# THE GENEALOGICAL CONTEXT: AN OVERVIEW OF THE HISTORY OF CANADIAN IMMIGRATION

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*The history of immigration in Canada provides the backdrop to millions of personal and family stories that arise from Canadians' genealogical impulse. Here, one of Canada's leading experts on immigration history sketches an overview of the subject reaching back to the 17th Century.*

## PURPOSE

The history and evolution of Canadian immigration policies and programs from the beginning of European settlement to the present day is a vast subject. Given the broad scope of this subject, the purpose of this overview is to describe the major developments in Canadian immigration through four distinct periods: Pre-Confederation; Confederation to World War 1; World War 1 to the end of World War 2; and, Postwar to the Present.

## PRE-CONFEDERATION

Migration to Canada began in the early 1600s, but

the volumes of immigrants were relatively small. New France and Acadia had a hard time attracting immigrants; the population of French North America was only about 60,000 when it fell to the British during the Seven Years War. British North America first experienced significant immigration following the American Revolution when the 'United Empire Loyalists' fled to Canada. Migration from Europe to North America only gained in popularity after the end of the Napoleonic Wars. From the French Revolution in 1789 until Napoleon's final defeat at Waterloo in 1815, Europe was embroiled in conflict. That conflict, and the blockade of the continent by the British Royal Navy, also led to the War of 1812 in North America as the blockade hindered American trade with Europe. The continual wars placed great strain on military manpower and no European nation wished to see its potential soldiers emigrate to Canada, or anywhere else.

The end of the Napoleonic Wars opened the way to large-scale emigration from Europe as the military imperative no longer applied and the withdrawal of military spending from European economies set off a continent-wide economic recession that created surplus labour, many of whom were willing to seek opportunities in the New World (Kelley and Trebilcock, 2010: 45). Nevertheless, the numbers travelling to North America remained limited as the voyage was long, expensive and perilous.

In the 19th Century, the U.S. drew immigrants from all over Europe while, until the 1890s, Canada only sought immigrants from the U.K. and the numbers were small compared to later years, mostly due to the high costs of travel and the risks involved in the days of sail. Once steamships entered the North Atlantic passenger business, reliability increased and costs decreased, leading to more migration. But most immigrants at this time chose the United States. The flow of immigration to Britain's North American colonies remained small because British North America was a collection of small agrarian colonies, as yet, without a western frontier.

## CONFEDERATION TO WORLD WAR I: POPULATING CANADA

In 1867, the year of Canadian Confederation, only 10,666 immigrants arrived in the new country. In 1870, Canada purchased its Northwest Territories (what is now Manitoba, Saskatchewan, Alberta and the three northern territories) from the Hudson Bay Company and Canada gained its own western frontier to which it could eventually attract settlers. The boom years in the early 1880s brought the 19th Century peak of 133,000 immigrants in 1883 but for most years the numbers were much less, and, at this time, most immigrants did not venture west of Ontario.

At the same time, many Canadians left to go to the United States, resulting in negative net migration. Over the quarter century from 1870 to 1895, it has been estimated that while 1.4 million immigrants entered Canada, 1.9 million people left Canada, mostly for the United States (Keenleyside, 1948: 224). Prior to 1885 and the completion of the Canadian Pacific Railway, access to the Canadian West was extremely difficult compared to the American Midwest, which was accessible both by railway and by water via the Great Lakes. The American climate was warmer and free land was still available in the United States. The U.S. was also much more industrialized than Canada and American industry sought workers, mostly from Southern

Europe and Italy, in particular, but also from Canada, especially from Quebec and the Maritime Provinces, to work in the mills of New England. Meanwhile, Canadians saw the burgeoning American cities as corrupt and crime-ridden and wanted to discourage immigration to Canadian cities. As a result, Canada sought agriculturalists to settle in the vast but largely unpopulated Canadian West and did little or nothing to encourage immigration to its cities (*New York Times*, 1911).

