

# Welcoming immigration in a changing urban environment

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## SUMMARY

Progress on social issues is often tenuous and subject to reversal of fortune, as the gains made by the efforts of earlier generations stagnate or are squandered. Although Canada can claim much success over the course of its recent history on immigration settlement there are now many strains in the Western world around issues relating to immigration, multiculturalism, globalization, religious tolerance, and refugee settlement. Canada has not been immune to these developments and many recent incidents challenge the comfortable notion that prejudice and discrimination have been eradicated and that respect, tolerance, and sensitivity are universal Canadian values. These occurrences have, unfortunately, come at a time when the easy ability to accommodate large immigrant populations is at an end.

It is argued that what is really needed in Canada is a national population policy. At the same time, Canada must do a much better job of leveraging the benefits of immigration and multi-culturalism and engaging the public if conflict is to be avoided. In the age of social media, mainstream television, radio, and newspapers no longer control the veracity and dissemination of information and unconventional ideas and extremist views can spread like wildfire.

## RÉSUMÉ

Les progrès sur les questions sociales sont souvent fragiles et sujets à des revirements de situation, car les gains acquis par les efforts des générations précédentes stagnent ou sont gâchés. Le Canada peut prétendre avoir réussi, au cours de son histoire récente, en matière d'établissement des immigrants, mais il existe aujourd'hui beaucoup de tensions dans le monde occidental en ce qui a trait aux questions liées à l'immigration, au multiculturalisme, à la mondialisation, à la tolérance religieuse et à l'établissement des réfugiés. Le Canada n'est pas épargné et les nombreux incidents qui se sont produits récemment remettent en question l'idée rassurante que les préjugés et la discrimination ont été éradiqués et que le respect, la tolérance et la sensibilité sont des valeurs canadiennes universelles. Ces événements se sont malheureusement produits à un moment où la capacité d'accueillir un grand nombre d'immigrants touche à sa fin.

On fait valoir que le Canada a besoin d'une politique nationale en matière de population. Parallèlement, le Canada devra faire de plus grands efforts pour tirer pleinement profit des avantages que représentent l'immigration et le multiculturalisme, ainsi que pour sensibiliser le public en vue d'éviter des conflits. À l'ère des médias sociaux, la télévision grand public, la radio et les journaux ne contrôlent désormais plus la véracité des informations ni leur diffusion, et les idées non conventionnelles et extrémistes peuvent se propager comme une traînée de poudre.





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#### INTRODUCTION

**P**rogress on social issues is often tenuous and subject to reversal of fortune as the gains made by the efforts of earlier generations stagnate or are squandered. There are many reasons for this: public apathy, short-term enthusiasm, loss of dynamic and committed leadership, shifting government funding priorities, and over-burdening the committed few in groups and organizations that rely heavily on volunteers. An example familiar to Canadians is the status of the French language outside of Quebec. While enrollment in French Immersion remains strong in elementary schools, bilingualism has stagnated for francophones in Quebec and is on the decline for anglophones outside the province. As the threat of separatism has receded in recent years, and as multiculturalism has simultaneously been embraced, it is increasingly difficult to identify bilingualism as a central feature of Canada’s identity. The enthusiasm and hope of the Privy Council’s goal in 2003 – to make 50% of those aged 15 to 19 bilingual by 2013 – now seems like a naive dream.

What then of immigration and multiculturalism? Canada can claim much success here over the course of its recent history. No country brings in as many

immigrants, on a per capita basis, and from as many different places. Canadians generally support federal policy in this area, respecting both the idea of providing foreign nationals with the economic opportunity for a better life as well as the compassionate principles underpinning family reunification and the refugee program. Also evident is an apparent valuing of ethno-cultural diversity for its own sake.

But there are now many strains in the Western world around issues relating to immigration, multiculturalism, globalization, religious tolerance, and refugee settlement. The blowback against Syrian refugees in Germany, outrage over acts of radical terrorism in France and elsewhere, and Britain’s vote to exit the European Union (Brexit) reflect a growing anger with the status quo that has resulted in a resurgent nationalism in many European countries.

On November 8, 2016 the United States concluded the most rancorous and poisonous presidential election in its history, as President-elect Donald Trump successfully appealed to many so-called ‘forgotten Americans,’ those who feel that America is less and less one country and one people and more and more a nation separated along religious, racial, cultural, political, ideological, social, and economic lines. One clear lesson of the American election is that opposition to multiculturalism has become an

extraordinarily powerful organizing tool for the political right.

