

*Our Canadian correspondent, John Meyer, called our attention to this article that appeared in The Toronto Star, September 20, 1992. It is a complete departure from previously published views in the mainstream Canadian press, which has been nearly universal in its unquestioning support for open-ended immigration. The essay is reprinted by permission of the Atkinson Fellowship in Public Policy. The Fellowship is named for Joseph Atkinson, former publisher of The Toronto Star. Mr. Stoffman used his grant as fourth winner of the fellowship to study Canada's immigration system.*

# **Pounding at the Gates: Why Canada Must Reassess Its Wide-Open Immigration Policy**

By Daniel Stoffman

The world is on the move.

By some estimates, as many as 100 million people from poor countries want to make new homes in the exclusive club of rich countries, a club that includes Canada. But the rich countries can't employ or accommodate more than a small fraction of them. Heartless as it may seem, the rich countries don't need these people and aren't going to let them in.

Yet through the 1990s and beyond, an ever-growing tide of people from the poor nations will be pounding on the gates of the rich. Four babies are born every second. In less than two decades, the Third World's labor force will contain 700 million more people than it does today, an increase equal to the existing labor force of all the world's industrialized countries.

Because of television and movies, people who live in the teeming cities of the Third World know that a better life awaits them in the rich countries if they can only get through those gates. You can't blame them for trying. All they want is what the immigrant ancestors of today's Canadians wanted — a better life for their children. They want it so badly that if one rich country refuses them entry, they will try another. One place many will be sure to try is Canada.

Canadian immigration policy used to be about seeking immigrants to populate a new country that was in the process of nation-building. It's not about that any more, although many people still think of it in these archaic terms. Immigration policy today is about finding a way to cope with the swelling tide of humanity that wants in. It is in Canada's best interest to select only a few of the millions of people who would like to come here — the ones most likely to become productive members of Canadian society.

That is why Parliament is debating measures aimed at giving the government more control over who gets in. And that is why policy-makers in Canada and other rich countries are belatedly waking up to the need to plan Third World development aid with the aim of curbing migration by creating jobs in those countries. It is clear that we must buy the goods and

services that the poor countries are offering or they will send us their excess populations. This new global setting provides an entirely new context for Canadian immigration policy. A national debate is long overdue.

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Yet, until recently, there has been little debate over immigration policy in Canada. This is surprising because the current five-year plan calling for immigration of 1.2 million people represents the world's largest wave of newcomers since the turn of the century, except for the special case of Israel. (The foreigners seeking admission to Germany are not immigrants but asylum-seekers, most of whom are expected to leave. But even if it gets 500,000 newcomers this year, Germany's intake will still be much lower than Canada's on a per capita basis.) No other country in the world receives immigrants on a scale even close to ours.

It's hard to have a dispassionate and serious discussion on this vital issue. That's because, more than any other area of public policy, immigration is encrusted with empty rhetoric, emotionalism, exaggerated claims and quaint, romantic notions that simply don't make any sense.

Both those who favor Canada's policy of massive, unselective immigration and those who are against non-white immigration and multiculturalism rely on a variety of myths to bolster their arguments.

Some of these ideas hark back to Canada's pioneer days. They are worthless as a basis for a modernized immigration policy suitable to the rapidly approaching 21st century. Before we can even start to talk about immigration policy in the '90s, we need to

reassess these outdated ideas.

Here are a few of them:

**Canada can absorb many immigrants because it is so big.** This is the most widespread, and the most foolish, of all immigration myths. It has been more than 70 years since immigrants came to settle empty land in Canada. Today, all immigrants go to big cities because that is where the jobs are and where other people of similar backgrounds live.

**Immigration brings in skilled people we need but don't produce ourselves.** Just when industry is desperate for highly skilled workers (and offers fewer opportunities than ever for the unskilled), we find ourselves with an immigration system that in, effect, gives priority to uneducated people. Immigrants, as of the 1986 census, were three times as likely to be functionally illiterate (i.e., have less than Grade 5 education) as native-born Canadians. Yet in 1971, immigrants were three times as likely as those born in Canada to have a higher education.

