

Keynote Speech by Senator Vivienne Poy

The New Face of Canada: Is immigration the answer?

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Honoured guests, ladies and gentlemen:

Thank you for inviting me to speak today. I chose the topic “The new face of Canada” because it is an important topic for this millennium. As we look around us, in all our major cities, we see Canadians who have come from different parts of the world. The face of Canada has changed a great deal since 1959, (the year I came to Canada as a university student), and I know that I have contributed to that change.

Canada was intended to be not only a white, but also a British country. Changes came about because of immigration, and these really began after the end of the 2nd World War as a result of labour shortages, a booming economy, and Canada’s international role in the settlement of refugees. Many displaced persons from European countries immigrated to Canada at that time. In 1947, Chinese exclusion was repealed, and there were gradual changes in our immigration policies, particularly with the emphasis on family reunification.

The biggest change came with the introduction of the points system in 1967. It was the turning point when immigrants began to enter Canada based on their education and skills, without consideration for their home country, racial origin, or family reunification. This meant that people could immigrate from any part of the world. From that time on, the face of Canada began to change.

An increasing number of students from different parts of the world also came to Canada for tertiary education in the 1960s, and many stayed after graduation and became Canadians. I was one of those students.

I believe the changes that were brought about by former Prime Minister Trudeau in the 1970s were of equal importance in making Canada what it is today. In 1971, the Multicultural Policy was introduced in

Parliament, and without going into it in great detail, the policy made people of all ethnic origins feel welcome in Canada. This policy had an important impact on changing the face of Canada.

Canada is a country of immigrants. Aside from the indigenous peoples, the majority of us came to this country from somewhere else, at different times. Therefore, immigration is an important topic for our policy makers.

Nationally, Canada faces a declining birth rate, and an aging population. As a result, immigration is expected to account for virtually all of the net growth in the Canadian labour force by the year 2011. Immigrants are, on average, younger than the native born population, and are therefore likely to have more children.

Many professions in Canada are dealing with labour shortages. Keep in mind that we always have had the problem of out-migration of Canadian professionals, particularly to the United States. A recent survey by the *National Post* found that 73% of business leaders in Canada believe there is a skilled labour shortage. And, because of this perceived labour shortage, there have been recent moves to recognize illegal migrants working in the underground economy in both Canada and the U.S. because our economies are dependent on these workers.

Globally speaking, a nation's productivity and competitiveness, especially today, is driven by its human resource capacity. Canada can no longer depend on the export of natural resources, as it has in the past. Competing in the global economy requires the best people from all over the world.

We all know that there is an increasing global movement of people, both of economic immigrants, and refugees. And as an immigrant receiving country like the U.S., Australia, and New Zealand, Canada needs to compete for the best skills, and best minds, of those who wish to immigrate, irrespective of their country of origin.

So, immigration would appear to be the answer to these labour issues, but there are problems with this assumption.

Recent statistics show that immigrants today are taking longer to reach income levels similar to those born in Canada, and to contribute actively to the Canadian economy.

Many immigrants who have come to Canada to fill the vacuum in different professions such as medicine, engineering, etc. are not working in these professions, leading to their under-employment and a great financial loss to Canadian society.

This leads to dissatisfaction among immigrants who have come here with the hope of a better life. They see themselves as having been misled by immigration agents, and indeed some immigrants would have been comparatively better off if they had remained in their home countries. Some do return to their countries of origin, and others move elsewhere for better opportunities.

There are also rising ethnic tensions in some of our cities. And, since September 11th, 2001, immigration has become tied to many of our national security concerns.

This year, the environmental organization, the Sierra Club, also declared that large-scale immigration, and global movements of people are destroying our environment.

Under these circumstances, we need to ask ourselves: “Is immigration still the best way to ensure Canada’s success in the future? “

First, let us look at the economic evidence. Up until 1986, it was not uncommon for immigrants to eventually catch up, or often surpass, their Canadian born counterparts, in terms of income and wealth.