In the 1890s, Canada's competitive position vis-à-vis the U.S. began to change for a number of reasons. The arrival of the Canadian Pacific Railway in the Canadian West meant that immigrants could travel directly to the Canadian Prairies without having to detour through the U.S. and be enticed to stay there. Canadian scientists also successfully developed new strains of wheat that required shorter growing times, making it safer to farm north of the 49th parallel. Finally, the free land in the U.S. was largely gone by 1890. While the price of land was soaring in the American West, 160 free acres were still available in Canada for farmers and neighbouring land could be bought for about one-tenth of the price south of the border. Suddenly the Canadian West was more attractive than the American West. But someone had to get the word out (Vineberg 2015).

In 1896, Wilfrid Laurier's Liberal Party came to power and he appointed Clifford Sifton as Minister of the Interior. Sifton, born in Ontario, moved west to Manitoba as a young man and made a fortune, mostly in newspapers. In 1899, he told the Canadian House of Commons, "In my judgement, the immigration work has to be carried on in the same manner as the sale of any commodity; just as soon as you stop advertising and missionary work, the movement is going to stop" (Canada, 1899: columns 8654-5). So Sifton spent millions on advertising "The Last Best West" to potential immigrants in Europe and in the United States. In Europe, he changed the previous policy of seeking only British immigrants and started promoting Canada as a destination for Northern and Central Europeans. This change was controversial because many doubted the ability of people, apparently so different, to integrate into Canadian society. In 1909, while working with inner-city immigrants in Winnipeg, J.S. Woodsworth wrote:

> "English and Russians, French and Germans, Austrians and Italians, Japanese and Hindus – a mixed multitude, they are being dumped into Canada by a kind of endless chain. They sort themselves out after a fashion, and each seeks to find a corner somewhere. But how shall we weld this heterogeneous mass into one people?" (Woodsworth, 1909: 203)

Sifton did not advertise in Southern Europe as there was a feeling in Canada that the United States was being harmed by massive immigration from countries such as Italy and Greece. In the United States, Sifton targeted both Americans and second and third generation Canadians who had moved to the U.S. earlier in the century.

To entice people to Canada, Sifton also invested heavily in expanding facilities to help immigrants settle successfully in Canada in contrast to the American approach of largely leaving immigrants to their own devices. Across Canada, particularly in the west, Sifton expanded the system of "immigration halls" to provide temporary shelter for immigrants, on arrival and en route to their

destinations. By 1911, there were more than 50 immigration halls in Canada, mostly in the Prairie Provinces. These facilities symbolized Canada's commitment to the concept of truly providing for the immigrant rather than just "getting them out of the way" (Vineberg, 2012: 69-71).

The closing years of the 19th Century saw massive changes in North America due to immigration. In both the United States and Canada, massive manpower was needed to build the transcontinental railways and other infrastructure. Employers met the demand by importing foreign labour from Asia, mostly from China. The Chinese came with hopes to earn enough money to return home and live comfortably there, but low wages made it impossible to save enough to go home or to send for their families. Meanwhile, resentment and attitudes of superiority fuelled anti-Chinese movements in both Canada and the U.S. The United States moved first, passing legislation in 1882 to exclude Chinese workers from immigrating (Hutchinson, 1981: 430). Canada followed in 1885, passing a *Chinese Immigration Act* that imposed a $50 head tax on all Chinese immigrants (Canada, 1885). This was not a coincidence. The railroads had largely been built by this time and they no longer needed Chinese labour, so the American and Canadian governments gave in to the anti-Chinese public opinion on their west coasts (Goutor, 2007). The U.S. government renewed its Chinese exclusion legislation several times over the next half century while Canada increased its head tax first to $100 in 1900 and then to $500 in 1903; and, in 1923, Canada excluded Chinese immigration almost entirely (Canada, 1923). Both countries also imposed restrictions on Japanese, South Asian and other non-white immigrants.

North American economies were strong at the dawn of the 20th Century and both the U.S. and Canada were increasingly seen as the Promised Land. The patterns of immigration to North America, which during most of the 19th Century had favoured the U.S. by a factor of ten to one or more, were changing. Canadian promotion of immigration and the lure of free land attracted more immigrants, swelling Canadian immigration numbers to over 400,000 in 1913, while immigration to the U.S. stayed within a range of 800,000 to 1.3 million from 1903 to 1914. Finally, with immigration to Canada representing fully one-third of immigration to the U.S., Canada was becoming an increasingly attractive destination. In proportion to population, Canada, with a population of under 8 million in 1913, received over 5% of its population, while the much larger U.S., with a population of 97 million in the same year, received only a little over 1% of its population.