**Immigration is essential to the economy.** There is no evidence that this is true. In fact, there is a consensus among economists who have studied immigration that it does nothing to raise the incomes of those already here. The world's three major immigrant-receiving countries — Canada, the United States and Australia — do not outperform other industrialized countries that traditionally have had little or no immigration.

**Immigrants cause unemployment and are a drain on social services.** Wrong. In the past, immigrants have contributed more to the public coffers in taxes than they have taken out. Studies have shown time and again that, while immigration may depress wages and cause unemployment in certain industries, it has no permanent impact on the over-all unemployment rate.

**Canada's refugee determination system is the most generous in the world.** True. But, by international standards, it is not really a refugee determination system. It is a parallel immigration program in which self-selected immigrants are given landed status as "refugees" although most would not be so defined anywhere else in the world.

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**Canada is under-populated.** The issue is not whether Canada is under-populated but whether Metro Toronto and other large cities are under-populated because that is where immigrants settle. Our cities are undergoing unprecedented stress — homelessness,

food banks, violent crime, traffic congestion, air pollution, overflowing landfill sites. Is more population the answer to these problems? Few urban residents think so, yet the Progressive Conservative government relentlessly pursues a policy of high immigration that makes rapid urban growth inevitable.

**Immigrants form ethnic ghettos and refuse to adopt Canadian cultural values.** This is a crude overstatement. Governor-General Ray Hnatyshyn's ancestors probably had less in common culturally with the native-born Canadians they encountered on arriving from Ukraine than do today's new arrivals. New immigrants have always been "different"; succeeding generations have always integrated and it's still happening. A survey of British Columbia high school students in 1986 by Charles Ungerleider of the University of B.C. showed that immigrants and their children knew as much about Canadian values as defined in the Charter of Rights as Canadian-born students and were equally loyal to those values.

**Canada requires immigrants to pass a points test to show they have useful skills.** Rarely. In fact, fewer than 15 percent need to prove any kind of worthiness, compared with 32 percent 20 years ago. By encouraging family reunification beyond the immediate family, even before immigrants have obtained citizenship, Ottawa has created a stream of self-selected immigrants who don't need to speak one of our languages or have any education or skills to enter Canada by right.

**Immigration is diluting the Canadian national identity.** If Canadians have only a frail sense of national identity, that is not the fault of immigrants. Most new Canadians are ready and willing to accept the Canadian identity as their own. But first we have to articulate clearly, both for their sake and our own, what that identity is.

**Because of our low fertility rate, Canada's population is shrinking and we need more immigrants to fill jobs.** Wrong. Because we have so many women of child-bearing age, our population would be growing even without immigration. Canada, according to the most recent Statistics Canada demographic report, has "the strongest rate of population growth in the industrialized world." Our fertility rate of 1.8 children per woman is among the highest in the Western world. (By comparison, Italy and Spain have the lowest fertility in the world at 1.3 children per woman.) Meanwhile, Canada's unemployment rate is stuck at a lofty 11 percent, a figure that does not include people who have dropped out of the labor force.

**If we don't have a lot of immigration, our population will go down eventually because Canadians aren't producing enough babies to replace the existing population of 27 million.** This is true, but what does it really mean? It means that because a couple now in their 20s decide to have only

one child, the Canadian population will eventually decline by one. But that decline won't likely happen for at least another 50 years when the mother and father die. In an over-populated world, there are far more pressing things to worry about than that. Anyway, no one can prove that a Canada of 20 million people in the middle of the next century would be worse off than a Canada of 30 million, 40 million or 50 million. The environment would benefit from a smaller population and, because we would be forced to invest more in training and technology, our economy would become more competitive.