However, since 1986, statistics show that immigrants of similar age, and family structure, are earning significantly less than their Canadian-born counterparts, despite the fact that immigrants are twice as likely as those born in Canada to have a university education. In fact, in 1998, 72% of immigrants selected in the skilled worker category had university degrees. With the points system, and the passage of the new Immigration and Refugee Act in recent years, Canadian immigration has increasingly stressed the need for education and skill-based labour in accepting applicants.

Nevertheless, in 1998, poverty among recent immigrants stood at 27%, double the 13% rate among the rest of the Canadian population. Annual wages and salaries were one-third less than those of other Canadians.

It is also important to point out that, more than a decade ago, the top ten source countries shifted to the Asia-Pacific region, with China now topping the list of countries of origin for new immigrants.

Statistics Canada says it cannot entirely explain these statistics, but suggests that it was easier in the past for new immigrants to get into the trades, and make a good living. In comparison, many of today's jobs focus on service-oriented professions, where language ability becomes of greater significance. That, perhaps, is one explanation.

Looking at the whole picture, economists seldom consider the cost of the education that immigrants obtained in foreign countries (without cost to Canada), and the increased productivity within Canada from cheaper labour costs. The benefits of entrepreneurial enterprises may also not be factored in. Overall, the *Economist Magazine* argues that countries experience modest benefits from immigration, while individual immigrants benefit greatly.

So far, we have focused mainly on the economic aspect of immigration, but we should also consider the sociological side of the picture. After all, Canada's immigration system has objectives beyond that of ensuring skilled labour, and potential markets. Our policy is three-pronged. The economic objective represents only one goal.

The other two objectives are humanitarian - allowing for family reunifications through family sponsorship, and providing refugee status to those who have been persecuted in their own countries. These two categories represent 40% of immigrants to this country, but their existence is not reflected in the calculations of many economists. These groups do have to be considered in any assessment of Canada's immigration policy.

Immigration should be understood not as a product, but as a process, which takes place over time. Immigration is about people - individuals with their hopes and their dreams, with integration into Canadian society as the

ultimate goal. The degree of acceptance by mainstream society plays a role in the success of our immigration policy.

We cannot ignore the fact that most immigrants who have arrived in recent years don't look like mainstream Canadians. At least three out of four new immigrants are visible minorities, which is virtually double the proportion of that of the mid-1980s so integration is of the utmost importance.

Another problem is the lack of recognition of non-Canadian work experience as well as foreign education by employers. Many employers don't recognize the institutions where the immigrants have worked or received their education, so they don't know how to rate them. Of course, this problem is a matter of ignorance on the part of employers.

I would like to give an example of what I have just mentioned. One of the informants I interviewed for my PhD thesis told me about her experience as an immigrant to Canada in the 1980s. The lack of understanding of employers here of other country's customs and cultures had adversely affected her chances of employment. And I should add that the other culture happened to be British colonial. The British term for a very senior officer or a government minister is "secretary," so as the "secretary to the President," she was the equivalent of a vice-president with a lot of responsibility in the organization. But the employers here considered her as a secretary in the Canadian context, and she was prevented from getting employment that was commensurate with her education and work experience. Employers didn't even bother to look at her educational attainment, or the work responsibility she had before coming to Canada.

The result is that visible minorities earn between 15 to 25 % less than most immigrants of European origin, whether in skilled or unskilled labour markets. And the failure to recognize foreign credentials costs the Canadian economy more than \$1-billion a year, according to the Conference Board of Canada.

If immigration is to be the answer to Canada's future, we need to find a better way to utilize Canada's human resource capability. A strategy needs to be developed.

The way we recognize immigrants' educational credentials and work experience is not working. The skill-based point system was primarily applied to individuals from Western countries before, and now that most of our immigrants come from non-white countries, employers don't know how to account for their work experience, and accreditation organizations don't know how to rank their education.

But when students come here to study at a university, their overseas education is recognized. Why can't a similar system be applied to immigrants? Also, immigration officials consider the work experience, and education, of immigrants before deciding whether to accept their applications. Why is this evaluation not "translated" for employers and accreditation organizations into something concrete and measurable?

