

Social Inclusion: A New Vision of Immigrant Settlement in Canada

Thank you very much for inviting me to speak. It is indeed appropriate that an immigrant addresses the first-ever national conference on settlement. Nonetheless, it is an honour for this particular immigrant to do so, and a responsibility that I hope I will deliver on.

Settlement is a uniquely personal and individual journey. Mine started at Pearson Airport more than 20 years ago. I sometimes wonder when and if my journey will ever end. For all purposes, it would not be wrong for people to assume that it has indeed reached a successful conclusion. My two daughters are wonderful, independent women, destined to take their share of shaping this new world. My husband, after five years of being shut out from his profession, has been practising it successfully for 15. We own our home – or at least the bank allows us to pretend that we do; I have sponsored my brother and his family; my parents came over 13 years ago. I chose not to return to the profession of teaching and have carved out a new

career for myself. On a more daily, trivial but far more tangible level, I am a member of the local women's book club; I plant daffodil bulbs in our neighbourhood park with the local residents association; and I demonstrate against the cutbacks to education in Ontario. I even finally understand the finer points of unmanageable (and for me fairly strange) processes, such as choosing, wearing and maintaining nylons or eating maple syrup with bacon. There are certain things that I have unfortunately not been able to master. It has been impossible for me to learn even the basics of French, and I regret this enormously. As I review the mental balance sheet that I have running, there is no doubt in my mind that as immigrants, we have both enriched and been enriched by Canada.

But there are times when I feel distinctly odd, alone, different – as, for example, when I mix and mingle at Toronto gatherings of elites and find that I am the only visible minority in a room of 400-odd people – in addition to the

serving staff, that is. These are the moments when I feel excluded simply by virtue of being different, of not being from this country and not having a greater, more personal, lived share of its history, language and culture. And yet, even in my aloneness, I know that they are the old establishment and are part of Canada's past, while I am of the future.

These are also times when I realize that there is really no end to this journey, because there is no destination and no single definition of what it is to be Canadian. Unlike our neighbours to the south, where American identity is defined, pre-packaged and sold as a brand all over the world, being Canadian is not a rigid concept. Pico Iyer, the world famous travel writer, thinks of Canada as a global soul "because it is free from expectation, because it is willing to experiment, because it has a rare sense of imaginative space and therefore is the best guide to the creation of a new kind of stained-glass society" [Iyer 2000]. By being free and uninhibited, we are best able to demonstrate to the rest of the world how creative possibility arises out of this mix between old and new, "between global beings and the global society around them."

However, there is one collective experience that resonates with us all – the experience of displacement. Most of us come from somewhere else, and have been displaced through persecution, war or political or economic ideologies. As displaced people, we are suspicious of official ideology, because we are refugees in a sense from officialdom; from governments, armies, strict traditions and ideologies. As Mark Starowicz, creator and executive producer of *Canada: A People's History*, points out, we "are especially vigilant of our rights – no one claims more rights than Canada. Canada is consistently cranky, litigious, in perpetual living negotiation of its constituent parts. To the frustrated question: When are we finally going

to settle all this? The answer of course is never. And that's not a problem. In fact, that is exactly the point" [Starowicz 2001].

So back to this journey to Never Never Land. If it is indeed a journey without an end, how should the traveller prepare for it? What should the traveller pack to take on this journey? What signs and milestones should the traveller watch out for to know that the journey is taking the right direction? Who is the best travel guide? Who draws the map for the journey? And ultimately, who is this traveller?

The conference organizers have asked me to work with you today to rethink and reimagine this journey. I am to challenge you by thinking outside the box and imagining settlement in a New World. What if we were to start again? What freedom is implicit in this question! Yet, before I roam freely with you on this subject, I do want to say a few things about my perspective. First of all, I believe that Canada is a wonderful country for immigrants and for those refugees who are able to successfully make a claim on our sense of social justice and compassion. My comments therefore do not arise out of a belief that immigration and settlement are bad; rather, I proceed from the conviction that they could be much better.

