INTERVIEW WITH THE HONOURABLE JOE VOLPE

Minister of Citizenship and Immigration



In the recent past, critics of Canada's immigration system have called into question the two most cited rationales for immigration policy in Canada: first, that immigration will address the aging of the population and, second, that economic benefits accrue from having a larger population. Are critiques of these rationales valid? Do population growth and economic benefits continue to be the primary rationales for immigration? What other rationales underpin Canada's continued commitment to long-term large-scale immigration?

It is correct to say that immigration will not change the age structure of the Canadian population, but immigration is key to maintaining labour force growth as Canadians age. Having a skilled labour force is a key element in Canada's economic growth and prosperity, and immigration can help address skill shortages as they arise and allow Canadian firms to prosper. Smaller provinces are looking to immigration to supply needed labour – as seen by the interest in the provincial nominee program and by new provincial immigration strategies being announced across the country. We also need to consider what other potential benefits immigrants might bring, including the extent to which Canada's growing diversity creates valuable networks that extend beyond Canada.

Public opinion continues to support immigration to Canada at current levels. To say that Canada's immigration is large-scale is perhaps incorrect. Over the past decade, immigration to Canada has averaged around 0.6 to 0.7 % of the population, down from 0.9 % in the early 1990s. Many countries are looking to increase their levels of immigration – and particularly the skilled component. Australia, for example, has announced the highest level of immigration to that country in over a decade and the most highly skilled ever. So Canada is not alone in this respect.

What considerations are weighed when deciding on the number of newcomers that Canada accepts every year? Is any consideration given to potential issues that will arise from diversity within the newcomer cohort and the resources that may be needed to address them, such as language skill upgrading, or public education campaigns to ensure that the "host" society is willing to embrace the diverse newcomers?

The Immigration Levels Plan is part of the Annual Report that the Minister of Citizenship and Immigration is required to table in Parliament under the *Immigration and Refugee Protection Act* (IRPA) every year. The Plan details by immigrant category the number of new permanent residents Canada intends to receive in the upcoming year.

A range of considerations is taken into account in setting immigration levels. These include goals such as helping to meet the labour market needs of our cities and communities, fostering family reunification, and honouring humanitarian principles of refugee protection. The interests of our provincial and territorial partners and the need to improve immigrant outcomes, for instance, through investments and collaborative initiatives in labour market language training and foreign credential recognition, are other important priorities that are taken into consideration in setting immigration levels.

The Immigration Levels Plan is approved each year by Cabinet and is managed within the announced range based on available resources.

Today there is growing interest in this area of shared jurisdiction and one of the challenges is to ensure that provinces, communities, cities, employers and others are able to play a greater role in long-term immigration planning. Ensuring that these diverse voices are heard may mean that we need to create new opportunities for collaboration on the challenges of social and economic integration.

That being said, Canada has a strong reputation with respect to integration. Viewing integration as a two-way process enables newcomers to settle, adapt and integrate into Canadian society while acknowledging the need for welcoming communities that respect diversity and are open to change. To support this approach we use a model that has four essential elements:

1) Canadian orientation abroad;
2) reception in Canada at ports of entry;
3) a range of settlement services and programs including language training, HOST program that pairs newcomers with an in-Canada host to support settlement and integration, resettlement assistance for government-assisted refugees; and,
4) ultimately the ability to apply for Canadian citizenship.

Recognizing that multiculturalism was a policy that affected all of the elements of the Government of Canada, the *Canadian Multiculturalism Act* obliges the Government of Canada to table an annual report with Parliament on how the 52 departments and agencies of government implement this act. Why is there no similar report on how these same departments and agencies work to facilitate the settlement and integration of newcomers to Canada?