Canada has not been immune to these developments. Political philosopher Hannah Arendt wrote in 1963 that, "once a specific crime has appeared for the first time, its reappearance is more likely than its initial emergence could ever have been."<sup>1</sup> She was, of course, writing about the Holocaust but her point is instructive here. Like other western nations, Canada has a legacy of racism, sexism, anti-Semitism, and other acts of exclusion. Much effort and expense has been directed at combating this in our schools, workplaces, and other areas of the public realm. Many recent incidents, however, challenge the comfortable notion that prejudice and discrimination have been eradicated and that respect, tolerance, and sensitivity are universal Canadian values. Examples include: foreign buyers being blamed for soaring housing prices in Vancouver and Greater Toronto; resentment at Mandarin-only signage in Richmond, BC; a Conservative party leadership candidate calling for immigrants to be screened for 'Canadian values';<sup>2</sup> the appearance of alt-right posters in a Toronto public park;<sup>3</sup> and the rise of the anti-Islamic secret organization La Meute (the Wolf) in Quebec.<sup>4</sup>

These occurrences unfortunately come at a time when the easy ability to accommodate large immigrant populations is at an end. Vancouver has run out of developable land, hemmed in as it is by mountains, agricultural reserves, and the Pacific Ocean. Opportunities for new low-density development now exist only in the Lower Mainland's distant suburbs. Similar conditions prevail in Greater Toronto and environs where a Greenbelt protects 800,000 hectares from development with plans for 9,000 more hectares to be added and density targets for designated Greenfield development areas increased to be at least 80 people and jobs per acre. There is also evidence that the local resident populations are dissatisfied with endless growth: a 2011 survey conducted by the Canadian Association for Canadian Studies found that among residents of Vancouver (GVRD), Greater Toronto, Calgary, and Montreal, fewer than 10% believed that their cities

were "not big enough" with over 90% believing there were "the right number of people" or "too many people."<sup>5</sup>

#### WHAT TO DO?

What is really needed in Canada is a national population policy, one based on objectives that identify how large a population Canada needs and in what areas of the country newcomers are needed and prepared to settle. At a minimum, at least, there needs to be a frank and meaningful dialogue between the federal and provincial governments on these issues, with a view to adjusting immigration levels to changing conditions in the economy and labour market. It is disingenuous and ultimately dishonest to assume that quality of life can be preserved

while simultaneously maintaining perennially high immigration levels: Ontario alone accommodates over 100,000 newcomers each year, most of whom settle in the Greater Toronto area. While the principles of Ontario's growth management plan for the region might appeal to planners (i.e., infill, redevelopment, and new construction at higher densities) it is doubtful that many married couples with young children view this as anything but a dystopian future of apartment life and mass transit. Bryan Tuckey, president and CEO of BILD (Building Industry and Land Development Association) was right when he commented to a Globe and Mail journalist in May 2016 that changes to the Greenbelt policies means "more intensification, more cranes, more congestion, less housing choice and fewer



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single family homes.”<sup>6</sup> Clearly, with population growth of the magnitude experienced in Greater Toronto, there can never be enough land for low-density housing. Indeed, housing affordability is now so dire in Vancouver and Toronto that some have advised would-be homeowners to rent instead.<sup>7</sup>

#### WHEN THE WATER HOLE SHRINKS

Decreased tolerance for multiculturalism coupled with the inability of our largest metropolitan areas to provide business-as-usual urban form, settlement patterns, and affordable housing choices could threaten the civic peace Canadians have come to expect.

Canada must do a much better job of leveraging the benefits of immigration and multi-culturalism and engaging the public if this is to be avoided. It is far from obvious that diverse societies are intrinsically better off – countries such as Japan, South Korea, Switzerland, and Sweden enjoy stability and prosperity with little diversity – so a stronger case needs to be made beyond the usual celebrations of song, dance, ethnic clothing and food.

One argument that should be made forcefully is that as a trading nation Canada cannot afford to disengage itself from major world economies such as India and China and that immigrants from these countries facilitate trade relationships which otherwise would not be possible. It is noteworthy also that there is more than just anecdotal evidence of over-achievement among the school-age children of recent Asian immigrants: the 2015 Program of International Student Assessment (PISA) ranked Canada seventh in the world out of the 72 participating countries and economies and lauded Canada in the 2016 summary report as achieving “high levels of performance and equality in educational outcomes.”<sup>8</sup> Our school system could be more proactive in identifying the ways and means by which immigrant parents make this happen, to the benefit of the broader school community. In a similar vein, the practices of Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) such as acupuncture and other

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treatment modalities might be integrated into mainstream medical practice and eventually covered by provincial health insurance plans.

Planners should advocate for as much parkland as possible as our cities grow and redevelop. The public parks and open spaces that native-born Canadians tend to take for granted are highly-prized by immigrants, and parks are excellent venues for ethnic, religious, and racial groups to intersect in an informal atmosphere with low expectations. Off-leash areas for dogs are important as well: responsible dog ownership is a means by which people can meet and break down barriers to social interaction in local neighbourhoods.

As regards governance, term limits at the municipal level would result in regular turnover of elected officials and would re-invigorate local democracy by ensuring a steady stream of new faces and new ideas. As matters currently stand, name-recognition alone is enough to return most incumbents to office given the generally tepid interest in municipal politics. There is no reason why anyone should serve more than two terms (six years) as a school board trustee, city councilor, or mayor. Longer tenure is deleterious to the public interest and invariably leads to factionalism, entrenched interests, empire building, and an attitude of entitlement. Regular turnover would create many more opportunities for new Canadians to participate fully in the democratic life of their new country.

#### CONCLUSION

In the age of social media, mainstream television, radio, and newspapers no longer control the veracity and dissemination of information and unconventional ideas and extremist

views can spread like wildfire. Canada will have its hands full in the years ahead if it is to maintain its status as a civil and welcoming society. We will need to do everything we can think of to maintain what we have built.

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