INTERVIEW WITH JAMES FRIDERES

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How did the multicultural character of Canada evolve between 1967 and 2007 (in qualitative and quantitative terms) and what would be the outlook for 2017 (the 150th anniversary of the confederation)? What are the social and economic impacts over 1967-2017 (50-year period)? What are the risks and opportunities between now and 2017?

In the past four decades the source countries of immigrants has moved from Europe and the United States to Asia, Latin America and Africa. There is no reason to suggest that the number of immigrants from these source countries will be reduced in the next decade. As such, the number of visible minorities has increased and it is projected to increase even more by 2017. The social impact of such a change is that "race" and religion will become important social policy issues in the next decade. Immigration will become a national issue that will force political parties to demarcate their position on entrance and integration.

The offer of dual citizenship has made Canada a primary choice by many potential immigrants. The current strategy of becoming Canadian and then moving all or a portion of the family to the "home" country will need to have more research carried out as to the reasons why immigrants would act in such a fashion as well as the consequences of such action over a long period of time. Return migration has not been an issue and it is clear that Canada needs to have up-to-date information on this process. There is no current research on this issue and the recent events in the Middle East have demonstrated that this social fact must be studied to determine the long term implications of such a policy.

The role of Quebec in Canada will diminish as its relative contribution to the overall population continues to decrease. With the lowest reproduction rates and low levels of immigration, its role in Canadian society may be reduced. At the same time, its focused selection criteria on language may increase the number of visible minorities within Quebec and create unique social and economic issues for the provincial government.

Today's immigrants are no longer accepting ideology that the dominant society has the right to force assimilation upon them and to dictate the rules of entry into the country as they did a century ago. Immigrants now take the position that, as members of Canadian society, they have a right to give direction to the future of Canada and to set their own time table as to when integration will occur. Their voice will take on a greater importance in how the country operates. This change has introduced tension between native born and immigrants.

We know that children of immigrants inherit the economic position of their parents. This means that, if poverty is characteristic of a family, the children of that family will also be poor. As such, the development of an "underclass" is a distinct possibility for the next generation unless policies and programs changed. What is particularly troubling is the fact that recent immigrants have high educational attainment and yet have low incomes. If immigrants are able to actively participate in the labour market commensurate with their educational skills, Canada will be able to leverage our linkages around the world and ensure Canada's place as a world leader, both economically and politically. In utilizing immigrant human capital, Canada will be able to drive economic growth in the new "knowledge-based" economy. If we are unable to convert the human capital of immigrants, we become just one more northern nation state that contributes to the exploitation of workers.

How would we ensure that our social and economic programs and policies meet the changing needs of an increasingly diverse population in light of the 2017 projections?

Canada needs a vision! Current political leaders need to ask "where do we (Canada) want to be in 2017?" A focus on youth needs to be emphasized as they are the next leaders of this country and will make up a greater proportion of the labour force. This will require an assessment of our current policies and programs to determine if they can "get us there" or if new policies and programs are required. Considerable research will be required to assess the impact of current programs and the identification of "best practices" that will ensure the economic and social integration of immigrants. With immigrants having higher educational backgrounds and increasingly sophisticated skill sets, our underutilization of them in the labour market creates human capital "wastage' and lessens our competitive advantage in the world economy.

What approaches could be used to ensure that Canadian cities are well prepared to accommodate the rising proportions of visible minorities in their populations and what indicators would measure the results?

Schools will be the initial starting point. Anti racist programs will need to be implemented. The federal government, along with provincial governments, needs to bring into existence a national strategy for a variety of dimensions (e.g., post-secondary education and credentialism). Government will need to insure that social support structures are in place to enhance English/French language abilities. Acculturation and community networks will also be crucial to accommodate immigrants and to strengthen the social cohesion of the country. Municipal governments need to become more proactive in the integration of immigrants.

What factors contribute to better labour market outcomes for Canadian-born visible minorities and visible minority immigrants?

Canada has always carefully selected potential immigrants on the basis of education and occupational skills (over family reunification), and yet they have not coordinated their selection process with the private and public sector. As a result, while 40% of the immigrants are able to integrate into Canada's economic structure, the remaining 60% have not been successful. There must be more collaboration with the private sector to ensure that immigrants with skill sets that do not fit Canadian regulations have an opportunity to obtain those necessary attributes. For example, if immigrant mechanics do not have "Canadian experience," programs need to be created that would allow them to obtain that experience. If immigrant health care practitioners do not meet the criteria established by provincial legislation and health authorities, programs need to be established to provide them with the necessary credentials to meet our labour shortages.

Government needs to expand current programs designed to support immigrants such that they will include family members. For example, spouses of primary immigrants must be provided with language, social and economic skills that will allow them to acculturate and become part of the Canadian community.

We need to vision what the world will be like as the new world powers in Asia and Latin America emerge and what our relationship will be as they take over economic leadership. We need to think about the kinds of linkages we want to build with these areas today, so that when they become economic powers in the future, we will have a meaningful relationship with them.

What policies and programs can prevent potential marginalization of visible minorities in major urban centres by 2017?

Current programs directed toward immigrants and visible minorities, e.g., employment equity, need to be re-examined. In carrying out the re-examination, it should be clear to employers what the consequences will be if they do not meet the minimum standards under current legislation. Second, actual enforcement of the legislation needs to be undertaken. And third, the enforcement and sanctions need to be widely known throughout the private sector. At present, violations continue for many years and no consequences are incurred. And everyone in the private sector is well aware of it. More vigilant enforcement of systemic racism needs to be undertaken, as "glass ceilings" continue to impact visible minority integration into the labour market.

The private sector needs to take on greater responsibility in the integration of immigrants. With record profits in a number of economic sectors, there has not been any re-investment into Canadian society to enhance the quality of life of Canadians, including immigrants.

As researchers have noted, we need to develop policies and programs to create a collective identity for young people that includes a belief in societal institutions involving politics, justice, education and human relationships. If we are unsuccessful in doing so, we will discover that immigrant youth will gravitate toward gangs, cults and various other social movements that will provide them with short term goals that give them a sense of collective identity.

What approaches could be used to promote diversity in rural communities in Canada? What indicators could be used to measure this progress?

Contrary to myths, rural communities have in/out-migration rates similar to urban centers. However, young rural residents (immigrants or native born) estimate their chances of carrying on a successful economic life as an adult in the rural area are small. Moreover, there is the "lure of the city" with all its lights and excitement as well as high estimates of economic success and these two factors contribute to the "push-pull" factors that lend to high urban migration from rural areas. However, the quality of life in rural areas continues to be rated higher than in urban areas. Hence, if economic success is rated high and social support is provided (which is now lacking), it is likely that many immigrants would prefer to take up residence and work in a rural area.

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