In addition, Canada became increasingly more attractive to Americans and Europeans who had originally immigrated to the United States. From 1890 to 1914, perhaps 1.25 million people emigrated from the U.S. to Canada (Sharp, 1950: 286). During the two decades from 1896 to 1914 over 3 million came to Canada while only 1.3 million left (Keenleyside, 1948: 225). Net migration was strongly positive for the first time in Canada's history and while most of the growth was in the Canadian west, trades people and others, including domestic servants, contributed to Canada's increasing urbanization.

## WAR, PEACE AND WAR AGAIN: 1914-1945

With the advent of the First World War, the North Atlantic was no longer a safe place for passenger

ships and immigration tumbled. Although immigration across the Atlantic did return to higher levels in the mid-1920s, the annual volumes were about half what Canada had been receiving in the decade prior to the war. The nature of the labour markets changed dramatically as a result of the war. With very large numbers of men fighting in Europe, industry turned to women to fill the jobs left vacant by servicemen and to fill new jobs in factories churning out weapons and ammunition for the war effort. At the end of the war, the returning servicemen represented a labour surplus that had to be absorbed into the economy. Consequently, Canada decided that it was in its interest to end the so-called period of "open immigration" that preceded the war.

Canada adopted a "Preference System" in which immigrants faced varying degrees of difficulty in being admitted to Canada. The most favoured were British subjects from the United Kingdom, Newfoundland (which did not join Canada until 1949), Ireland, Australia, New Zealand and South Africa, as well as American citizens, who were all eligible to enter Canada provided they could support themselves until employment was found. Agriculturalists and domestic servants benefitted from a travel subsidy or loan amounting to a 90% discount on the sea/rail fare from Liverpool to Winnipeg. The second preference applied to those from the countries of Northern Europe and Scandinavia, who could enter freely on the same basis as British and Americans but without a travel subsidy. The third preference applied to citizens of Central and Southern European countries, who could only enter Canada if they were agricultural workers, domestic servants or close relatives of Canadian residents. Any other workers required a special permit issued by the Minister of Immigration. The fourth preference group comprised the rest of the world, and admission was limited to those whose potential employer or relative in Canada could obtain a ministerial permit (Kelley and Trebilcock, 2010: 192). The 1919 *Immigration Act* (Canada 1919) also included new provisions against sedition given the fear of communism that arose in the wake of the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia and the Winnipeg General Strike. It would be four decades before Canada eliminated discrimination on the basis of national origin and race from its immigration policies.

Later in the decade, Canada's economy recovered and, until 1929, it welcomed relatively large numbers of people. However, as the world slid into the Great Depression, the government issued an Order-in-Council on March 21, 1931 that effectively prohibited all immigration except from the most preferred group noted earlier, with sufficient means to support themselves, and the wives (but not husbands) and children under 18 of a sponsoring Canadian resident (Canada, 1931). Immigration to Canada dropped from 105,000 in 1930 to less than 21,000 in 1932, and numbers remained low throughout the depression and the Second World War.

The provisions restricting immigration throughout this period were also used by Canada, as well as the U.S., to justify the refusal to admit refugees, particularly Jews fleeing Nazi Germany. This reflected, once again, the strong discriminatory practices inherent in North American immigration policies of this period that resulted in such tragic consequences (Bernard, 1950: 33 and Kelley and Trebilcock, 2010: 256-261).

## 1947 TO THE PRESENT: EVOLUTION TO AN INCLUSIVE IMMIGRATION PROGRAM

After the end of the war, Canada eliminated the legislative prohibitions on Chinese immigration. China had been an allied partner in the war against Japan and it seemed inappropriate to bar all immigration from China. On May 14, 1947, Canada repealed its *Chinese Immigration Act* (Canada, 1947-2). Repeal of the prohibitions did not, however, lead to open immigration for Chinese and other Asian and African nationalities. Canada imposed tiny quotas for immigration from these countries, apart from allowing spouses and children to be sponsored.

