ELEMENTS OF SUCCESS: LEADERSHIP, MEDIA, AND PUBLIC PARTICIPATION IN REFUGEE MOVEMENTS TO CANADA

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INTRODUCTION

Responding to a refugee crisis is never easy. Despite strong humanitarian instincts, there are limits to what any country can do, and each refugee movement comes with its own complexities and challenges. Canada's experience with the Indochinese and Syrian refugee movements has helped to highlight elements that are key to success. Recent responses to the situations in Afghanistan and Ukraine are also instructive and can benefit from lessons learned as they continue to evolve.

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THREE ELEMENTS OF SUCCESS

Refugee movements to Canada are most successful when three elements are present: government leadership, media coverage, and public participation.

Government leadership is exemplified when the federal government demonstrates a strong and sustained commitment; creates and implements responsive policies, programs, and vehicles for

public participation; and keeps information flowing to the media and the public. Partnerships with provincial and municipal governments are also critical for successful refugee resettlement.

The media has the greatest impact when it galvanizes public opinion and awareness which in turn strengthens government commitment and public participation. The media can also play an important role by maintaining a critical eye on government responses and keeping the public informed about what is happening, why, and how to become involved.

Public participation means that civil society, the private sector, and individual Canadians are meaningfully engaged in various ways. Partnerships with civil society organizations can help to shape and implement refugee policies, programs, and vehicles for public participation. The private sector can provide goods, services, housing, employment, and financial donations. And individual Canadians make an enormous contribution by serving as volunteers and sponsors, forming important connections with refugees.

INDOCHINESE REFUGEE MOVEMENT

All three elements for success were at play during the second wave of Indochinese refugees. Although Canada's response had been relatively modest during the first wave from 1975 to 1976, government policy innovations and compelling media coverage contributed to a robust response resulting in many more arrivals and unprecedented levels of public participation in the second wave which occurred just a few years later.[1]

A new *Immigration Act*[2], which came into force in April 1978, set the stage for success. This was the first Canadian legislation to recognize refugees as a distinct class of immigrants and to enable private sponsorship. Regulations[3] under the Act created a designated class for people from Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos, allowing them to be admitted without having to undergo formal determination as Convention refugees, and streamlining the formal selection process. The designated class and the introduction of private sponsorship greatly facilitated the arrival of Indochinese refugees to Canada with significant levels of public participation.

The government created an incentive to sponsor when it committed to increase government assisted refugee spots by matching the number of privately sponsored Indochinese refugees. The government also showed leadership by creating special programs, in cooperation with provincial governments, for unaccompanied minors and refugees with disabilities. Civil society organizations such as Operation Lifeline and Families for Children played important roles in engaging and supporting the sponsorship of Indochinese refugees and the placement of unaccompanied minors respectively.

Another highlight of the Indochinese movement was the government's commitment to keep families intact. Visa officers on the ground in refugee camps were instructed to select entire family groupings, regardless of the degree of relationship. "No family member left behind" was the operational instruction. Later, an "orderly departure program" allowed family members still in Vietnam to be reunited with their families in Canada directly, without the risk of having to escape to a

country of first asylum. Such policies enabled families to help each other in resettlement without the constant worry about those left behind.

The media was instrumental in heightening public interest and government action through intense coverage, including televised images of people drowning in the sea as they tried to escape. The government also took its communication role seriously, disseminating proactive messages through a weekly newsletter to stakeholders and the media, and keeping them abreast of developments.

A UNHCR representative in Canada underscored the impact of the intersecting roles of government, media, and the public during this movement:

> *In Canada, individuals and groups were so moved by the plight of the Indochinese that they not only advocated for government action, but also organized a public response encouraging Canadians "to rescue" the Indochinese through the private sponsorship program. This movement was facilitated by an interested media and a government who welcomed the opportunity to tap into the public concern of Canadians.* – Michael Casasola, 2016.[4]

SYRIAN REFUGEE MOVEMENT

Canada's response to the Syrian crisis is another example of media attention helping a modest approach to become much stronger. A photo of three-year old Alan Kurdi lying face down on the beach motivated many people to take notice and take action, and to demand that their government do the same. Syrian refugee resettlement became a 2015 election issue and a top priority for the newly elected Liberal government. The new government quickly committed to ambitious goals and targets in collaboration with provinces, municipalities, and civil society. Canadians stepped up in droves to sponsor Syrian refugees or to donate money and goods.