**Without high immigration there wouldn't be enough young people to pay for the social programs to support all the old people we are going to have as society ages.** This is most unlikely. European countries already have the high percentage of older people that we will have in the next century and they are doing fine. "Even with ordinary increases in productivity the whole question of supporting an aging population just disappears," says Mike Murphy, who headed the federal government's review of Canada's demographic future.

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**A tidal wave of people is on the move and you can't stop a tidal wave.** Yes, you can, if you decide you really want to. Italy sent back boatloads of Albanians and the Albanians stopped coming. When the West said it would no longer accept Vietnamese refugees and proved it by forcibly repatriating them from camps in Hong Kong, the boat people stopped coming. The fatalistic notion that countries can't prevent mass influxes of unwanted migrants is unsupported by any evidence.

Once we've dispensed with the mythology, what are we left with? Well, we're left with 250,000 people a year leaving crowded cities in other countries to come to crowded cities in Canada. We know why they want to come: most will enjoy a better standard of living and a lot of them have relatives here.

Furthermore, in Canada they can live in peace, get enough to eat, and vote in free elections, which is a better deal than most countries are offering these days.

But immigration is supposed to be a balance between the needs of the people who want to come and those of the people who already live here. So what's in it for us? Why do we want to cram so many new people, half of whom can't speak either official language, into our largest cities every year?

That is a difficult and complex question. I know,

because I have been asking it for the past year. It was a year devoted to investigating immigration policy — conducting scores of interviews in Canada and the U.S. as well as Mexico City, Brussels and Geneva, and examining countless reports and studies.

Defenders of the existing policy argue that rapid population growth is essential for economic growth. By this analysis, the citizens of China and India should be the richest people on Earth while those who live in small countries with stable populations — Switzerland and the Netherlands, for example — should have starved to death long ago. The truth is that immigration helps some Canadians economically, hurts others, and makes little difference to the vast majority. It's time for a more realistic assessment of what immigration can do, both for Canada and for the people who want to settle here.

Immigration is a way of:

- Providing a haven for genuine refugees.
- Getting some capital and useful skills, while keeping in mind that these benefits, though helpful, have no great economic impact.
- Reuniting immediate families, that is, spouses and dependent children.
- Preventing too steep a drop in population.

Finally, there is an intangible but vitally important reason why Canada receives immigrants: because it is a nation of immigrants. Canada was built by immigrants and all of us, except for aboriginals, are either immigrants or descendants of immigrants. Recharging our batteries with a flow of new arrivals is an essential — perhaps the essential — element of our national character.

In this, says Doris Meissner, an expert on immigration at the Carnegie Foundation in Washington, Canadians, Australians and Americans differ fundamentally from Europeans for whom "membership in society is tied to ethnicity and nationality." In the immigrant-receiving countries, ethnic diversity is seen as a good thing and membership in society is based not on ethnicity but on a shared commitment to democratic values.

We should stop looking at immigration as an economic panacea; it isn't. Nor should we view immigration as a demographic necessity; there will be no demographic disaster if we have much less of it. Instead, we should celebrate immigration as a reaffirmation of who we are — a nation of immigrants. But we should be clear about how immigration is changing the country: who we are, and who we are becoming, is different from who we were.

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Until the 1960s, immigration policy in Canada, the U.S. and Australia systematically excluded visible minorities. Then all three immigrant-receiving countries, with Canada leading the way, traded in their racist policies for egalitarian ones. The implications of that decision were not debated then and, in Canada, they still haven't been.

The implications are these: the vast majority of the immigrants to Canada now are non-white. This fact, coupled with a low birth rate and the concentration of immigrants in the largest cities, means that non-whites will eventually become the majority in these cities. When the politicians quietly changed the policy a quarter of a century ago, nobody thought this would happen.

In both Canada and the U.S., politicians actually thought they could have a non-racist immigration policy without changing the ethnic makeup of their respective countries. Most immigration to North America had always been from Europe and that was the way it would always be, or so they thought. In the Third World, said Nicholas Katzenbach, who was U.S. attorney-general at the time, "there are not many people who want to come."

