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Canadians, Ottawa out of sync on immigration

November 16, 2011 - 4:40am By HOWARD RAMOS



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Immigration Minister Jason Kenney recently announced plans to revamp Canadian immigration policy to better integrate immigrants and meet Canada's demographic and economic needs. Kenney also noted that family-class immigration needs to be scaled back, and "there have to be practical limits to our generosity."

Yet, recent polling by Environics, to be presented at the Trudeau Foundation national conference this week in Halifax, shows that the overwhelming majority of Canadians support immigrant family reunification and other forms of immigration set to face potentially radical changes.

To his credit, the minister plans to speed up the processing of immigration applications and keep the intake of immigrants at a level relatively parallel to those of recent years.

A chronic problem with the immigration system has been the long waits, which have literally taken years, for people applying to immigrate to Canada. Amelioration on this front is bound to make the system stronger and more equitable.

Similar praise should be offered to the government's decision to keep intake levels of immigrants at about 250,000 annually. This is a level that is historically high, but is in line with migration over the last decade and is needed to offset Canada's aging population and shortage of skilled workers.

It is likely for these reasons that Mr. Kenney aims to revamp Canada's immigration policies to focus on young, skilled, employable immigrants — ones who will work in the Canadian labour force for years to come, make valuable contributions, pay taxes and actively help build the economy.

The Environics poll shows that 59 per cent of Canadians believe that immigrants should be expected to quickly become economically self-sufficient as a condition for being admitted to Canada and are thus supportive of such a focus.

The Conservative government might mistakenly think such support is reason to justify its attack on family-class immigrants and family reunification over the last few years. Upon release of CIC targets for next year, Mr. Kenney noted that new policies would not favour the reunification of spouses and children with immigrants already settled in Canada.

The new policies are less clear-cut when it comes to immigrants' desire to sponsor their parents and grandparents.

The minister announced new and innovative policies to offer 10-year visas for parents and grandparents to visit Canada for up to two years, yet at the same time, he placed a moratorium on any new applications, which



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essentially closes the door on such reunification.

Mr. Kenney's sentiments and policies on this front, however, dramatically counter those of Canadians polled, 90 per cent of whom believe that Canada should put the same, or even higher, priority on immigrant family reunification. Only eight per cent of those polled thought it should be lowered. It is unclear on what basis the government is deciding to make changes to this category of immigrants.

Perhaps more controversial is the largely untold story of the Harper regime's policy toward dramatically increasing the number of temporary foreign workers to Canada.

University of Ottawa professor Delphine Nakache, who with Paula Kinoshita wrote an Institute for Research on Public Policy research paper on the topic, observed there has been "growth, from about 100,000 temporary foreign workers present in Canada in December 2002 to more than 250,000 in December 2008, [and it] has created a kind of permanently temporary workforce."

In 2010, the latest statistics available by Citizenship and Immigration's Facts and Figures show the number skyrocketed to 430,000 temporary workers.

Despite the rapid growth in this area of immigration, few Canadians are aware of the changes and when asked about them, the overwhelming majority do not favour an increase in temporary foreign workers. Polling data show that only 33 per cent of Canadians favour such policies.

Clearly, the minister and the government are not in sync with these sentiments.

Upon the release of Citizenship and Immigration Canada's immigration report two weeks ago, Mr. Kenney noted, "We don't want to end up with an immigration policy that diverges dramatically with the public's practical sense of our capacity to integrate folks."

But Environics polling data show that the minister shouldn't be too concerned. Immigrants polled largely share similar views to native-born Canadian with respect to immigration and integration. Numbers were also consistent across regions.

Yet again, Canadians and the minister are at odds.

The minister could likely benefit from getting to know Canadians a little better so that perhaps the government's policies can better reflect their overwhelming support of immigration and time-tested and established policies.

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