CANADA'S IMMIGRATION SCORE: RECOMMENDATIONS FOR A WIN-WIN

Ratna Omidvar

How do the hundreds of thousands of immigrants who arrive each year in Canada fare in the immigration process? The president of Maytree, Ratna Omidvar, examines the extent to which our immigration policy succeeds in the short, medium and long terms for both Canada and the immigrants. Using a number of economic, social and political indicators, she finds that Canada is doing well in the medium and long terms, but must do better in the short term: "Canada's score on this front is abysmal," she says. She makes several recommendations to increase the benefits of immigration in the first few years of arrival, notably by strengthening the federal Skilled Worker Program.

Comment se portent les centaines de milliers d'immigrants qui s'établissent chaque année au Canada une fois franchies les étapes du processus d'immigration ? Ratna Omidvar, présidente de Maytree, analyse l'efficacité à court, à moyen et à long terme de la politique d'immigration canadienne du point de vue du Canada et des immigrants eux-mêmes. À l'aide d'indicateurs économiques, politiques et sociaux, elle montre que le pays fait bonne figure à moyen et à long terme mais qu'il doit absolument améliorer ses résultats « déplorables » à court terme. Elle formule plusieurs recommandations visant à multiplier les avantages de l'immigration dès la première année d'établissement, notamment le renforcement du Programme fédéral des travailleurs qualifiés.

I applied for immigration to Canada in Bonn and arrived in Canada with my family in June 1982. We were eager to continue our careers in our new country, but instead we had to reinvent ourselves. Canada was in a recession — and we were in survival jobs.

Despite our struggles, after two years, we bought a house; after five we became citizens; and after ten years we sponsored my brother and his family to come to Canada. Gradually I become more involved in local political and civil society organizations.

Today, both my daughters are university graduates: one is a lawyer; the other works in market research. My nephew serves in the Canadian Armed Forces.

Our story is not unusual. Variations of this story could be told by the hundreds of thousands of immigrants who arrive in Canada each year. The question I sometimes pose to myself is, How did my country fare in the economic balance sheet of Omidvar versus Canada? Or perhaps more magnanimously, how do Canada and the hundreds of thousands of immigrants who arrive each year fare as a result of the immigration process?

While there is no scoreboard for such things, if there were I suspect points would be given for integration indicators over the short, medium and long terms.

Within the first few years in Canada, there is no doubt about it: attachment to the labour market is paramount. It does not serve Canada or the immigrant well if the immigrant is unemployed or underemployed. The Conference Board of Canada has found that if all immigrants' foreign learning and learning credentials were recognized, between $3.4 billion and $5 billion would be added to the Canadian economy every year.

In the short term, we can measure immigration success by examining earnings, labour market attachment and the number of people working in a field commensurate with their training and experience.

Unfortunately, Canada's score on this front is abysmal. Despite the fact that recent immigrants are more highly educated than previous cohorts and than the Canadian-born, they have lower wages and more difficulties entering the labour market. The number of new immigrants to Canada with bachelor's degrees is equivalent to

the total annual number of undergraduate degrees awarded by Ontario universities, yet Canada has not leveraged this talent into innovation and productivity.

Instead, immigrants to Canada are unemployed and underemployed. Approximately 65 percent who arrived in the 1990s experienced low income, and about one-fifth had chronic low incomes. In the most recent recession, recent immigrants accounted for essentially all net job losses in Montreal, Vancouver and Toronto — their employment declined by 17 percent compared to virtually no decline among Canadian-born workers. Many of the newly unemployed were immigrants who had taken jobs in the manufacturing sector because their skills and experience were not recognized. They now find themselves even farther from their original career goals.

To measure Canada's success in the medium term, the score sheet should probably be more complex. The indicators of success should be less economic in nature, and more about the extent to which immigrants become part of Canada, part of "us."

The most important indicator is citizenship acquisition. Fortunately, on this front Canada fares remarkably well. In 2001, approximately 84 percent of immigrants had become citizens after meeting the requirements. This means that they are eligible to contribute to making Canada stronger and better by voting, running for office and shaping public policy. Many new citizens take advantage of this opportunity. While naturalized Canadians have lower rates of political participation than their Canadian-born counterparts, as their familiarity with the system increases, they begin to participate at similar rates to the Canadian-born.

Participation outside of the political system is just as important, if not more so. While citizenship policy is national, the experience of citizenship is inherently local. It is often at the neighbourhood level that citizens engage with one another, whether that be at a community centre, local charity, religious institution or school.

Determining how engaged people are in their community is difficult, but there are indications that Canada is doing well in this area. The Ethnic Diversity Study finds that 34 percent of those who immigrated to Canada from 1991 to 2001 were members of or participants in a group or organization in 2002. This compares with 41 percent of those who had immigrated to Canada before 1991, and almost half of the Canadian-born.

In addition, the Canada Survey of Giving, Volunteering and Participating reveals that in 2007 immigrants were only slightly less likely to give to charities and nonprofit organizations than those who were born in Canada (82 percent versus 85 percent), but they gave noticeably larger amounts when they did contribute ($505 versus $423). Immigrants were also more likely to donate to religious organizations than were those born in Canada.

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Immigration is a multigenerational phenomenon. Immigrants bring their families, marry and have children in Canada.

The success of future generations, then, is important to consider in Canada's immigration score. If generations of immigrants live in ethnic neighbourhoods, excluded from the rest of the city and in poverty, then the country's immigration program has failed. If by realizing their professional ambitions and being able to contribute to their communities the children of immigrants succeed where their parents did not, then Canada has succeeded.

For immigrant parents, who often see themselves as having made a sacrifice for their children, their children's success is *the* most important indicator. It legitimizes their own personal struggles.

