

Did the boomers bring peace to Canada?

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SASKATOON — Canada's baby boomers have been waiting to hear this: Flower-power worked. The hippies' giddy make-love-not-war-movement of four decades ago actually resulted in a more loving country.

University of Victoria historian Dominique Clément says today's plethora of human-rights legislation and institutions can be traced directly back to the demands by young people in the 1960s and 1970s for a Canada that would be more caring and sensitive toward their marginalized fellow citizens: the poor, the disadvantaged, homosexuals and racial minorities.

"Biology alone did not define the baby-boom generation," he says in a paper presented at this week's Congress of the Humanities and Social Sciences at the University of Saskatchewan.

"The youth of the Sixties were the front-runners of a specific historical movement in which political activism and radical ideas were pronounced. Though the generation was not revolutionary, it had a revolutionary impact."



[Enlarge Image](#)

Love-ins, like this one at Queen's Park in Toronto on May 22, 1967, were a common occurrence in the 1960s. (*John McNeill/Globe and Mail*)



Dr. Clément's paper weighs in on a subject that has been hotly debated for years: whether the hippies generation and their dewy-eyed embrace of Bob Dylan's *The Times They Are a-Changin'* actually made any difference.

He says they did. They changed the times. They didn't just make a lot of noise and then fade into middle age.

"The boomers alone were not responsible for transforming social movements," he writes. "But the boomers were the catalysts of a transformation in social movement mobilization and among the leading participants in this new era of social activism."

For aging and maybe jaded boomers, now crossing the threshold of their 60s, Dr. Clément's research should provide a warm bath of substance to the memories of their youth — the protest marches, sit-ins, demonstrations and above all the music (today is the 40th anniversary of *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*) that caroled for a better, nobler world.

He reproves his academic colleagues for not having done more investigation into the subject over the passage of time.

"Historians, particularly in Canada, have yet to make a significant contribution to the study of contemporary social movements. This is unfortunate, because historians are well-placed to offer a broad, long-term empirical analysis of social movement dynamics."

One of Canada's leading rights lawyers, Clayton Ruby of Toronto, was swept into activism by the winds of the Sixties. While still a law student, he set up a street legal clinic to give advice to the hundreds of hippies attracted to Toronto's Yorkville district who were harassed by police and city officials. Mr. Ruby said in an interview yesterday that the youth impact was true to the extent that it changed values about social activism.

"I have no doubt it made a huge difference. There was an acceptance that the world could be changed and that we [young people] were going to do it. It was different from the social activism of the 1940s and 1950s where there was a feeling that other people would make the changes and Canadians would accept what was done. It was a much more deferential society then."

Dr. Clément, a postdoctoral fellow specializing in human-rights history, was born in 1975 and is therefore too young to have been a boomer himself. He says the proliferation of what he calls social movement organizations or SMOs, in Canada in the Sixties and Seventies was nothing short of astounding.

Youth spearheaded organizations such as the Combined University Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, the Student Union for Peace Action and the Company of Young Canadians. (The CYC was a controversial federal agency created in 1966 in response to demands from young people for a publicly funded social activist organization they could join as volunteers. Among its alumni are Bloc Québécois Leader Gilles Duceppe, former Toronto mayor Barbara Hall and aboriginal leaders Georges Erasmus and Phil Fontaine.)

Lobby groups proliferated by the hundreds for blacks, aboriginals and gays. Human-rights associations were formed in every province.

One of the strongest legacies of Sixties activism was the women's movement in Canada, Dr. Clément says. It carried, at times, a heavy dose of irony.

"Disgusted at the rampant sexism among student radicals, women formed the first women's liberation groups in Canada. The generational gap within the women's movement was most evident in the Voice of Women [created during this period], which acted as a bridge between older and younger feminists. Many of the new gay and lesbian groups, from the Lesbian Organization of Toronto to the Gay Alliance Towards Equality, epitomized the generational gap."

Says Dr. Clément: "In essence, the boomers were the catalysts, and the participants, in a historically unique phenomenon."

He says that if one accepts the notion that generations are an age group shaped by history, there is no doubt the social movement for the baby-boom generation was the Sixties.

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