Second, I want to acknowledge that my roots are in the settlement service sector, where I was fortunate enough to find a home for many years. However, in the last three years, I have come to know the community of funders and policy-makers as well. I have come to understand that all of us – settlement workers, funders, policy-makers and private foundations – are basically trying to do the same things, but with different tools. So I speak with a great deal of admiration and affection for settlement workers, and a growing respect for funders and policy-makers.

The timing could not be better to discuss the issue of immigrant settlement. The world around us is moving at a dizzying pace. The flow of knowledge, information, goods and people – this force that we call globalization – has changed the context and environment in many areas, including that of immigration. Our immigration levels will need to increase sharply to maintain labour force growth. As a nation of taxpayers, we need to be thankful that we are also a nation of immigrants and we need to make sure that we remain so. The Minister of Citizenship and Immigration has set out an ambitious goal of increasing annual immigration to one percent of Canada’s population. So let’s start with the premise that we need immigrants.

At the same time, Canada faces competition and has had a sketchy history of meeting these targets. This problem may be attributed to a number of factors, including a growing middle class and increased opportunities for skilled individuals in traditional source countries of immigration. Other countries, such as Germany, have recently joined the competition for skilled immigrants.

Strangely, we don’t seem to be doing so well with the immigrants we get. The image of a lawyer, engineer or doctor driving a taxi is almost burnt into our national consciousness. We know that immigrant wages are not reaching the levels that they used to; in fact, the indisputable correlation between race and poverty should be a grave concern for all Canadians.

Clearly, something is not right. The speed and pace of change have put extraordinary pressure on the settlement sector to change and speed things up. There was a time when we all subscribed to this unwritten contract between Canada and its immigrants, where the expectation was that our children would be ones who would fulfill our immigrant dreams of full

social and economic inclusion and participation. The immigrant dream thus stretched out over at least two generations. But that paradigm no longer exists; immigrants are no longer prepared to defer their gratification to the next generation. If they don’t get it here and now, well then, they have increasing opportunities to reach their ambitions elsewhere. “Instant Settlement” is the order of the day. The challenge for the next 10 years will not simply be getting immigrants, but keeping them.

So, to our original premise – that we need immigrants – we need to add a second premise: We need to do better by immigrants. Therefore we need to do settlement better, differently.

What is this settlement that we are concerned about? Is it an end unto itself? Should it have the kind of institutional framework that results in the creation of a settlement industry that stands alone? It certainly seems that this is exactly what we have created – a separate, stand-alone institution that is set apart and away from the rest of Canada. Consequently, settlement is something that only we immigrants think about and care about, and mostly deliver, and mostly alone. As a result, when things go wrong it is easy for the public to blame immigrants – if immigrants are not working out, well then it is the immigrants themselves who are fault, who are not integrating. When immigrants find that their much-vaunted qualifications are not translating into the appropriate high-level jobs, then it is because their credentials are not on par with ours.

Consider who is attending this conference on immigrant settlement: We are almost all settlement workers, policy wonks or funders! Where are the others who should and do have a keen and vested interest in us? Where are the corporate leaders who need our talents, the condominium developers who need our business,

the political parties that need our votes, the unions that need our membership, the small businesses that need our investment, the real estate agents who need our downpayments and the cultural industries that need our talent?

If we are to truly rethink settlement, we need start at the beginning by recognizing its rightful and important place as a means to full and equal participation in our democratic society. After all, immigration is about nation-building. And in this nation, thankfully, nation-building is about democracy and participation.

Settlement, therefore, cannot end at speaking English to a certain level; it should mean speaking enough English so that we can vote or sit around a boardroom. Settlement should not end at a referral to housing. Yes, it should start there, but it should also include one of the most meaningful and sadly forgotten indicators of settlement: home ownership. Settlement should not end at showing people how to find jobs; it should start there and go with them into the workplace. Settlement should not end at mere information and referral; it should begin there and end with full participation. In fact, settlement should not start and end with immigrants and refugees at all – it should include and involve all Canadians, all our institutions and our public. If the real test of settlement is not language levels but active participation in our democratic institutions, we have to examine the capacity and ability of democratic Canada to successfully facilitate this participation. And we cannot do this if all the effort is concentrated on the immigrant, without concentrating with equal force on the ability of Canada to make this happen. Otherwise, it is like the unheard sound of one hand clapping.