Luckily, on this front Canada's score is high. The children of immigrants are more likely to go on to postsecondary education than the children of the Canadian-born. They have higher incomes and lower unemployment rates than their parents. They often choose to marry outside their racial and ethnic background, reflecting the fact that their generation is open to the world and the myriad of cultures in it.

However, not all children from immigrant families are doing well, and the research in this area has revealed some exceptions within some racial and ethnic groups. These exceptions must be examined in order to ensure that all children have access to opportunities in Canada.

Another long-term indicator of immigration success is population growth. While there should continue to be debate about how our cities can grow in an environmentally and socially responsible way, there should be no debate about the need to increase our population. When we compare Canada to the United States, or virtually all countries in Europe, with their string of cities, and their complex and innovative economies, it becomes clear that Canadian cities need to grow. The country cannot compete on a global stage with only a handful of global cities. To Vancouver, Montreal and Toronto we must add Calgary, Edmonton, Halifax and Winnipeg, and we must develop other large and diverse cities.

Canada has experienced a rapid growth in the number of temporary workers arriving to Canada. In fact, in 2008, there were more temporary workers living in Canada than the total number of permanent residents arriving to the country. These workers are chosen by employers, and many will never be able to get permanent residency.

The short, medium and long terms are equally important for immigration success. Canada cannot sacrifice its long-term prosperity to meet short-term labour market needs. Nor can we continue to ask immigrants to sacrifice their short-term success in the interests of future generations. The impact of this lost productivity on our collective prosperity cannot be overstated.

While on the whole Canada has done well in many areas, it is clear that the country can and must do better in several others. Notably, it should consider the following recommendations.

Test language competency. Research has shown that language is the most important indicator of labour market success in Canada. However, the federal government does not test for it. It relies instead on immigrants to demonstrate their language proficiency in a paper process that unfortunately results in too many immigrants arriving with little language ability. Mandatory language testing is essential. This should not apply to refugees, or to parents and grandparents who arrive through family reunification. But it is entirely reasonable to request that immigrants who arrive through the Federal Skilled Worker Program have a level of language proficiency that would allow them to succeed in Canada. In fact, I would suggest that language ability should be a prerequisite for entry to Canada for skilled workers, so that skilled worker principal applicants who are not proficient in English or French would not be able to meet the requirements in the points system by receiving points in other categories.

Provide more points for young people, less for work experience. Skilled worker principal applicants can receive up to 10 points for age if they are between 21 and 49 years old, and a maximum of 21 points for "work experience" (the passing grade is 67). This favours older immigrants who upon arrival find that employers do not recognize their skills and experience. According to research by Naomi Alboim, Ross Finnie and Ronald Meng published by the IRPP, work experience is discounted by a factor of almost 70 percent. To continue to allot points for international work experience is disingenuous at best. Younger people, even with little work experience, have long careers ahead of them with which to contribute to the Canadian economy.

Go digital. There has been very little investment in technology at Citizenship and Immigration Canada. The immigration process is still primarily a paper process — and the 900,000 applications are scattered all over the world. There is no centralized processing unit, no searchable database. This means that there is no way to fast-track a particular applicant whose skills are in demand in Canada. If a database of applicants were created, then immigration officials, and in some cases employers, could search the database for immigrants that our economy needs. Searching this database could be a prerequisite for employers wishing to recruit temporary foreign workers.

Remove the occupational list. Canada does not have very accurate and timely labour market information, and the immigration system, as a paper process, does not respond as quickly as it should to the labour shortages that do exist. In this context, limiting the skilled worker class to 38 occupations does not make sense. On the current list there are many occupations to which there are still licensing and regulatory barriers. Keeping these professions on the list creates a false expectation that employers and regulatory bodies will recognize immigrants' skills when considering them for jobs.

Focus on selecting future citizens, not just workers. Awarding permanent residency through the Federal Skilled Worker Program is important, because it is the only way that the federal government is able to directly select individuals who will one day become citizens. However, in recent years, Canada has experienced a rapid growth in the number of temporary workers arriving in Canada. In fact, in 2008, there were more temporary workers living in Canada than the total number of permanent residents arriving in the country. These workers are chosen by employers, and many will never be able to get permanent residency.

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Immigration is a multigenerational phenomenon, and the success of second-generation Canadians "is important to consider in Canada's immigration score." On this front, "Canada's score is high," says Ratna Omidvar.

The shift toward more temporary foreign workers has been driven primarily by the expansion of the Pilot Project for Occupations Requiring Lower Levels of Formal Training (National Occupational Classification C and D). Similar programs in Europe have led to a large number of undocumented and marginalized populations, which has undermined social cohesion and support for immigration more generally. Employers are demanding access to workers willing to do low-skilled jobs, and their needs cannot be ignored. However, there are other ways to fill these positions. Perhaps employers can find ways to relocate underemployed permanent residents and people born in Canada from other parts of the country? The Seasonal Agricultural Worker Program (SAWP) and the Live-in Caregiver Program (LCP) are possible models, with the right provisions and protections in place. The SAWP is well monitored by the sending countries and the Canadian government, and the LCP is a two-step model that allows for permanent residency. If these strategies do not work, then perhaps the refugee and family reunification programs could be expanded on an experimental basis.

Canada's immigration program has changed rapidly over the last five years, with very little debate. The federal government has made major policy changes, often through ministerial directions and budget bills that have passed with little democratic participation.

Canada must ask, "What is the purpose of our immigration program? How can we create a system where both Canada and immigrants win? What kind of nation do we want?"

Unfortunately, I do not think that the timing is right for such a debate. Recessionary periods stir up anti-immigrant sentiment and inspire protectionism rather than innovation. However, as the country begins to climb out of this dark period in our economy, the government needs to engage Canadians, both new and old, to embark on a discussion on our future and our immigration program.

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