



### Politics or Policy?

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The federal government has been making changes to Canada's immigration system, and engaging in heated exchanges with ethnic and cultural groups in Canada. It raises the question as to whether we are seeing a significant shift in policy or energetic politics.

In 2008 the government put in new rules that gave then immigration minister Diane Finley extra powers to fast-track immigrants the government viewed as desirable. It also increased its ability to influence the choice of immigrants through provincial nominee programs and the temporary worker program, which is disconcertingly like the failed guest worker programs in Europe.

In 2009 the new immigration minister, Jason Kenney, is talking about more changes. He wants immigrants to have fluency in English or French, and his government has stopped supporting heritage language programs. More, he wants immigrants to work harder at fitting in, at adopting Canadian ways and avoiding being isolated in the culture of their country of origin.

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Mr. Kenney and his government have also opposed the Canadian Arab Federation and its leadership and denied British Member of Parliament George Galloway entry to Canada to make a speech, citing his support of Hamas, which is designated a terrorist group by the Canadian government.

The government has explanations for these moves. Because immigration is important to Canada, having ministerial ability to respond to labour market needs is important. Dealing with short-term labour shortages might indeed turn one's attention to temporary worker programs. As for fluency in language, there is evidence from countries like Australia that this is a critical factor in successful immigrant settlement.

There are explanations for the dust-up with the Arab Federation, growing in good part out of the volatile rhetoric of some of its leaders. And there is no doubt that Galloway supports Hamas, that Hamas is listed by the Canadian government as a terrorist group, and that Galloway is a publicity hound whose aim was to raise support for Hamas and embarrass the Canadian government.

And there is some resonance with the “fitting in” point of view. In parts of Canada there are people who feel that the old way of life is slipping away into something more uncertain, alien, and risky. The recession exacerbates all of those concerns, as the ground under many Canadians seems to be shifting. A recent book by Rudyard Griffiths captures this sense of something being lost. In *Who We Are*, he argues for a return to our founding core values upon which we can build a more sound future.

There is no doubt about the depth of Griffiths’s concern, which he has been expressing for years. The federal government’s behaviour, though, raises questions. In a prolonged period of minority government, is sharper control of immigration considered a change of policy, or is it a political strategy aimed at consolidating the anti-immigration vote? Is picking fights with the Arab Federation and excluding Galloway aimed at securing the largely urban-centred Jewish vote, and is that a bridgehead for penetrating the urban areas which have not been friendly to the Conservatives? Is talk about core values, foreign languages, and ethnic enclaves an appeal to non-urban Canadians which form much of the Conservative base?

Canada has been portrayed in recent years by writers like Richard Gwyn and Michael Adams as a post-modern state. Part of its current character is that it does not have onerous membership requirements, other than those contained in our “points system” for immigrants. People born in Canada have no membership requirements beyond obeying the law. They don’t need to know who Sir John A. Macdonald was, or the capital of New Brunswick, or when the Toronto Maple Leafs last won the Stanley Cup (admittedly ancient history).

In good part, this lack of obligations allows people to thrive and work together. It lessens the sense that some people belong more than others. It makes it easier for immigrants to find a place, because there is less they need to displace to find a place of their own. And from that platform of equal membership, we create the next chapters of the Canadian story. Making sure that the Canadian story remains vibrant and successful will continue to be a demanding task, one that requires all hands on deck. We need everyone working shoulder to shoulder, whether they’ve been here for five generations or five months, whether they’ve come from 100 miles down the road or from half way round the world.

If the federal government is engaging in politics to gain votes, then one might expect a vigorous opposition from other political parties and the provinces. If the government is indeed creating a major policy shift, it is even more important for the opposition parties to force a debate that would include a chance for all Canadians to register their views. And if that policy shift is based on a traditional view of an old Canada, and a presumption that the old Canada was a better place, then a national conversation is critical. Many of us would argue that post-modern Canada is a great achievement to preserve and build on, and a return to an old Canada of preference and exclusion would be a step backwards.

Politics are inevitable, but they should be in the service of policy. And policy should be in the service of country building, which should be an inclusive exercise which brings as many voices to the table as possible. Policy which is merely the fall-out of the practice of street-level electoral politics is a hard legacy for a government to leave behind.