The thinking in Ottawa was the same, recalls Orest Kruhlak, a political scientist with a special interest in immigration and head of Ottawa's multiculturalism program in Vancouver. "The bureaucrats and politicians thought that immigrants would still come from Europe," he says.

Kruhlak, who is of Ukrainian background, thinks few Canadians are racist but he thinks many are like his mother-in-law. Like her, they observe our society changing because of non-European immigration and they feel "a sense of uncomfortable-ness, a sense of unease. My mother-in-law is 80-years-old, was born and raised in Alberta, and is of British and Swedish origin. She used to know the signposts of life. She didn't have to have an explanation. Now the symbols are changing and she isn't as comfortable. In her terms, we've changed the rules of the game. She says, 'nobody asked me.'"

When the rules were changed, only 3 percent of Toronto's population was made up of visible minorities. Today, they are 25 percent and by 2001, they will be 45 percent. Meanwhile, an Angus Reid poll last June found that 55 percent of Canadians think racism is a serious and escalating problem and 71 percent of Torontonians expect more rioting like last spring's rampage on Yonge St. following the police shooting of a black man.

Even members of minority groups are less comfortable in Canada than they were before Brian Mulroney's government decided we needed a huge

influx of newcomers. A poll by Goldfarb Consultants this year found that only 47 percent of minority group members were "very satisfied" with life in Canada compared with 73 percent in 1985. As well, 26 percent felt prejudice against them was increasing compared with 17 percent in 1985.

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**Immigration Levels**

Country and Population	Number of Immigrants	Percent of Population
Canada 27.3 million	250,000	.92%
United States 252.2 million	1 million*	.40%
Australia 17.3 million	80,000	.46%

(\* 750,000 legal and estimated 200,000 illegal)

SOURCES: Immigration Canada, U.S. Department of Labor, Embassy of Australia

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Change is always stressful, especially rapid change. Canadians will have to accept that, in an increasingly multicultural world, the ethnic composition of Canada will change. But, not unreasonably, they prefer gradual to rapid change. That is why opinion polls consistently show strong support for lower immigration levels.

Canada's three major parties have decided that this majority view should not be permitted to have political expression. Immigration policy in Canada is conducted as if it were none of the public's business. Instead, it is the preserve of advocacy groups, ethnic communities, politicians representing those communities, and lawyers whose livelihood depends on having a large supply of immigrants to represent.

These people form a sort of immigration establishment and they resent the idea that immigration policy should reflect the national interest. Instead, they insist that it conform to the wishes of prospective immigrants and their Canadian relatives. And because most new immigrants are non-white, advocates of lower, more selective immigration risk being accused of racism.

It is the same in Sweden, says Jonas Eidgren, a former Swedish secretary of state for immigration. He now heads the Informal Consultations, a Geneva-based organization that provides a forum for the 16 developed countries that are the most frequent destinations of asylum-seekers. "In Sweden you have to hate racism," he says. "So you can't even discuss immigration because that is being racist." This situation allows the terms of the debate to be set by the far right, which is unafraid of being called racist, and creates a political vacuum on a crucial public policy issue.

We should not smugly assume that Canada is immune to the sort of anti-immigrant backlash now under way in Europe. It could happen here if the pace of immigration continues to outstrip the country's ability to absorb newcomers. The government's proposed changes are a welcome beginning at restoring an element of national interest to immigration policy. But they are only a first step.

The government still hasn't got around to explaining why Canada needs the biggest per capita immigration intake in the world. And, intellectually, it hasn't caught up to our Commonwealth cousins in Australia, who have accepted the fact that immigration's impact on the economy is neutral. Our policy is still based on exaggerated claims of its ability to boost prosperity.

We might be better off if we scaled down both the size of the immigration program and our expectations of what it can do for us. Most of all, we need to discard the mythology, drop the name-calling, and have a real debate on how to shape immigration policy for the 21st century. ■