Uzma Shakir of the Council of Agencies Serving South Asians has observed that there is a “lot of settlement going on, with nobody actu-

ally getting settled.” I believe that the reason for this is that we keep settlement in a cage.

Why is this so? The answer we are usually given is ‘jurisdiction.’ We are brought into this country by one level of government; we are left at the mercy of a second. Most of us live our lives in cities and have our first experiences of Canadian citizenship in cities and municipalities. Yet this level of government has no place, no role in policy-making on issues of immigration. The problem of jurisdiction is not just vertical, between governments; it is also horizontal, between departments and ministries. Immigration remains isolated from human capital development, which remains separate from health, and so on. Because of jurisdiction, we have the unfortunate situation of recruiting ‘designer immigrants’ for labour market shortages, without actually being able to follow up with the jobs that we implicitly or explicitly promise them.

The lofty goal of nation-building is difficult to accomplish within this maze of jurisdiction, with its inexplicable limits on who can do what to whom, who gets credit for what and who gets blamed. The voice of the immigrant recedes further and further into the background as governments engage in louder and louder squabbling.

Of course, jurisdiction is not a problem unique to immigration; it is part of our national landscape, covering many issues of national concern. Yet at least in health and education we have some reason to hope that jurisdictional boundaries will be transcended, largely because they occupy so much of our national consciousness as issues of primary concern to Canadians.

But what about immigration? We know that the health care system, the long-term care system, the pension system, the care for our seniors are to a significant extent dependent on

the future wealth from population increase, taxes and consumption that result from immigration. Yet immigration is of national concern only in its negative manifestations. I have a hard time remembering the last time I saw a positive story about immigration or refugees on the front pages of our national newspaper. If ever we are featured, it is a story about refugees or immigrants on welfare, or about sponsorship breakdowns or about illegal refugees. With coverage like this, it is no wonder that, according to a national poll of Canadian attitudes by *Maclean's* magazine, Canadian attitudes towards immigrants are hardening. Apparently, over 70 percent of Canadians insist that immigrants should adjust when they come to Canada [Sheppard 2000]. But what do they think we do most of the time when we get here? Every day of our lives, we adjust a little bit more. We manage not to freeze in the winters, we manage to accept working in factories when we should be working in hospitals and we manage to accept substandard wages. I think we do possibly a little too well on the adjustment scale, and a little too little on the protest scale.

It is therefore unsurprising that jurisdictional barriers are harder to transcend when it comes to immigration than in areas of national commitment like education and health. Yet I am left with the suspicion that, if it were not jurisdiction, there would be some other reason to keep our interests on the margins.

I believe that to a large extent we ourselves are at fault. As long as we see ourselves and allow others to see us as outsiders, supplicants and victims, we will remain exactly that. We cannot rely on our political leaders to give immigration and settlement their due. Our new immigration bill appears to be more concerned about the machinery of keeping people out than getting people in and keeping them here.

How do we change this? By remembering that political leaders are elected by people! As people of this country, we must take it upon ourselves to translate the issues closest to our hearts into issues of national concern, much as have those who are most directly interested in health and education. This means that, we as immigrants, must start unpacking our minds as well as our baggage. We immigrants must begin to translate our individual successes into collective political power. We need to stop being solely engaged by our pasts and take ownership of this new land that we have chosen as our own. We must stop drawing on our identities solely as Iranians, Chileans, Pakistanis, Chinese and so on, and start seeing ourselves as Canadians. Most importantly, we have to start influencing public policies.

