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It seems like there's a "season" for everything these days. Pollen has a season. Canada's federal budget has a season. Taxes, ticks and wildfires have a season. Heck, pumpkin spice lattes have a season. Some seasons even have official (and unofficial) start and end dates. According to Starbucks, Pumpkin Spice Latte Season has an official start date of August 25th this year. Seasons also vary. A winter can be harsher than other winters, for example, and a wildfire season can be more devastating than others (see, British Columbia, 2023).

With the horse already out of the barn when it comes to seasons, which it is, I ask for your indulgence as I propose a new one here in Canada: Mathematics Assessment Season. With no official start or end date, the beginning of Math Assessment Season (which coincides with Back-to-School Season) runs from late August through to early September and often continues through September and then ends in October or, in rarer occasions, in November. As mentioned, seasons vary, and how long, exactly, Math Assessment Season lasts each year relies on a number of factors.

Mathematics Assessment Season, as in years past, can be over in the blink of an eye. In and out along with Back-to-School Season. Not this year, however. No, this year, this year in particular, I think we'd all better hunker down for, what I predict, will be a long Mathematics Assessment Season. Cards on the table, I have not read *The Old Farmer's Almanac* for this year, and I do not know Wiarton Willie and, even if I did, the translator apps on my iPhone (e.g., Apple, Google and DeepL Translate) don't have "Groundhog to English" as an option. I have, though, kept my ear to the ground for many, many years.

Like every year, Back-to-School Season is an excuse for traditional media, that is, newspapers (e.g., *The Globe and Mail* or *The Toronto Star*), radio (e.g., *The Current* or *Cross Country Checkup*) and television (e.g., *The National*), to run a bunch of stories which present a narrative that, essentially, Canadian kids are not performing all that well on mathematics assessments. In Ontario, for example, traditional media will reference EQAO (Education Quality and Accountability Office) testing and explain that student achievement in mathematics isn't what it should be for a country as great as Canada. Similarly, over in Alberta, media will reference the PATs (Provincial Achievement Tests) written by students in grade nine and, again, the results will be presented in a manner where we could and should be doing better in a subject as important as mathematics. I should point out that this negative narrative is par for the course during Mathematics Assessment Season. After all, there's an old media adage, "If it bleeds, it leads", and Canadians not doing well in mathematics is a news story that, year after year, has legs. What happens next is typical, as well.

My favourite part of Mathematics Assessment Season is the subsequent feigning of interest by the Canadian public and, especially, the hyperbole. Sure, there's the inevitable water cooler conversations, which typically focus on a tired debate over the different ways that mathematics is getting taught in schools, which is always couched relative to how it was taught "back in the day". Once the debate over teaching gets tired then the story starts to die then the inevitable hyperbole keeps the story going.

One of my favourites was circa 2012 (which was a particularly robust Mathematics Assessment Season) when John Manley, then CEO/President of the Canadian Council of Chief Executives (and former Deputy Prime Minister) declared a "national emergency". The impetus for his declaration, the math results from PISA 2012. Every three years the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, better known as the OECD, conducts the Program for International Student Assessment, better known as PISA, where 15 year old students from over 60 countries take a standardized exam that focuses, in part, on mathematics. In other words, a nearly global mathematics assessment. Canada had, again, performed above average, but Canadian math scores on PISA were continuing to decline. Me, I took it upon myself to learn that Canada, in fact, had a National Emergency Response System at the time and, rightfully so, at least based on my reading of the document, the response system was not actually employed despite a national emergency being declared.

Sure, I may be being a tad hyperbolic myself, but my understanding is that what's good for the goose is good for the gander. Take, by way of a second example, an editorial from *The Globe and Mail*, which noted, "And when a country's ranking collapses, it is rightly treated as a national disaster." There was me, again, this time checking out our National Disaster Mitigation Strategy. Digging through the document, I could not find the appropriate support for implementing the National Disaster Mitigation Strategy because Canadians students performed above average, but were, overall, declining in their performance on a global mathematics assessment. Mathematics Assessment Season circa PISA 2012 was quite hyperbolic. National disaster, national emergency, but surely things couldn't get more hyperbolic!?

