



Now Is the Time

Alan Broadbent

The Great Recession is no excuse for Canada to turn its back on the great nation building job of attracting immigrants to bolster the economy and enrich society.

Like most developed countries, Canada's fertility rate is below the so-called "replacement" rate. The rate is 1.58, compared to a replacement rate of 2.1, which means that over time our population is in decline. In fact that decline would begin within the next twenty years. If left to what the demographers call "natural replacement," the population of Canada would be in decline from 2030 to the end of the century.

The low fertility rate is not our only demographic problem. Our population is comparatively old, and ageing. As Canadians get old, retire and leave the labour market, we are left with worker shortages. While not as visible in this recession, it is a problem that is only going to get worse.

There are very clear messages from these facts: Canada will continue to need immigrants, even more than our current intake levels. And we will continue to have to integrate them into our economy and our communities successfully. We know that the greatest factor in successful integration is positive labour market integration. Therefore, it is critical to have programs and services in place.

I think these are things we can all agree on, and I think we can persuade others. We have demographic information to support the imperative of immigration. And we have common sense that says if immigration is inevitable, we should embrace it and make it work well. After all, there is no reason to make it difficult for the immigrant, to create hoops to jump through or barriers to get around. That won't help the immigrant, and it won't help Canada.

What is giving some people pause these days is the Great Recession. The world economy has taken a severe hit, and Canada has not been immune from the effects. Things will get better, but nobody knows when that will happen. In the meantime, we have people out of work, and many of those lucky enough to retain their jobs have found their pay cheques shrinking. As the unemployment rate has crept up, a number of people have suggested we reduce or even suspend immigration so as not to create even greater pressure on jobs.

This is exactly the right time to help people begin that journey, to let them know that we want them, that we want to help them succeed, that we want them to live beside us and work with us, that we want their families to join in the life of the community with our families, and that we want them to stand shoulder to shoulder with us in the daily work of building a great country. Now is the time to extend that welcome.

But that is exactly the wrong thing to do. We are not the only country in the developed world dependent on immigration, and there is a growing competition for the brightest and the best. Canada has a distinct advantage on other countries: we have had a system for attracting and choosing the brightest and the best for almost half a century. And we have used it to great effect, and others have begun to copy us. We know that our system isn't perfect, and there are a lot of ways it could be improved, but it tends to be well regarded by the rest of the world. They are going to develop similar systems, and compete with us for the best immigrants. Getting out of the game now, just as the rest of the world is gearing up for it, is exactly the wrong thing to do.

Immigration and integration are not short term. They are processes that have a variety of stages, and it can take an immigrant some years to feel truly settled: to be in the right job at the right level; to be settled in a good neighbourhood; to have their kids in good schools and community activities; to have a broad and diverse set of relationships; and to participate fully in the life of the community, including in its political life.

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Now is the time to make sure that our apparatus of government is improved, and aimed at finding the next best generation of Canadian citizens, not just temporary job fillers to be discarded at some future date. And now is the time to improve the ability of communities to help immigrants make a living and make a life, through the development of programs of welcome, transition, and engagement.

Now is the time for employment councils across Canada to help the labour market open itself up to immigrant success. This is a pivotal moment in Canada's ability to move forward. It is easy to get spooked by scary economic news. But this is our moment to rise to the challenge of the future, and put in place a key building block for the 21st century.

This Maytree Opinion is adapted from Alan Broadbent's keynote speech given on June 12, 2009 at the 2009 ALLIES Learning Exchange in Vancouver, B.C.

For a video of the full speech, visit: maytree.com/integration/allies/2009-learning-exchange/presentations.