

Immigration – Part One

Immigration as a Function of National Demographic Policy

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Sir Wilfrid Laurier had a demographic policy for Canada. He wanted to create a super power north of the 49th parallel, with a population of 100 million by the end of the Twentieth Century. One hundred years later, we are only 32% of the way there; and, we spend most of our energies talking about how to make the system work more efficiently.

Laurier's problem, and that of all governments subsequent to his, lay in his reliance on an immigration program to constantly and consistently bring in "new" people from abroad to achieve his goal. Given the size of Canada's population of about nine million at the turn of the century, he was asking Canadians to accept "never-ending change" as a defining element of their culture.

Most people, though, treat immigration programs as an issue that will eventually result in "more of them and fewer of us", and tailor their approach to those programs accordingly. Every success is usually hidden, and every "failure" becomes a national crisis. As long as the Department of Citizenship and Immigration operates as little more than a bureau whose role in Nation-Building is restricted to one of receiving and processing applications, there would be no end of these.

In my short stint as Minister of Citizenship and Immigration before the December 2005 election, and often despite the objections of my own colleagues on both sides of the House, I pursued the Laurier model of growth. My approach was to **Recruit, Invest and Manage** for an improved Immigration program. In order to "fix what was broken", I felt we needed to: firstly, identify our demographic needs and potential sources of supply; secondly, build partnerships with provinces, industry and communities so as to more effectively recruit, integrate and retain prospective new Canadians. Gone are the days when Canada could rely on wave after wave of immigrants from familiar European sources. Those countries are now our competitors for the men and women prepared to leave the security of their native lands to build a better future with us; and they have a lot to offer both in standard and quality of life.

The booming economies of Europe, the USA (both of which economies rely on armies of "undocumented workers" numbering in the tens of millions) and Australia demand "bodies"; quality (trained and skilled) people are at a premium. China has its own internal immigration dynamic. In 1992, China's government allowed workers to leave their native towns and villages without requiring an exit permit. Close to ninety million (7% of the population) took advantage of this new found freedom that year to fill the ranks of the new manufacturing enterprises springing up in the cities. India embarked on an economic strategy that sees the retention of a human critical mass to grow an economy ever more reliant on education and manufacturing.

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The point is that potential immigrants have choices they could never dream of before. There are "economic tigers" everywhere. For example, places like Ireland and Scotland, which just a few short years ago had nothing to export but their people, have now embarked on an aggressive program of repatriation. Meanwhile, in Canada, critics often refer to the inability of our governments to meet immigration "targets" (numbers) as an indication of the need to adjust numbers downward.

Instead, I proposed we be guided by the answers to three simple questions. Whom do we want? What do we have to do to get them here? How do we keep them here? The marketplace would dictate the numbers, the speed and the circumstances which would see them arrive. To constrain our efforts by locking ourselves into slavish adherence to processing targets mandated by categories and sub-categories of classes of immigrants or some formula respecting the "traditional character" of Canada would be akin to inviting failure.

We should never scapegoat the system for the built-in weaknesses we put in place, or the people whose ambition for this country is greater than our own. A senior official in Quebec confided that we are so committed to preserving our past that we have to relearn how to be more welcoming - for our own good. It is neither easy nor impossible. Fortunately, I had the support of my senior officials who appeared to rise to the challenge I proposed to them. By October of 2005, I received the unanimous support from all of the provinces and territories on a going-forward plan for immigration. My successors do not appear to have had the good fortune of either.

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