

# Meeting the needs of Canadians ends with elders

*Pete Aarssen - January 2021*

While we remain in the grips of a global pandemic; trying to respond to the needs of those we care for or employ, it seems to me that the needs of our elders have slipped from the minds of our political leaders! So many programs, so many tens, no hundreds! of billions of dollars invested to meet the needs of students, first responders, laid off employees and businesses but comparatively little to substantially improve upon the lives of the aged. I want to be clear; I'm not referring to what our long-term caregivers and care homes are doing. This community is literally racing to improve upon things within the scope of their control to aid our elders. The pandemic has shone a brilliant light upon the sometimes, dark environment that some elders had been experiencing while living in the few but far too many care facilities that were riddled with inadequacies and even willful neglect. What I am referring to here is our government's continued broken promises to adequately support the needs of our elders. Maclean's magazine penned a sizzling criticism of various levels of government and their empty promises. They said: 'For decades, one Canadian government after another has made promises to Canada's older adults to increase their access to support and improve the quality of their lives. In 2004, Ontario's minister of health and long-term care, George Smitherman, said: "We need to change the culture of long-term care in this province." In 2014, Canada's minister of state for seniors, Alice Wong, said: "The government of Canada is committed to ensuring a high quality of life for seniors." In 2019, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau said: "We're making sure [seniors] have the support they need." But the reality of 2020 proved that Canada's seniors are suffering disproportionately, and it's because these promises have gone unfulfilled.'

The problem with all of our individual memories is that they are short! This regrettable phenomenon only benefits our elected legislations who wrestle with where to invest the public purse. In the spring of 2020 came the sad, frequently announced deaths of many elders. A full 80% of all Covid-19 related deaths in 2020 occurred in nursing and retirement home type settings. At the rapid speed of life we live, few of us have the ability to add the studied lens of context to each government announcement or financial decision. We have a very specific problem with how Covid-19 impacted Canada. While our incident rate has been lower and our patient survival rate higher than in many other parts of the world, the way that Covid-19 impacted Canadian elders is disproportionate; out of sync with the bulk of international experience. Far too many of our elders contracted Covid-19 and far too many of them died from it. It is a responsibility that we all share, to some degree; for not having demanded better care be provided the aged among us and for not holding politicians to account for their many promises made in this area. Long term care wait list continue to grow, as does the percentage of elders numbered among low-income households, those in no position to help themselves. Elders living in poverty and those socially isolated in care facilities keeps the circumstances of their struggle from being observed by us in everyday life. That doesn't mean that their struggle is any less real, just that we haven't taken notice. If there was a lesson from Covid-19 for us in 2020, this is it! In the Maclean's article that I mentioned previously, a renowned professor was quoted as having said: 'I think a lot of people are just unaware of how bad it is [for Canadian seniors] "But do I think our governments and politicians know? Absolutely."

If that is the case, that our political leaders know the issues confronting elders, it can be concluded that they are unwilling to respond to their needs. With public money being granted to so many things today, I am especially irked by our tax dollars being happily pledged to support issues abroad when our very own citizens at home remain marginalized or in greater need. It can't be easy; being a public servant, conferred with the public trust. Still, the last time I checked, elders are clearly members of the public and the promises made to them from successive generations of public servants are still awaiting adequate restitution.