In 1947, the Canadian Prime Minister, William Lyon Mackenzie King, stated in Parliament that, "The people of Canada do not wish to make a fundamental alteration in the character of their population through mass immigration" (Canada 1947-1). However, in that same statement, King laid out the principles for our immigration program – principles that still apply today:

1. Immigration should be at high levels, consistent with but not greater than Canada's absorptive capacity;

2. Economic immigrants should be subject to a selection system;

3. Canadian citizens and legal residents should be able to sponsor close family relatives;

4. Canada has an obligation to the world community to accept refugees for resettlement; and,

5. Economic immigrants must bring with them sufficient means to support themselves on arrival.

Canada grew more confident as its own nation as a result of its massive contribution to the war effort and rapid industrialization during the war. The immigration policy initiatives were also matched by the 1947 *Citizenship Act* – establishing a unique Canadian citizenship quite separate from British nationality.

It was not until the 1960s that the Civil Rights movement in the United States and concern over South African apartheid, in Canada and other Commonwealth countries, as well as international pressure for all countries to respect the spirit of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (United Nations, 1948: Article 2), drove Canada to implement changes in its immigration policies. Canada acted three years ahead of the United States and a decade ahead of Australia, passing an Order-in-Council early in 1962 (Canada 1962) allowing all persons, regardless of race or nationality, to apply to immigrate (Hawkins, 1988: 125).

Canada, while allowing Canadian residents to sponsor close family members, placed greater emphasis on selecting skilled workers to enhance the Canadian labour market. This system was formalized by the introduction of a "Points System" in 1967 to select skilled workers in a more objective fashion. (Canada 1967). The admission criteria allocated a total of 100 points based on the applicant's education, personal qualities, demand for their occupation, their skill level, age, knowledge of English or French, the labour demand in the area of the country to which they were destined, the presence of a

relative in Canada and whether they had arranged employment. The points system has been changed a number of times over the years and now includes the Express Entry process, but it remains the key selection tool for Canada.

A distinguishing mark of Canadian immigration policy is provincial involvement in immigrant selection in Canada. Out of linguistic and demographic concerns, the Province of Quebec pursued a series of federal-provincial agreements resulting, in 1991, in full authority over the selection of economic immigrants destined to Quebec. Later in the 1990s, other provinces, particularly in Western Canada, also sought greater participation in selection processes. The result was the development of the Provincial Nominee Program (PNP) that permits provinces to select pre-determined numbers of immigrants to meet the unique needs of the various provincial and territorial labour markets (Vineberg, 2011: 30, 31, 36-38). In the twenty years since the inception of the PNP, provincial selection has grown to 67,800 in the 2020 Immigration Levels Plan, fully 35% of the Economic Immigrant target of 195,800 and 20% of the overall target of 341,000. (Canada 2020a) The PNP has especially allowed the three Prairie Provinces of Manitoba, Saskatchewan and Alberta to benefit dramatically, increasing their immigration from 15,762 (9.0% of the national total) in 1998 (Citizenship and Immigration Canada 2004: 38,39) to 80,878 (27.3% of the national total) in 2016 (Canada 2020b).

Canada also actively funds orientation, employment assistance and language training programs to assist immigrant settlement. Canada's federal government now spends in the range of $1 billion annually on such programs (Vineberg (2012). In Canada, while these programs are funded by government, they are primarily delivered through nonprofit community-based organizations, constituting a distinctive approach to assisting newcomers in the integration process (Richmond and Shields, 2005).

## CONCLUSION

Over the course of the past four centuries, immigration has reflected the needs, ambitions and prejudices of the government and people of Canada. In the French and British colonial eras, immigrants were only sought from the 'mother country'. In the post-Confederation era, Canada's horizons expanded to include most of Europe and the United States as sources of immigrants but regarded migrants from the rest of the world as undesirable. Finally, in the wake of the Second World War, Canadian immigration policy and the attitudes of most Canadians opened Canada to the world. This has facilitated the growth of a modern, cosmopolitan Canada. In the future, with declining birth rates among Canadians, immigration will, increasingly, be the key to Canada's prosperity.

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