Citizenship and Immigration Canada (CIC) derives its mandate from the *Immigration and Refugee Protection Act* (IRPA) as well as the *Citizenship Act*. *With respect to collaboration between partners*, IRPA states that it should be "construed and applied in a manner that facilitates cooperation between the Government of Canada, provincial governments, foreign states, international organizations and non-governmental organizations" [IRPA 3(3) c]. There is no legislative requirement for an annual report on interdepartmental collaboration as in the *Canadian Multiculturalism Act.*

Nonetheless, as outlined in CIC's 2005-2006 Report on Plans and Priorities, the Department will continue to work closely with federal and provincial partners, municipalities, the private and voluntary sectors, and other stakeholders so that Canada continues to attract and welcome people from all over the world. CIC works in conjunction with various working groups and committees in the development of its policies and programs, such as the Federal-Provincial-Territorial Working Group on Settlement and Integration, the Settlement and Integration Joint Policy and Program Council (JPPC) as well as an interdepartmental group of 14 federal departments and agencies working on the development and implementation of a coordinated federal approach.

CIC's Departmental Performance Report compares the achievements of the Department against the performance expectations and commitments as set out in the Report on Plans and Priorities. In 2003-2004, CIC partnered with other government departments and stakeholders on various initiatives to enhance settlement and integration services, including the Government of Canada's Going to Canada – Immigration Portal, Enhanced Language Training and Official Language minority communities.

Further information on CIC's Report on Plans and Priorities for 2005-2006 as well as CIC's Departmental Performance Report for 2003-2004 can be found on the Treasury Board Secretariat website at www.tbs-sct.gc.ca.

The most recent budget contains sections explicitly addressing the concerns of Seniors, Aboriginal Peoples, the Disabled, and Youth, yet deals with newcomers under an "investments" category. In subsuming immigrants within another category, this structure seems to suggest that the Government of Canada takes the needs of this important group of Canadians less seriously than other subsets of the Canadian population. How would you respond?

A government should be judged on action rather than rhetoric, and Budget 2005 commits substantial new funding for initiatives to address settlement and integration issues as well as necessary improvements to delivering better service to potential newcomers to Canada.

This $398 million infusion into the program provides ample evidence that the government is responding to the needs of new Canadians and of those who wish to make Canada their home. In particular, funding in this Budget will address such issues as foreign credential recognition, an enhanced Going to Canada immigration portal, language training, and improving labour market outcomes.

Budget 2005 clearly demonstrates the government's commitment to investing in people, both from an economic and a social and cultural perspective. A key goal is to maximize the participation of these important contributors to our economy and to our communities. The Budget is one way of achieving this objective, but it is not the only way.

I have asked my department to take on the issue of undocumented workers. We also need to look at how we can improve processing times with a view to improving efficiency of service and delivery times. We are taking on the challenge of current inventory backlogs, reforming the temporary workers program, and better integrating foreign students. Building on the announcements in Budget 2005, we will continue to work on improving the recognition of foreign credentials for skilled workers and increased access to language training to assist immigrants in achieving their full potential as new Canadians.

These are just some of the tasks we, in cooperation with our partners and stakeholders, are taking on to improve the prospects of newcomers. It is an ambitious agenda but one which appropriately demonstrates the value that the Government places on the contributions made by immigrants who have chosen, and who continue to choose Canada as their destination of choice.

Family reunification is a perennial political hot potato, but one that has heated up of late. The primary concern appears to be that parents and grandparents will do little to either attenuate the aging of the population or to contribute actively to the economy. Is there any research evidence that either proves or disproves this widely held view? Would including immigrant seniors as an area of key concern under the newly minted Seniors' Secretariat lead to a better understanding of the experiences of newcomer seniors and thus guide better policy development in this area?

It is correct that parents and grandparents will do little to attenuate the aging of the population, but that is not the objective of this particular program. It is part of family reunification, reflecting the importance of extended families in many cultures. I would encourage the Seniors' Secretariat to look at the provision of services to all seniors, including immigrants. This information would be helpful to me and to other departments in formulating policies related to our respective mandates.