

Immigration – Part Two

Immigration Purposes and Results

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Countries design immigration programs to benefit their national interests. Even considering refugee systems, the needs of the individual immigrant is secondary to the country's economic interest. Effective strategies for recruitment, integration and retention, then, can only be measured against the return on investment.

A solid immigration program would begin by ensuring that the country would stop squandering the asset and opportunity presented by "the best and the brightest" attracted to its borders. It makes good economic sense. According to Statistics Canada, 350,000 immigrants landed between 2001 and 2006 had at least one university degree. It would cost the Canadian economy in excess of \$50 billion over a 22 year period to "home grow" this talent. In a knowledge based economy, we could not wait that long to maintain our competitive edge.

What are the obstacles? "Professional" standards and career specific language skills deficiency primarily. Working with local agencies, industry organizations, sector councils and provincial authorities, we invested \$20 million in enhanced language training and a further \$68 million in the Foreign Credentials Recognition process. But the process is not easy. Of the total immigrants indicated above, 70,000 had an engineering degree - an average of 14,000 per year flooding the marketplace in competition with our own graduates. Regrettably, many leave the profession or the country.

Still, to facilitate integration and increase the odds of retention, the Liberal government sought to ease the connection to their families in a twofold strategy: one, increase the number of parents and grandparents landed from 6,000 to 18,000; and, two, issue 5-year multiple entry visitor visas for this category of applicant. The impact was an immediate reduction on a "backlog".

Furthermore, to ease the "social burden" on the provinces and to enlist their support, I secured from Cabinet to allocate \$1.2 billion over a five year period (\$940 million for Ontario) to ensure that the integration process would be effective and durable. On that score, several provinces noted that immigration has an additional benefit for transfers to provincial treasuries since every person is counted towards a CST calculation of about \$1500 per annum. Therefore, a net gain of 200 000 immigrants means a flow of \$300,000,000 from the federal to the provincial authority, per annum.

Keeping on the education theme, it makes great sense to recruit for students who might fit into the Canadian dynamic upon their graduation. The foreign student education business is worth about \$1.5 billion annually - \$25,000 per student for tuition, etc. Unused capacity represented by an additional 10,000 students would accrue some \$125 million in tuition alone to our educational institutions and build awareness of Canada everywhere. I aimed to draw an additional 40,000 over a five year period and invested \$10 million to improve the Department of Citizenship and Immigration's capacity to handle that inflow.

Students represent perhaps the best investment and return for recruitment and integration. They pay their way; make a contribution to the economy and learn the "Canadian way" by graduation time. I didn't, and do not, think we should encourage their return to native lands. Therefore, we announce in April 2005 a program that would allow them to work off campus for 20 hours per week and issued a work permit upon request at graduation for up to two years so that they could acquire Canadian experience before applying for permanent residency status.

The other source of "integrated, productive prospects" lies in the people who make their way into the country and take up employment in "blue collar industries" vacated by an aging Canadian population. They are here; they are working; their employers depend on them and they are not competing with Canadian born workers. Many are "guest workers", working in our agrifood business, slaughter houses or oil fields in Western Canada. Then President of Mexico, Vincente Fox, made a formal submission to our Cabinet to double and triple the number of workers we "permitted" each year.

Others in this "inventory" were (and are) simply "out of status", or "undocumented". Many of them engaged in the hospitality industry or in virtually every construction project.

That speaks more to the failure of a process-based system than to the "non-desirability" of this human resource, which is either a huge opportunity or a difficult problem. The Americans and Europeans are wrestling with numbers of undocumented workers that reach stratospheric proportions - tens of millions! Whatever our totals (around 200,000 according to estimates), some sectors of our economy, like those in the USA or the EU, cannot survive without them.

I proposed to set up an "In-Canada Class" (for skilled workers, to appease some of my most recalcitrant cabinet colleagues, but applicable to any one who could pass the "test") for those who could prove physical attachment to Canada for a predetermined period of time, pass a security check, apply for a work visa and stay employed for the duration of the visa period. Again, the presence of these people represents no economic cost to Canada. Any funds we would expend in "normalizing" their status would be an investment in making our system more efficient and more responsive to Canada's needs. The then Prime Minister backed me and I was able to secure \$700 million dollars over a five year period to "fix the system". Eventually, over a five period, we hope to scale up the total number of immigrants landed by 100,000.

Such were some of the underpinnings of a comprehensive approach to Immigration as a nation building tool. Alas, the department is small in size and with few friends around the cabinet table or in the media. Most politicians are risk averse. The Department and its ministers are usually under steady fire from their critics, the "worst are from within". After the 2005-06 election, the new government placed all of these initiatives on hold, choosing to re-release only those which it deemed most palatable. The only new thing about the current government is that the critics are now winning.

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