INTERVIEW WITH THE HONOURABLE MONTE SOLBERG

Minister of Citizenship and Immigration Canada

Presently, immigrants' contributions are largely measured in economic terms, with less emphasis on social contributions. Many argue that immigrants contribute in other ways, such as by increasing Canada's cultural diversity, or by contributing through unpaid work, which is often undertaken by parents and grandparents sponsored through family class immigration. How do you think the contributions of immigrants should be measured, and what indicators will you use to assess your government's record on integrating immigrants to Canada?

Immigration indeed contributes in many ways to Canada's social, economic and cultural growth. Social and cultural contributions are perhaps more difficult to quantify, but I do think each of us makes a subjective assessment of these contributions in terms of the perceived strength and vitality of the Canadian multicultural mosaic as well as our collective adherence to Canadian values like tolerance, mutual respect, and compassion. I would also like to stress that the Department is currently looking at a number of ways to more objectively measure these contributions.

The indicators we can use to assess the government's record on integrating immigrants are somewhat more tangible. Statistics Canada, for example, publishes many studies each year that track how well newcomers are doing, including the *Longitudinal Survey of Immigrants to Canada*. CIC also tracks newcomer progress and makes those statistics available through publications such as *The Monitor*, which is an online newsletter. We have a research group called *The Metropolis Project*, which holds several workshops and conferences each year. We also measure our performance each year through a set of strategic outcomes which are published in the Report on Plans and Priorities. So there are a number of ways to measure our progress in terms of integrating newcomers as well as in many other matters.

What are your priorities for the immigration program? For example, do you intend to continue the recent developments that saw immigration levels increase?

I've been carefully reviewing the immigration and refugee portfolio over the past few weeks. There are really three key priorities on which I intend to move fairly quickly. Canada needs to make sure immigrants can find work commensurate with their skills. So the first priority is to work collaboratively with Human Resources and Social Development Canada to set up a new federal agency that would help address the issue of properly recognizing foreign credentials. What we need to do as well is engage all our partners and ensure everyone works towards the goal of unlocking the true potential of each newcomer we bring to Canada while ensuring all regions benefit from immigration. Many newcomers face a significant financial burden during their first few years in Canada. We also need to find ways to lessen that. My second priority is therefore to reduce the Right of Permanent Residence fee and then eliminate it.

Finally, in our election platform, we committed to supporting Canadian parents who adopt foreign-born children by extending citizenship to these children provided the adoption is legal and in the best interests of the child. This would help put them on an equal footing with children born to Canadians. I therefore intend to introduce legislation to put these changes into effect on a priority basis.

Concerning immigration levels, I don't have any immediate plans to make significant changes to the overall annual target for immigration.

The question of immigration levels, of course, is one that needs to be worked out in conjunction with provincial and territorial partners as well as businesses and other stakeholders across the country. I'm fully committed to doing just that over the coming months and to strengthening our partnerships in a number of other areas as well.

The previous government's six-point immigration plan included the "60/40 split," which translated into 60 percent of immigrants who came to Canada as part of the economic class (including their families) and 40 percent as social immigrant classes (including the family class, refugees, and humanitarian and compassionate cases). Last year, 24 percent of immigrants were strictly family class. Does your government plan to maintain these levels and the 60/40 split, or would it propose moving in a different direction?

While I don't plan on making significant changes to the categories of persons who can be sponsored in the family class, I think we need to examine the current mix of immigrants with an eye to doing a much better job of matching labour market needs with the skills newcomers bring with them, and look for ways to use the tools that we have, like work permits, to help meet some of the skill shortages that this country has in different sectors.

If we need workers for the oil rigs in Alberta or the East Coast, for example, then we need to put our energies into making sure we get them. The same goes for every part of this country — from Gander to Nunavut to Whitehorse, Whistler, Edmonton and Québec City. We have to be much more proactive in terms of recruiting and selecting immigrants according to community and labour market needs, and we need to look at strengthening our existing partnerships and building new ones to encourage the distribution of immigration right across Canada so that skills don't become centred in our major metropolitan areas.

A number of lobby groups and individual Canadians – including both citizens and permanent residents – support the expansion of the family class, which would allow for the sponsorship of additional family members, including siblings, for example. Do you support the expansion of the family class, or do you plan to maintain the present definition?

Families play a very big role in helping immigrants adjust to their new lives in Canada, so it's important to make sure that our policies continue to support family sponsorships and family reunification. I believe Canada's family class program today is balanced and well managed.

There's actually quite a broad definition of family class already in the Regulations. The definition of the family class is fairly broad, and it includes children less than 22, spouses, common-law partners and conjugal partners.

Right now, we process these close family class members on a priority basis, which generally means within a matter of months. Other family members can also be sponsored, such as parents and grandparents. Brothers and sisters can already be sponsored but in limited circumstances (such as when they are orphaned and under 18).

In exceptional cases, certain requirements of the family class program can also be waived on humanitarian and compassionate grounds to allow individuals to sponsor loved ones who otherwise wouldn't qualify.

The current interim policy on same-sex marriage acknowledges unions between a foreign national and a Canadian citizen for immigration purposes in the family class. How do you respond to stakeholders who have been pushing for a final policy that would go beyond the interim policy and that would recognize all same-sex marriages performed in Canada and in foreign jurisdictions that perform these marriages?

As you know, the issue of same-sex marriage relates to much more than just immigration and cuts across many departments other than Citizenship and Immigration Canada. CIC will make sure that its rules and regulations fully support whatever measures the Government of Canada chooses to take on this issue. The current interim rules on same-sex unions will remain in place until then.

Research funded by the Department of Justice and Status of Women Canada examined the present ban on polygamy in the *Criminal Code*. The findings suggested that polygamy is rarely prosecuted and, therefore, that the ban serves little purpose. Given this, does the government propose to recognize polygamous marriages and permit immigration based on such relationships? And, if not, will the government be taking any steps to deal with religious communities, such as Bountiful in British Columbia?

Let me first point out that the study you refer to is only one of several that were recently published on this issue and the only one to suggest that polygamy should be decriminalized. Polygamy is contrary to Canada's criminal code. The short answer to your question is, therefore, that there are no plans to recognize polygamous marriages for the purposes of immigration. The second part of your question relates to a local enforcement matter not within the purview of the Department.