"Hit 'em where it hurts", as the saying goes. Take Trevor Howell, working for the *Calgary Herald*, who reported: "How can we be satisfied with 13th place in math when we're not satisfied with second place in hockey" [John] Manley told a crowd of teachers, industry professionals, school board members and provincial politicians in Calgary on Wednesday". Manley's reference to "13th place in math" was, of course, referring to where Canada ranked in the 2012 PISA results and "second place in hockey" was, of course referring to Canada's dissatisfaction with winning anything but Gold in Olympic hockey, which had just happened in 2010 in Vancouver. For the record, I agree, Canada is good at hockey.

PISA takes place every three years, which means that PISA 2012 results were followed by results from PISA 2015, 2018, and 2022 (COVID being thrown into the mix, yes). In the interest of full disclosure, I closely follow PISA results and, especially, the resultant PISA Hullabaloo, which I consider a key part of my job. I contend, only to the best of my knowledge, that Mathematics Assessment Season circa 2015, 2018 and 2022 were calmer and quieter seasons compared to 2012. Sure, the debate over the best way to teach mathematics was present in print, radio and television media. Sure, people feigned interest and outrage. Then, however, the seasons were just over. Unlike 2012, I didn't hear about a rally being held at a provincial legislature, I didn't see newspapers running 44-part series on "The Great Canadian Math Debate", I didn't see petition after petition getting signature after signature, and I didn't see provinces scrambling and messily changing mathematics curricula. I didn't see a national story that had legs for years and would pop up in the most unlikely of places (e.g., *Costco Connection: A Lifestyle Magazine for Costco Members*). As alluded to earlier, the results from PISA 2025 have the potential for a particularly blustery Mathematics Assessment Season akin to 2012.

There are some specific factors that, I think, support my contention for a devastating Mathematics Assessment Season this year. All the issues with our "neighbours" to the south ("51st state", Lake Ontario America, etc.) will lead to cranky comparisons with mostly one other country. The looming question as to whether Alberta should remain a province of Canada will also lead to quarrelsome comparisons within our country as currently comprised. Jacob Tsimerman, the second Canadian and first scholar based at a Canadian institution, to win the Fields Medal will, somehow, support some weird arguments about how, as a country, "See, we can do anything if we just put our minds to it". The largely ignored results from the

“other” global math assessment, the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) 2023 will start to see the light of day, albeit many years later. Sprinkle social media into the mix, add the notion that nearly everyone has a podcast, and all the components for a long-drawn out Mathematics Assessment Season are there for this year.

Expressing all of this to a colleague the other day, they asked me, politely (of course), how I was going make it through Mathematics Assessment Season this year. I thought about it for a little bit, not too long, and let them know that the recent FIFA World Cup is where I would find my solace this season. Sure, we may not be satisfied with second place in hockey, as John Manley rightfully noted all those years ago. At the recent Olympics, though, we did come in second place. Three times: Para, Women's and Men's Ice Hockey! Were we satisfied, no, which got me to thinking that perhaps hockey is not the proper comparison for Canadians when it comes to Mathematics Assessment Season in PISA years and where we rank relative to the world.

This last summer, I thoroughly enjoyed following the FIFA World Cup 2026. Canada, along with Mexico and United States, co-hosted for the first time. Amazing! Canada, for only the third time ever, played in the World Cup. Also, amazing! As a country, we earned our first group stage point (drawing against Bosnia and Herzegovina) and World Cup match win (over Qatar). Are you kidding me, amazing!? Canada even made it out of Group Stage play, won over South Africa in the elimination round of 32, but then, unfortunately, lost to Morocco in the round of 16. What a run for Canada! I also enjoyed how happy and proud Canadians were for how well Canada performed on the world stage.

At the FIFA World Cup 2026, Canada, officially, finished in 14th place. People were happy with the result. People were proud of the result. Nobody really thought we were going to win the World Cup. After all, Canadians are a humble bunch. Please keep the recent World Cup in mind, especially when the 2025 PISA results get released and things start to get out of hand, which they might this year. Mathematics Assessment Season is Coming...

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