For immigrants, who come to Canada with the promise of work prospects, disappointment awaits them. They are offered a dream, and when they arrive, they often find that they cannot find work in the professions in which they were trained.

The current immigration system is not based on specific skills but awards points for education, age, years of job experience, and language skills, and may be leading to a surplus of foreign-trained job seekers in fields such as engineering, and a deficit of trades people, even though our economy needs more people to work in construction because of the boom in the housing industry.

There is a growing awareness that the process has to begin even before immigrants arrive, says Toronto-based immigration lawyer Stephen Green. "The Canadian government has built this beautiful Ferrari, but they forgot to put in the engine."

For instance, in the "Immigrating to Canada as a Skilled Worker" section of the Citizenship and Immigration Canada website it said, "Skilled workers are people whose education and work experience will help them find work and make a home for themselves as permanent residents in Canada." There was a footnote that some occupations may be restricted "to make sure that Canada does not have too many people with the same skills." But the site proclaimed in bold letters that "there are no restricted occupations at this time." This kind of wording could mislead many who might want to immigrate to Canada.

If immigration is to be our future, we need to consider, on a holistic basis, all the factors that are reducing immigrants' success. We need a well-developed public policy that involves governments at the federal and provincial levels working with universities, employers, and accreditation agencies to make immigration work for Canada.

The Federal Government should take the lead role in ensuring that immigrants, once they arrive in Canada, integrate successfully. So far, the system is fragmented with little communication among the different ministries: Immigration, Human Resources Development Canada, and Industry Canada.

At the provincial level, it gets even more fragmented. There are 70 departments in the provinces and territories, as well as more than 50 regulated professions with at least 400 regulatory bodies.

Nevertheless, a national integrated system for recognition of foreign credentials, and work experience, needs to be put in place, and everyone agrees on this point. The question is: 'how can this be done?'

So far most of what has been produced is study after study, promising future initiatives. In an article in *The Globe & Mail*, Wallace Immen wrote that "if the mounds of bulky studies and worthy reports issued by programs launched in the past year alone could be used as building material, they could be assembled into a superhighway to jobs for foreign-trained workers."

Judy Sgro, the new Immigration Minister, has signaled her commitment to this file by encouraging immigrants to settle in regions where there are shortages of foreign trained professionals. This is particularly true of the need for doctors in rural areas, and many cities in the Maritimes. The Minister has asked the Maritime provinces to forge an agreement to speed up recognition of foreign credentials in order to attract foreign-trained doctors.

Minister Sgro has also met with 8 mayors, as well the Minister of Citizenship and Immigration in Ontario, in February, to work out a framework agreement with Ontario, which receives the majority of Canadian immigrants. It was the first time that the mayors of cities were included in

these negotiations. This is appropriate since Toronto received 50% of all immigrants in 2003, making it the most multicultural city in the world. As well, Ministers of Immigration in all provinces have met this year in Victoria in an attempt to collaborate on immigration issues.

Another positive development was the appointment of Hedy Fry as the Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Citizenship and Immigration, with a special emphasis on Foreign Credentials, and the appointment of Gurbax Singh Malhi as Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Industry with special emphasis on Entrepreneurs and New Canadians.

The problem is, as usual in Canada, accreditation of credentials occurs at the provincial level. Even native-born Canadians sometimes have trouble working in different provinces, because of the difficulty in getting accreditation in certain professions. So there is a lot of work ahead for our policy makers. However, there are currently several positive initiatives underway. For example:

In September, 2003, The Conference Board of Canada announced that it will undertake a comprehensive research project to help organizations in Canada break down the barriers to the advancement of visible minorities, and to raise public awareness of the importance of maximizing their talents.

This year, Health Canada announced \$4 million in federal government funding to enable more foreign-trained doctors to become licensed to practice medicine in Canada. This funding will bring at least 100 additional foreign-trained graduates into Canada's physician supply over the three-year period.

