

First Canadians Say Canadians First

BY TIM MURRAY

The announcement on August 5, 2009 by Immigration Minister Jason Kenney was a masterpiece of bad timing and perverse priorities. It followed the conclusion of an agreement to attract skilled immigrants to the Northwest Territories.

Once again, Mr. Kenney and other politicians are courting foreign labour to fill labour shortages that have never been duly inventoried. Once again, a vast pool of untapped local homegrown Canadian talent begs for opportunities and educational funding for skills development. Kenney's announcement echoed the infamous proposal two years ago by the Canadian Dehau International Mine Group to import 400 full-time Chinese workers to develop an underground coal mine near Chetwynd, B.C. That town is in the orbit of three native reserves.

Kenney's program to entice migrant labour is being introduced in the teeth of a severe recession and with the prospect that rising oil prices could smother a recovery. More importantly, though, it is a failed strategy that comes on the heels of the Assembly of First Nations (AFN) leadership contest to elect their new Chief. It also flagrantly ignores the advice of the leading contenders. Both leading candidates expressed understandable frustration and outrage at Ottawa's fixation on immigration as the magical solution to our economic woes and its favouritism of foreign labour sources at the expense of Canadian-born.

The newly elected Chief of the AFN, Shawn Atleo, explained that 54 percent of aboriginal citizens were born after 1984 and that Canada needs to embrace this tsunami of youth by supporting them with education and training and creating jobs for them. Aboriginal youth are in dire need of hope and opportunity. His sentiment was seconded by his rivals, who mentioned that 60 percent of natives lived as urban Indians because too many reserves offer no jobs, no housing, and no clean water. Meanwhile, federal politicians fall over themselves on the campaign trail complaining that immigrants with foreign credentials can't find work in their fields. And provinces like New Brunswick, Newfoundland, and others endow immigrant welcoming

centres with lavish grants. At the same time, some 10,000 First Nations youth eager to be trained for jobs that are in demand can't get them for lack of educational funding.

Atleo said that young human potential already exists in Canada, so we don't need to go elsewhere. His opponent, Perry Bellegarde, who narrowly lost the contest, made the same point. We don't need to bring in further immigrants to Canada, but rather, we need to invest in the human capital pool that is already here. If First Nations win, he declared, all of Canada wins. But the reality is, thanks in large part to immigration, both are losing. Unemployment rates for all Aboriginal peoples, including those in the Northwest Territories, continue to be at least double the rate of the non-aboriginal population, with so-called Registered Indians suffering an unemployment rate of 27 percent.

No wonder, then, that in the Community Well-Being Index of 4,685 Canadian communities, half of the First Nations communities fell into the lower range of the index as compared with 3 percent of non-native communities. In fact, 92 of the bottom 100 communities were First Nations. Thus, according to an Indian and Northern Affairs Canada study, the quality of life of First Nations peoples in Canada ranked 63rd in the Human Development Index developed by the UN. Candidates agreed that the keys to eliminating poverty amongst natives were education and the hope that comes with economic opportunity. Without a preference for native hiring, however, neither education nor hope would suffice. A Canadian First hiring policy would obviously be in order.

One could be forgiven for thinking, then, that self-appointed human rights advocates would concur with Chief Atleo's statement that First Nations poverty should be the number one social justice issue in Canada. Yet federal politicians and labour groups seem to pay more attention to the human rights of refugees to Canada than to the refugees who jump from the fire of hopelessness on native reserves to the frying pan of alienation and despair in Canada's major cities. Most puzzling is the emphasis that the Canadian Labour Congress (CLC) places on regularizing undocumented workers." Equally strange, the CLC does not question whether Canada even needs most immigrants. And instead of redressing the inexcusable lack of humanity shown to First Nations people by the government's immigration policy, CLC Secretary Treasurer Hassan Yusuf and other union officials denounce the inexcusable lack of humanity

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and zealotry of the Canadian Border Services Agency in pursuing the deportation of job-stealing illegal immigrants. For direction, Yusuf might confer with Jim Sinclair, who as President of the B.C. Federation of Labour in May of 2007, at least protested Dehau’s proposal to import 400 Chinese miners and to bypass local Canadian labour.

The CLC continues to be unimpressed with a Statistics Canada study released at that time which showed that immigration was implicated in a 7 percent drop in real wages of educated workers from 1980 to 2000. Rather than suggest a tightening of immigration, which by growing the labour pool by 13 percent since 1990 has weakened labours bargaining power, they merely demand that immigrants be informed of their workplace rights. Like the union establishments of the United States and the UK, the CLC has chosen to chase the union dues of potential immigrant recruits at the cost of resident workers whom they exclude from primary consideration. The parliamentary arm of the CLC, the NDP, meanwhile, mimics and amplifies the CLC stance. NDP Immigration critic Olivia Chow, reading from the same script as her opponents in the Liberal and Conservative caucuses, declares the standard nonsense that We need more immigrants because of our ageing population. We need productivity and growth.

It cannot be said that First Nations citizens lack the same ambition to find work as other Canadians. In fact, a 2004 study done by the Caledon Institute for Social Policy found that they have similar labour force participation rates. Put simply, the study stated, people of Aboriginal identity are trying to get jobs at almost the same rate as the

total population, despite Aboriginals high rates of unemployment. This finding implies that the main labour market challenge to the Aboriginal community is not lack of will to work: Rather the challenge is finding jobs.

“First Nations Role in Canada’s Economy,” a discussion paper for the Council of the Federation of the AFN enumerated the difficulties inherent in the standard obsession with immigration as a solution to the country’s labour force requirements. Rather than take their love outside Canada, governments would do better to love the potential



that First Nations Canadians offer right here at home. As the paper points out, First Nations workers are here in Canada already and do not require any immigration process. First Nations citizens generally speak at least one of the official working languages (English or French) fluently, possess Canadian work experience, and possess their credentials from Canadian schools,

thus eliminating many of the limitations that face immigrant workers.

All of these things would save government enormous amounts of money. “Most importantly, First Nations citizens have a right to expect that the Government of Canada would favour their employment over (that of) the citizens of a foreign country.”

Amen to that and to the right of all Canadian-born to expect the same thing! Or translated into a lexicon familiar to those of a Euro-Canadian cultural heritage: If anyone does not provide for his relatives, and especially for his immediate family, he has denied the faith, and is worse than an unbeliever. 1st Timothy 5:8. ■