

Labour shortage fear unfounded, demographer says

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By Eric Beauchesne

Canada's most famous demographer rejects concerns that this country faces an imminent labour shortage, despite growing cries of alarm to the contrary.

"We're going to have labour market surpluses before we get to the labour market shortages," says David Foot, author of the 1990s best-seller *Boom Bust and Echo*.

Fear has grown recently among business, labour and government that Canada will suffer a shortage of skilled workers, and in some sectors already faces a crunch.

The Canadian Council on Social Development warns Canada could face serious skills shortages and even widespread labour shortages within five years and urges that older workers be encouraged, but not forced, to stay on the job longer. The Conference Board of Canada has forecast a million skilled jobs could go begging within 20 years, while the Canadian Federation of Independent Business says the skills shortage among smaller businesses is already as high as 300,000.

The government takes those warnings seriously, says Jane Stewart, the Human Resources Minister, who included the upgrading of the skills as a key part of Ottawa's new Innovation Strategy.

Fears were reinforced this month with the release of Statistics Canada's census results confirming the country's population is rapidly aging. The report sparked headlines warning: "Canada facing aging crunch ...Huge disruption feared to the national economy."

"It's exactly the opposite," Mr. Foot says. "The [Baby] Boomers aren't retiring for at least another five years and their kids are entering the labour market," he says. Canada still has a jobless rate of 7% and he says that "doesn't sound like a labour shortage to me."