

Canada should be building on the immigration successes that have been fundamental to this great country, as well as making the changes necessary to address the needs of Canada in the 21st century. Backlogs, skills that Canada needs, benefits of family, integration of new immigrant communities, legitimate refugees – and yes, fraud – are among the issues that continue to call for better answers.

Our History

Canada is the world's most successful example of a pluralistic, incredibly diverse, yet harmonious society. Our history has been one of waves of immigration, from different parts of the world at different times. Even aboriginal Canadians likely came from somewhere else at one time. We have been a safe haven; we have been a land of opportunity; we have been a land of great struggle, but endured by people looking for a better life for their children. We have been many things to many people. And we are a unique country whose rich identity and success is made of this history.

Much of that success, and much of our economic competitiveness as well, comes from the immigration policies we have established over time. Relatively open immigration policies, and communities that are receptive to new immigrants, together work to support a society that is more stable and more secure than one which places significant barriers at our borders.

But our system needs improvement.

The Skills We Really Need

Our immigration point system must be significantly revised to reflect the skills that are needed in Canada and which we can't supply from home. On the one hand, we have certain industries, such as construction, which attract illegal immigrants simply because of the great need for those skilled in the relevant trades. At the same time, the system still encourages others for whom there may be less immediate need – witness the number of PhDs, engineers and doctors who are driving taxis.

Recognition of Foreign Credentials

Yet the latter problem isn't just due to our point system – we do need some of these skills (doctors are a great example). Although we are making some progress, we must more effectively address the challenges to integration created by professional associations and inter-provincial barriers. We should, for example, consider some options such as pre-qualification of international medical schools and sources of other professional accreditations.

Language

Language is, of course another major challenge. Far too many people arrive in Canada without an adequate knowledge of either English or French. Whatever our tests are measuring, it clearly isn't a working knowledge of a language sufficient to work in many of the fields for which people do have accreditation. One can have all the necessary degrees and experience needed to practise medicine, but not if one cannot communicate with one's patients. Different government programs and many non-profit organizations try hard with programs to teach English or French as a Second Language, but these are costly, and a major burden

for service organizations which should be using their resources for other challenges. And not being able to work and earn a living means that the people affected cannot sustain themselves, or contribute to their families or their communities. The cost to society is enormous. There should be more insistence on people wanting to come to Canada to be able to function more effectively in one of the official languages.

Integration

I hear often the frustration of new Canadians when describing their challenges in becoming full-fledged members of their larger Canadian communities. Too often peoples' attitudes, but also official policies such as those at the municipal or educational level, treat newcomers as members of their 'source' ethnic or cultural backgrounds, not as members of their new Canadian community. There remains too much segregation in school policies and discrimination in workplaces. Many are not looking for 'special treatment'—some of which might be very well-intentioned—but which only serves to prevent the successful integration that many are looking for to truly establish Canada as home.

Geography

Study after study shows that Canada will need increasing numbers of new immigrants to bring much needed skills to the country. Provinces and municipalities, however, find it increasingly challenging to deal with the costs and complexities of the social infrastructure that some new immigrants require, particularly as most move to, and stay in, our bigger cities. At the same time, many smaller communities are the ones with the greatest need for some of those skills. Can we require new immigrants to settle in certain places? Yes, particularly through the use of incentives. We should be able to require and encourage newcomers to spend a certain

amount of time in certain places, depending on where our needs are greatest. After all, much of our history has been based on such geographically targeted immigration. We must work with provinces and municipalities to ensure that skills and immigration settlement do not simply flow to our major cities, but work to benefit the entire country.

Backlogs and Expectations

We also know that there are massive backlogs, and that expectations of employment and integration are often unmet when people arrive. It will be a big job, and require both new and reallocation of existing resources, to remove the backlogs. We must manage the expectations of prospective immigrants before they arrive in Canada, in their countries of origin (including, as noted above, with respect to language requirements). Waiting until after someone has arrived is often too late, and provides much greater strain on all concerned than necessary.

Families

The Harper government has been very quick to criticize family reunification immigration policies – they look only at a person and the specific skills that that person can bring. They ignore the social importance of family, for example, the role that grandparents often play when (thanks also the Harper) it is so hard to find daycare. There is a strong argument to be made – not just social, but economic – that some ‘family’ immigration makes sense. We just have to do it right.

Refugees

Our history has not always been good – we have dark episodes that we can only hope to have learned from. However, over the last few decades, Canada has been, proudly, a safe haven for many. We have

generated international respect as being there for those who have arrived on our shores in need. Yes, we also have a reputation of being too “easy”, and yes, people have been allowed to stay in Canada who shouldn’t have. Better that we’ve erred in favour of those in need, but we do need to tighten the system. Stephen Harper’s government, however, is being too harsh. It is nickel and diming legitimate refugees over things like health care. The costs are completely negligible for us as a society, but a stick in the eye for people least capable of helping themselves. And yes, human trafficking is abhorrent, and the people who do it should be treated accordingly. We don’t like it, but many of those people do so consciously because they are so desperate to leave their circumstances. As with too many issues, the Harper government uses black and white measures and slogans, where more understanding of the complexities is needed.

Canada’s Future

A smart, yet open and progressive immigration policy that better addresses Canada’s needs, as well as the challenges faced by newcomers, is a recipe for economic growth, a future of diversity, respect and harmonious pluralism, and long-term domestic stability.