I think it is natural to pay attention and be concerned about what is happening back home. But that does not mean that our civic activities here need to be contained to our own cultural and ethnic associations and faith institutions. Haroon Siddiqui of the *Toronto Star* tells an interesting story. When the newspaper failed to report that an Indian had won the Miss World title three years in a row, Toronto's South Asian community was outraged. The *Star* got more calls than it could handle. But when the *Star* reported on the problems that immigrant and ethnic professors were experiencing in receiving tenure at the University of Toronto, there was hardly a squeak out of them. Certainly the millions of South Asians who live in all parts of the world outside India and Pakistan have a history of paying a heavy personal price for staying out of the public policy and political arena – look at Fiji and East Africa. Let's look at a more positive lesson from our neighbours to the south and at the attention that the Latino vote got in the last US election. Certainly, that particular

politicized community has been incredibly effective in flexing its muscles, particularly in California.

Before anybody misunderstands me, I am not calling for immigrants to set aside their identities and adopt a solely Canadian identity. I am not against multiculturalism as it is supposed to be. I am against existing solely in our own exclusive worlds, cultures and institutions. True multiculturalism surely must mean living side by side with all our similarities and differences in a civic society as engaged citizens.

A first step in redefining the place of immigration and settlement policies in the national consciousness must therefore start with immigrants. We are so often called a special interest group; perhaps it is time for us to start acting like one. We can do this in four steps.

First, we need to form a national coalition of immigrants and interested individuals, whose purpose would be to inform the public and the government on immigration and settlement policy. Members would not represent organizations or any specific groups of immigrants; they would simply represent themselves and be free from the constraints of organizations or governments because they would be acting in their own personal capacity as watchdogs, commentators and informed citizens. They would include a mix of prominent and ordinary people. The National Forum on Immigration in the US is a model that I admire. When its CEO puts in a call to the Vice-President of the US, he is assured his call will be returned, because both political parties in the US understand the power of the immigrant vote. Closer to home we have the Canadian Council of Refugees, an excellent model (and a sympathetic one, too) that we can build on.

Second, we need to bring policy down to a level such that it engages people in their daily lives. Policy in the abstract has no meaning. It

only begins to engage people when they see how it affects their lives, their communities and their children. People live their daily lives in communities and cities. Most immigrants gravitate to cities and most of the impacts of integration occur (or not) at that level. Cities, therefore, should be at the centre of policy discussion on all issues of settlement. It is at the level of neighbourhood, community and city life that the immigrant is best able to start getting involved in matters of policy. So we need to actively encourage immigrants to participate in local affairs.

Third, but tied to the second point, we need to ally ourselves to some of the emerging and potentially powerful movements in the country that are about the redistribution of political power to Canada's cities. I refer to the movement that is gathering force in our nation's biggest cities to create a new base of respect for themselves through redefining their relationship with senior levels of government. If we accept the premise that greater coherence between federal settlement policies and local integration practices would accelerate settlement, then it would make sense to start exercising our potential power by participating, and in fact playing a very important and leading role, in this new movement.

Finally, settlement workers need to formalize their professional bonds with each other across the country and form their own professional association dedicated to furthering their capacity and garnering respect for them. National or even provincial settlement worker associations would not only serve the profession through development of standards and codes of conduct, but hopefully also enter formally into the field as a player in policy. It is time for frontline settlement workers to emerge from behind the skirts of their Executive Directors. It is time for you to gain the respect of this nation. Who can imagine any debate on public

education in Canada not being informed by the very powerful teachers federations or any debate on health service delivery without the input of doctors and nurses?

So this, then, is my vision: a coherent national body of concerned citizens informing and shaping national policies of settlement and immigration, shored up by a grass-roots movement of immigrants taking part in a strengthened local democracy, backed by the professionals in the field. We would finally be in a position to craft settlement policies, not in back rooms or even at conferences, but in full, open discussion with the public.

Perhaps now we can begin to imagine a Canada where the discourse on settlement has been popularized, where our national coalition of immigrants is an influential body that has the ear of the public, the media and government. Where conversations relating to settlement policy are crafted with the active interest of a wide variety of stakeholders. Where the objectives of settlement dovetail with the objectives of industry, education, labour and health. Where the resources of these ministries would be brought to bear collaboratively on the achievement of certain national objectives. Then, and only then, can settlement services be elevated from the basement to the penthouse, where they deserve to be.