This was the first refugee movement with a strong role for federally funded settlement agencies across the country. Once again, civil society organizations – such as Lifeline Syria – emerged to facilitate private sponsorship. In the absence of a formal family reunification program, private sponsorship began to be used more often for that purpose.

The government showed leadership by deeming Syrians to be prima facie refugees. As such, Syrians did not have to undergo a formal determination of refugee status, which greatly facilitated private sponsorship by Groups of Five individuals or community groups. The government also increased the number of visa officers abroad, reinforcing them with significant resources from the military and other departments; created a coordinating body involving federal departments and provincial-territorial governments; and held regular briefings with the media.

The Liberal platform initially provided no ceiling for privately sponsored refugees. This added a real incentive for people to become sponsors. After the overall target of 25,000 admissions for all Syrian refugees had been reached within a few months, enthusiasm turned to outrage and frustration when the government was slow to process many outstanding sponsorship applications and placed a cap on the total number of applications that could be submitted. In response to the public outcry, the cap for sponsorships was removed and admissions

rose to over 40,000 by the end of October 2020.[5]

As with the Indochinese movement, the participation of private sponsors helped many refugees to settle successfully. Unlike government assisted refugees, privately sponsored refugees benefited from personal connections with the sponsors and access to their social and professional networks.

AFGHAN REFUGEE MOVEMENT

The Afghan refugee movement is rife with problems. This is in large part due to the brutal realities on the ground which make it difficult to escape from a country now ruled by the Taliban. These realities also create challenges in working with neighbouring countries hosting Afghans who have managed to escape. In addition, this movement has not garnered the level of sustained media attention and public participation that was evident in the Indochinese and Syrian movements.

While there has been some strong media coverage, it has not been as prevalent or sustained as in the two other movements. Nor did Afghanistan become a major issue in the federal election which took place in September 2021. The re-elected Liberal government honoured its election platform commitment to increase its Afghan resettlement target from 20,000 to 40,000 over two years. As of February 8, 2023, approximately 28,000 have been admitted since the Taliban takeover in August 2021.[6] Despite the government's collaboration with allied countries, progress has been difficult due to the political situation in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

The urgency of the situation in Afghanistan and neighbouring countries would dictate welcoming larger numbers on a faster timetable. However, thousands of Afghans who have expressed their interest in coming to Canada are still waiting for information about next steps. An arbitrary target of 18,000 for people who worked for the Canadian military or diplomatic corps flies in the face of the moral imperative to help Afghans at risk from having worked alongside Canadians to achieve our objectives. Only about 9,500, a little over half of that target, have arrived as of February 8, 2023. And with no Canadian military or diplomatic presence left in Afghanistan, there is no on-the-ground support apart from volunteer associations such as Aman Lara comprised of Canadian veterans and former interpreters. Afghans who have escaped to Pakistan or other neighbouring countries are often subject to harsh living conditions, changing entry and exit requirements, and political instability.

The reality is that government mechanisms have not been put in place to promote wide-spread public participation in the Afghan movement. Referral of individuals to the special resettlement programs can only be made by organizations such as the UNHCR, the United States, the Department of National Defence, Global Affairs Canada and designated human rights organizations.

The private sponsorship route remains problematic. The vast majority of Afghans who arrived under

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private sponsorship in the early months of the movement were people who had been in the inventory for years, as opposed to individuals affected by the Taliban takeover.

After much advocacy, the government allocated 3,000 spaces in October 2022 for Groups of Five and community groups to sponsor Afghans without formal determination as a Convention refugee. Demand was so great on the part of sponsors that all 3,000 spaces were quickly exhausted and no new applications are being accepted.[7]

In 2023, the government allocated 3,000 new spaces to Sponsorship Agreement Holders. Most of these spaces were quickly spoken for, leaving many interested sponsors without an opportunity to assist Afghan refugees. This is especially problematic because private sponsorship is often used for family reunification. Without an avenue for family reunification, refugees worry constantly about family members left behind to the detriment of their own settlement in Canada.

On a positive note, Afghans who arrive in Canada as government-assisted or privately sponsored refugees are entitled to all services and a wide network of excellent support available to refugees and permanent residents. In addition, a national Afghan resettlement steering committee is functioning well under joint leadership from the immigration department and the resettlement sector. Their work includes active engagement with Canadian veterans and associations of former Afghan interpreters. One of the committee's priorities is to encourage refugees to settle in locations across Canada to reduce the pressure on housing and services, especially in large urban centres.