"Alternative Teacher Accreditation Program for Teachers with International Experience" aims at incorporating foreign-trained teachers effectively into the Canadian labour market, while recognizing their academic qualifications and validating their professional skills acquired abroad.

World Education Services (WES) will search to verify that the degrees of immigrants are authentic, and that the course programs and the schools that granted the diplomas are the academic equivalents of schools in Canada.

Career Edge is another program, funded by the Ontario government, with 50 intern positions available for engineering and technology workers because between 1994 and 2000, 73 % of all immigrants to Ontario were engineers or engineering technicians. This trend is replicated in other provinces.

The Ontario Government, which receives almost 60% of all immigration to Canada, has also pledged \$4-million to support skills improvement programs for internationally trained health care workers, pharmacists and technicians.

Ratna Omidvar of the Maytree Foundation says that, despite these many hopeful projects, they are all short-term, with limited funding rather than a long-term solution. She refers to the phenomenon as “project-itis”.

In measuring the market worth of foreign credentials, recognition of foreign credentials may not be enough. Over the long-term, root causes, rather than just symptoms, may need to be considered if integration is going to be successful.

Consideration of a potential immigrant’s competence in at least one official language, and of someone’s age, are justifiable. Language skills are very important to adaptability, and young immigrants are obviously more promising than older immigrants with larger families. Younger immigrants are also more likely to be able to learn new things that will help them to adjust to life in Canada. Both factors are emphasized in the new Immigration Act.

Race and religion also need to be taken into account to the extent that they affect adaptability. It is important to recognize that discrimination exists in Canada, and to tackle the issue head-on, because this is the only way to make a difference in integration for new Canadians.

We should note that immigrants from Europe, and the U.S., take less time to catch-up in earnings than those from Asia and Africa, the regions where most of our immigrants are from in recent years.

Racial and gender characteristics of many foreign credential holders may affect how these credentials are assessed. For example, the female immigrant I spoke of earlier - her degrees were from both Hong Kong and

Europe, and she worked in the British colonial system - but being Chinese, her race and gender affected her access to the right level of employment as an immigrant.

In a field study in Toronto, black and white job seekers applied for entry positions in a newspaper. White applicants received job offers three times more than black job seekers, and telephone callers with an Asian or Caribbean accent were often screened out when they called about a job vacancy.

On the subject of accents, one of my informants in my interviews told me that she got her teaching job over the phone in the 1970s because the school principal mistook her last name as an English name, and because her spoken English was perfect. The principal was shocked when she reported to work to see that she was ethnic Chinese!

In another study, white male immigrants with degrees from foreign institutions, or with a mixed education that is part Canadian/part foreign, actually do better than a white Canadian born male in income level. Male visible minorities, whether they have degrees from foreign institutions, or Canadian institutions, are disadvantaged, as are white women. The very lowest income earners are visible minority women who are confronted by discrimination on the basis of both race and gender.

A hopeful finding is that when you subdivide groups that come to Canada, principal applicants in the economic class catch-up more quickly than family and refugee classes, as might be expected. Therefore, our method of attracting economic immigrants is somewhat successful.

Studies conclude that there are many other factors that play a role that may be difficult to measure through the points system, such as an immigrant's work ethic, work patterns, social capital, and entrepreneurial skills. Also, market conditions at the time of entry into Canada can make a difference in how fast integration takes place. Despite what has been said, whether immigrants are visible minorities or not, they will catch-up in earnings eventually.

However, for new, talented, immigrants facing the frustration of seeking employment in their fields, this eventuality cannot come soon enough. The current situation that faces many new Canadians has been

called a "Canadian-made tragedy", in which, aside from the enormous losses to our economy, we are faced with an incalculable loss in human potential. The following are some of the people behind the numbers:

Ivy Zheng had been an engineer with the Chinese space program, and she had won a citation for designing a rocket component that helped launch a Chinese astronaut into space. In the two years since she immigrated to Toronto, she has searched in vain for an engineering position, and, needing to support herself, she took a job making cinnamon buns in a shop.

