

When the boomers go marching out

Professor David Foot will be taking his own retirement advice as he eases out of the workforce
Reprinted from *The Financial Post*, December 9, 2006. p. FW8.

By William Hanley

David Foot is thinking about retirement. In fact, the University of Toronto economics professor and co-author of the bestselling *Boom, Bust & Echo* series of books about the impact of the Baby Boom generation, thinks about retirement a lot. But these days, it's his own retirement that's on his mind.

"Yes, I'll retire from the university," he says in a meeting room at the main U of T downtown campus. "No, I won't retire full-time."

Foot is going to practice what he has been preaching over the years: He's going to phase out of full-time work and not take the "cold turkey" retirement he says is wrong for most people and ultimately harmful to employers.

"This cold turkey stuff is crazy. It's also crazy at the front-end of work. It's best to learn on the side [in a co-operative program] while you're still taking your academic courses. It's a much healthier way of learning. We should ease into the working place and ease out."

Unfortunately, Foot says, there are big obstacles in the way of phased retirement for many people. There are those who would like to work, say, three days of the week for 60% of their pay, continue to accumulate pension benefits on those days and withdraw from the pension the days when they're not working.

"But that's illegal. And that's stupid," he declares, adding that people and companies need a more flexible working policy now that the front quarter of the Boomers are over 55. "As more and more workers are getting older, having these people simply walk out the door is insane. Why not just keep them working but gradually reduce their hours and responsibilities?"

Foot says companies should allow the 55-year-old to work half the time for half the salary and the other half of the salary would pay the full-time salary of a 25-year-old. "So you can bring in the 25-year-old, you can get workforce renewal and you haven't raised the cost. That's the way we've got to go."

Going that way would also require some public policy changes to Workers Compensation, the Canada Pension Plan and Employment Insurance contributions, which have caps that are quickly met in the year. "So, by capping contributions, we're encouraging employers to take on fewer workers and work them longer hours."

Foot has been researching economic and demographic issues over a teaching career that stretches back to 1973 at U of T, where he landed after earning a PhD at Harvard, and an undergraduate degree in Australia, his home for his formative years.

But in 1996, the publication of *Boom, Bust & Echo: How to Profit from the Coming Demographic Shift*, which he co-wrote with journalist Daniel Stoffman, vaulted him out of the ivory tower into the popular culture mainstream. The book sold 250,000 copies in hardcover and was on Canada's bestseller list for three years. (An updated paperback version *Boom, Bust & Echo: Profiting from the Demographic Shift in the 21st Century*, was published in 2000 and sold more than 50,000 copies.)

The highly readable story of ageing Boomers and their impact had an immediate impact on Foot. "All of a sudden I'm getting 40 to 50 telephone calls a day," he says, adding that answering them took him well into the evening most days. "It was wonderful because it meant people were reading it and thinking about what it meant

to them. But my life just changed dramatically."

The professor, who is arguing for flexibility in the workplace now, asked the U of T economics department to be flexible then. "I said, 'I'll give 60% of my salary back to the university in return for a 40% to 50% teaching load.' "

The department agreed and that's the way it's been for the past decade. Foot, who has twice been voted best undergraduate teacher at U of T, teaches two courses in the winter term, goes on the road in the spring and fall for his lucrative speaking engagements and does research and takes a holiday in the summer.

"I'd gradually been building a speaking business over the first half of the '90s before Boom, Bust & Echo came out. I loved taking academic research on the road. But Boom, Bust & Echo was a quantum step up."

The accompanying step up in his outside income has bought him time to still be a very good teacher and still conduct the research he's expected to do.

On this day in early November, he says he's been on the road for the past two months. "I'm too busy -- for my age," he says with a laugh. In fact, at 62, he looks younger and seems to have energy to spare after his gruelling road trip. And his "retirement" from U of T in two or three years will signal a new phase in his career. He says he'll continue to satisfy his desire to be a professor by giving guest lectures at other universities while still maintaining his speaking business as long as there's demand for what he has to say.

One thing he does like to talk about now is health care -- the Boomers' biggest issue as they move into retirement. The Boomers have already had some experience with it, through the care their ageing parents have received. Foot is not optimistic that Canada's system will be up to the task of providing care for an ageing population that will live longer and need more resources.

"There are all sorts of special interest groups protecting their own interests in the health-care sector," Foot says. "We don't have a comprehensive policy that is well-funded or even partly funded. There are no clear guidelines. That's the biggest uncertainty as the Boomers move forward into their 60s and 70s."

The Boomers may be facing uncertainty, but David Foot, a couple of years ahead of the generation he has chronicled, is certain where he's headed.

"I'll do the academic version of what Bill Hanley is doing in journalism," he says, referring to my gradual withdrawal from the workplace. My guess is he'll be doing somewhat more than writing one column a week.

Copyright © 2006 CanWest Interactive, a division of CanWest MediaWorks Publications, Inc.. All rights reserved.