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There has been little visible effort by the federal government, however, to keep the public and stakeholders apprised of progress and challenges. Nor is there an apparent willingness to increase targets or avenues for family reunification despite the huge need.

UKRAINIANS FLEEING THE RUSSIAN INVASION

The most striking feature of the government's response to people fleeing the Russian invasion of Ukraine is that it treats them as temporary residents and not as refugees. This innovative approach, and the speed with which it was announced and implemented, is evidence of strong government leadership to respond quickly to an urgent situation but has also created problems and concerns.

Canada has a large Ukrainian community, a strong Ukrainian Canadian Congress, and a Deputy Prime Minister who understands that part of the world well. These factors helped to expedite government decision-making and contributed to the generosity of the approach. Ukrainians are eligible to receive emergency travel authorizations, to work or study in Canada, to stay for three years or more, and to receive priority processing to become permanent

residents. There is no cap on the number of arrivals. The volume and speed of arrivals has been unprecedented.

As of the first week of February 2023, a year after the Russian invasion, there were over 158,000 arrivals of Ukrainian citizens and returning Canadian permanent residents of Ukrainian origin. Approximately 840,000 applications had been submitted for emergency travel and temporary resident permits and over 540,000 had been approved.[8] The government promised to develop a family-reunification sponsorship program for both immediate and extended-family members of Ukrainians in Canada, but none has yet been announced.

Questions remain about whether Ukrainians should have been treated as a refugee movement from the outset. The decision to consider them temporary residents assumes that they will return home or can find durable solutions elsewhere. The reality is that many Ukrainians who choose to come to Canada can be expected to stay, as borne out by a recent survey conducted by the Operation Ukrainian Safe Haven Task Force in which 84% of respondents indicated that they would like to apply for permanent resident status.[9]

Previous experience with refugees from Kosovo is illustrative. Seventy percent of Kosovars who were airlifted to Canada on a temporary basis chose to stay here rather than return to Kosovo when the war ended, despite being offered free transportation home and start-up funds to re-establish themselves there.[10]

The longer the war in Ukraine lasts, the more likely that individuals will stay in Canada. Yet there seems to be no plan for transitioning potentially hundreds of thousands of Ukrainians to permanent residence if they do indeed choose to stay.

One downside of the Canadian approach is that temporary residents are not entitled to many of the government services and supports available to refugees. This has led to parallel systems and processes, lower federal benefits than refugees receive, and a heavy reliance on provincial and municipal governments, the private sector, and the Canadian Ukrainian community. It has also created confusion and differential treatment across the country, with some getting more support than other refugees, and others falling through the cracks. A national steering committee which includes representatives of the federal, provincial, and territorial governments, the settlement sector, the Ukrainian Canadian Congress, and other stakeholders, is helping to address these problems but disparities remain.

Another downside is that Ukrainians, as non-refugees, are ineligible for private sponsorship, which drastically reduces opportunities for public participation. Many Ukrainians have chosen to settle in large urban centres such as Toronto, creating enormous pressure on housing and other services in those locations. If Ukrainians were considered to be refugees, sponsorship would help to alleviate such pressure by attracting people to the many communities across Canada where private sponsors reside. As demonstrated in previous refugee movements, sponsors also use their social networks to help refugees to obtain interim and permanent housing, employment, and the personal connections that are vital to successful integration.

Sympathetic and sustained media coverage has helped to build public support for Canada's role in providing a safe haven for Ukrainians. However, commentators have questioned whether there is a racial component to the differential treatment offered to Ukrainians as opposed to refugees from Afghanistan or other parts of the world.

Despite the various concerns, the innovative approach the government chose in response to the situation in Ukraine will be a valuable case study on the development, modification, and potential future use of non-traditional approaches for groups at risk.

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CONCLUSION

The three elements identified for successful refugee movements – government leadership, media coverage, and public participation – are interconnected. Government policies and programs only work if the public supports them. An engaged and committed public can spur the government to exercise stronger leadership and action. Transparent government information about progress, challenges, and vehicles for participation will encourage the media to keep the issue on the front burner. This in turn will motivate public engagement for the benefit of refugees.

There is much to learn from prior movements that exemplified these features and from more recent innovations and experience. Reflecting on proven elements of success can help Canada to achieve its humanitarian objectives and to benefit from the social, cultural, demographic, and economic contributions that successfully resettled refugees provide.

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