As documented by the Maytree Foundation, NV is a talented civil engineer with a Bachelor of Science degree from a well-known foreign university. Since graduating, he had held increasingly senior engineering positions with government departments in Sri Lanka, Malaysia and New Zealand, and with the United Nations Development Programme. In Canada, he was unable to find work in his professional, so he retrained for two and half years, and now works as a house inspector.

Bobby Premakamaren came here four years ago with a degree from Middlesex University in England and five certificates in accounting. After sending out 3,000 resumes over the past four years looking for an accounting position, he now cleans office buildings and apartments. He describes his immigration experience in Canada as a "disaster."

An important aspect of integration for immigrants is the media, since we all know its tremendous influence on the general public. And, as long as the media portrays immigrants as a problem, immigration will be perceived as a problem. We all know that bad news sell, and so stories in the media often highlight immigration fraud, snakeheads, and illegal migrants arriving in boats. But, where are the stories about the immigrants and their descendents that I know who have added so much to the growth of our country? Many of them have excelled in finance, in business, in literature, the performing arts, and in the scientific fields. There are those who give generously of their time and money to Canadian society. You know, we don't hear these stories in the mainstream media - you only find them in the ethnic media.

Because of some members of the media, there is a persistent perception among some Canadians that immigrants are a drain on our health care and social services, despite the statistics that show otherwise. In fact,

immigrants, over a period of time, actually use less of these services compared to those born in Canada. But, let us keep in mind that people will believe what they choose to believe.

Since September 11, immigration is often associated in people's minds with lax security in our immigration system, because of the way it is framed in the media. Many believe that the tragedy was the result of the inadequate screening of immigrants coming into Canada, even though it was American immigration that issued the visas to the individuals who were responsible for the tragic event. Media can certainly bring fear into the minds of Canadians. Just because you look Middle-Eastern does not make you a terrorist! This actually happened to the husband of one of our senators. Even with a special passport, he was deemed to look like a terrorist!

We are beginning to see a shift in some media as to the importance of integration, and incorporation of skills of immigrants for the good of the country. Journalists have a huge responsibility in this regard.

There are arguments out there that immigration does not solve the problems of our demographics. I personally think it does because of our very low birth rate. We need new blood, and we need more young people in Canada. I also would like to think that, as Canadians age, and seniors are an increasing percentage of the general population, there will be enough working young people paying taxes to support us in our old age.

Besides demographics, Canada needs immigrants for the many other reasons that I mentioned earlier, as well as to build bridges for Canada with the rest of the world. And since the majority of immigrants in recent years are visible minorities, we need to educate Canadians to understand that diversity represents a positive benefit, and a potential asset to all Canadians.

The arena for this change in Canadian perception is in our institutions: the schools, the universities, the different levels of government, and in business. Since one fifth of Canadians below the age of 30 are the children of immigrants, our educational institutions have the important responsibility of influencing the attitudes of students at a young age. These students are learning in increasingly multicultural classrooms, where everyone shares their different cultures, and it is that sharing of diversity that we celebrate in Canada. For these young people, the new face of Canada is a reality.

We must realize that we cannot be pro-immigration without being pro-immigrant. It is not just a government policy, because beyond that policy are people who are taking a tremendous risk by starting over in a new country. We need to recognize in these debates that immigration has made Canada what it is today, and it is who we are as Canadians.

Immigration is the answer if we make a commitment to do a lot more to help immigrants integrate into Canadian society. It is here that individuals, the media, corporations and different levels of government must play a role.

Fundamentally, there is a need for a shift in Canadians' attitudes about what constitutes our reality. You and I need to catch-up to the new face of Canada because it is here.

In closing, I would like to quote Sir Wilfrid Laurier, our first French-Canadian Prime Minister, in his speech on the occasion of the province of Alberta's entering Confederation in 1905:

"Those who come at the eleventh hour will receive as fair treatment as those who have been here a long time ... we do not anticipate and we do not want, that any individual should forget the land of their origin or their ancestors. Let them look to the past, but let them also look to the future: let them look to the land of their ancestors but let them also look to the land of their children. Let them become Canadians"