Settlement policy would no longer be confined to the outcomes to which it is currently forced to limit itself, because settlement would no longer be just about language proficiency, job search skills or initial settlement counselling. It would measure its progress differently, be delivered differently, resourced differently and involve different stakeholders.

Settlement workers would have the responsibility of providing active connectivity to the rest of the world. That would mean that settlement workers would work in different places, including schools, libraries, community colleges,

union halls, employment centres, health centers and shopping malls. Within these institutions they would have standing, prestige and clout because they would be the initial, essential and interpretative link to potential consumers and customers – to a new power base.

And how would we measure progress in this brave new world? Accountability is important. How trivial it would be to tie settlement to ‘language level’ 1 or 2 or 3, or how many clients were seen by how many counsellors within this emancipated vision; and how inappropriate.

What if we adopt the larger measure of equity, instead, as the high ground we are striving towards? Equity is a simple concept, easy to grasp, easy to measure, easy to dream about. When does society begin to look like us? Who makes how much and how does it compare? Who is sitting around our boardroom tables? Who is governing our country? Who is teaching our children? How far away are we from a reflection of ourselves among Canada’s powerful institutions?

It is high time that the faces of teachers in our classrooms in Surrey and Hamilton begin to resemble the faces of the students; that senior citizens in Chinese or South Asian long-term care facilities are able to get care from qualified nurses in their own language; that occupational regulators understand that there is no conflict in promoting access and protecting the safety of the public.

I was asked to unpack the box of settlement, and in doing so I have come to dislike the contours of this box, with its hard edges and rigid walls, with its current limitations of what is possible and what is not. Perhaps we don’t need a box at all. Perhaps we need a whole new way of looking at settlement where equity is the objective. Perhaps we should simply throw away the box and replace it with a circle – of inclusion and equity.

Perhaps it is even time for us to consider replacing the very word ‘settlement’ with the word ‘inclusion.’ Instead of settlement policies we would then have inclusion policies; instead of settlement programs, inclusion programs. Instead of the Department of Citizenship and Immigration, there would be a Department of Citizenship, Immigration and Inclusion. Our Co-Chair’s new title would be Director General, Inclusion Branch. I feel dizzy just at the thought.

I hope, though, that we don’t just flirt with these ideas today only to drop them again tomorrow. The test of good ideas lies in their ability to be translated into action. I challenge you today to determine whether mine have any legs. You – settlement workers and settlement agencies – are powerful players, with the ability to reach out to thousands of immigrants. It is up to you to sow the seeds of a new national movement of immigrants that focusses on creating, responding to and commenting on relevant policy issues and, if the idea resonates, to put forward a new framework for settlement based on inclusion. It is up to immigrants to carry forward and translate their individual successes of immigration into political clout.

I recognize that this will not be easy. The question of funding is always at the heart of our capacities and our limitations. I ask you, however, to imagine a world of settlement that has new allies, new stakeholders, new relationships and therefore new champions.

Let me finish where I started. If settlement is indeed a journey, then who is the traveller? I conclude that the traveller is not the immigrant, but Canada itself. It is Canada that travels this road, with its history, its institutions, its culture, its people and, yes, accompanying it are immigrants and refugees, settlement workers and agencies. But it is a road that we travel together. We are joined together, and we should know that if one turns, so does the other, if one

succeeds, so does the other; and if one fails, so does the other.

I will borrow some much-quoted lines from Rabbi Hillel in closing. He says in these few words what I have been trying to say for the last twenty minutes:

If I am not for myself, who will be for me?

If I am only for myself, what am I?

And if not now, when?

Thank you very much.

Ratna Omidvar

Ratna Omidvar is Executive Director of the Maytree Foundation.

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1600 Scott Street, Suite 620
Ottawa, Ontario, Canada
K1Y 4N7

phone: (613) 729-3340
fax: (613) 729-3896

e-mail: caledon@caledoninst.org
website: www.caledoninst.org