". It was affecting people's health, hampering productivity in the workplace and eroding social cohesion.

News of the ministerial appointment garnered international attention. Although interest was partly due to the sheer novelty of the title, it also reflected a general concern about social isolation and loneliness. Here in Canada, experts estimated that "1 in 5 Canadians experience some form of loneliness or isolation." Representatives of various groups, particularly seniors, new Canadians, those living in poverty or with disabilities, came forward to speak of the toll that a lack of social interaction was having on their populations.

Loneliness is literally killing us. In an essay in the *Harvard Business Review*, former U.S. Surgeon General Vivek Murthy identified loneliness as being associated with "a greater risk of cardiovascular disease, dementia, depression, and anxiety," claiming it resulted in a "reduction in lifespan similar to that caused by smoking 15 cigarettes a day and even greater than that associated with obesity." Murthy pointed out that loneliness also hampers workplace productivity, with lonely and isolated workers being less creative and unable to engage fully in effective decision making.

And think of other, less easily measurable, costs. Humanity is at its best when we work together, each contributing to the common good. When we allow a significant portion of the population to become isolated, we rob ourselves of their energy, their ideas and their simple participation in efforts to build a better world. The nature of the challenges facing our nation, from climate change to poverty, through to reconciliation with Indigenous Peoples, demands an all-hands-on-deck approach.

Is anyone surprised when experts tell us that the situation is getting worse? Anyone experiencing modern life realizes that we are on a trajectory that will result in loneliness being among the greatest challenges facing our nation as it turns 200.

The signs are everywhere.

You need only start with the ubiquitous smartphone. An intimate family dinner, with every participant focusing on their phone instead of each other, is no longer simply fodder for cartoonists — it is a modern-day reality. It is having a particularly devastating effect on youth, those who will be leading the country in 2067. As Jean Twenge, Professor of Psychology at San Diego State University, concluded in a widely read *Atlantic* article on

the effects of smartphones on youth: "The portrait of iGen Teens emerging from the data is one of a lonely dislocated generation."

Tied to smartphone use is the rapid rise of social media. Virtual communities don't seem to be replacing the type of in-person connectedness that is so beneficial to someone's health and well-being. And it's not just formal social interaction that has gone missing. Growing activities like on-line shopping have eliminated important casual social contact.

New social patterns reinforce loneliness. As children grow and disperse across larger and larger geographic areas, our sense of connection with friends and family weakens. On the education front, the hustle and bustle of campus life doesn't seem to be filling the void, with a recent survey indicating that more than two-thirds of Canadian university students reported feeling "very lonely".

And what of employment? The idea of a permanent life-time job is now a distant memory. Short-term jobs that take you from employer to employer and even community to community severely limit the opportunity to make long-lasting friendships in the workplace. The fact that a growing number of these jobs involve working from home only heightens the sense of isolation.

Looking ahead, increasing automation and the rise of artificial intelligence are certain to disrupt the lives of most Canadian workers, rendering many permanently unemployed. Are we about to create an entire class of Canadians who feel useless and disconnected from the world of work? A new Guaranteed Annual Income program might offer them financial support, but how will they fill their days? Countless individuals sitting at home, growing more and more isolated, could dramatically weaken the bonds of our society.

Our aging population means that the leaders of 2067 will be dealing with a much older Canada. As seniors are particularly vulnerable to isolation, it will also be a much lonelier nation. Increasing immigration will not help on the loneliness front as many new Canadians, struggling to integrate into mainstream society, will experience their own isolation.

What is going to hold us together in 2067? Over the next fifty years, we are as a nation less likely to watch the same TV shows, read the same books or consume the same news media — common cultural references will continue to disappear. Churches, social organizations and political parties will continue to struggle to maintain their membership, and more and more of us will be "bowling alone", to borrow the title of Robert Putnam's famous book about the negative effects of the lack of social cohesion on democracy.

We seem to be experiencing a political polarization that grows more profound every day. As more Canadians adopt an “I am always right and the other side is always wrong” attitude, we tend to avoid interacting with those who hold different views. As we grow more isolated in our opinions, we are creating a political loneliness that will render national discussions and political compromise extraordinarily difficult.

Fifty years from now, fighting loneliness will go beyond the activities of one government department. It is more likely, in fact, that Canada will have a Minister Responsible for Loneliness whose

role will be to coordinate activities by every department and analyze all government policy proposals through a “loneliness lens”.

There is another reason that the task won't simply be given to a line department. By 2067, the erosion of trust in government will mean citizens will no longer look to those in charge for top-down answers. Solutions to most pressing problems will be developed at the grass roots level, with governments playing the role of convenor or facilitator. Government will need to work alongside groups that connect people and build interdependence, such as volunteer groups, business and community organizations and faith communities, all of which create a sense of belonging.

There is reason for optimism. Despite the forces that seem to be tearing us apart, humans long for social interaction and a sense of connectedness. Every now and again there are bright spots on the horizon of citizens coming together almost spontaneously — think of all those who joined forces to welcome Syrian refugees. Although harnessing that energy to build a less lonely Canada will be a major challenge for whomever is running our nation in 2067, it will be worth the effort. As Saint-Exupéry taught us in *Terres des Hommes*, "there is only one true form of wealth, that of human contact."