

An Open Letter to Prime Minister Paul Martin

Summer 2004

Dear Prime Minister:

Congratulations on your election as Prime Minister of Canada. As you begin to implement your platform and policies, no doubt many priorities will emerge – competing for attention, action and resources. The choices you make will have a profound impact on our nation.

A key concern that I want to bring to your attention is the urgent need for a system to allow internationally-trained workers access to the jobs for which they were trained. The Conference Board of Canada calculates that the impact to the Canadian economy of recognizing immigrants' learning and learning credentials is in the range of \$3.42 to 4.97 billion annually. As the Co-chair of the Toronto Region Immigrant Employment Council (TRIEC), an initiative dedicated to integrating immigrant skills into the labour market, I see this as a critical issue both for successful nation building and for maximizing the economic potential of Canada.

Your government has worked well to build some of the foundations needed to address the barriers that prevent highly skilled immigrants from contributing their skills, knowledge and experience to the labour market. In fact, there are some excellent initiatives underway. However, many are ad hoc, time-limited projects that serve only a limited number of people in a limited number of occupations and locations. A more systemic approach is needed, one that involves all stakeholders and levels of government working together, and one which will lead to meaningful and sustainable results. With support from a number of federal departments, TRIEC is trying to build this system in a local context, but more is needed. Below are six recommendations for your government to help fulfill the promise that it makes to immigrants, and the promise that immigrants bring with them to Canada.

First, revise settlement policy to deliberately include labour market integration.

Policies and programs need to focus attention on services that facilitate economic integration: employment related language training, internships, mentoring, and other labour market access supports. Canada has fine-tuned its policies to select those immigrants best able to meet our labour market needs. The level of education and skills required of immigrants in the economic class has been raised significantly, and the types of programs that are needed have changed. Yet, settlement policies have not been appropriately adjusted – they continue to focus on the reception needs of immigrants: shelter, orientation, and basic level language instruction. While these services remain important for many, they are not enough. Employment is a key element of successful immigrant settlement. As such, programs that facilitate access to appropriate employment for immigrants need to be an integral part of settlement policy. This requires a more deliberate coordination of settlement and human resource development priorities. A coordinated infrastructure within the federal government for this priority has the potential for greater speed, impact and accountability.

Second, extend programming options overseas so that immigrants can better prepare themselves and be able to hit the ground running when they arrive in Canada.

By working with educational partners, particularly with community colleges, there is an opportunity to provide language and skill assessment and training overseas to potential immigrants before they arrive in Canada. This is an idea that deserves your attention and investment. As well, skilled immigrants often lack the necessary information to make informed choices about where and how to practice their occupation in Canada. There is a vast amount of information on the Internet, but not an effective navigation tool. Access to relevant, in-depth labour market information can be key in helping an immigrant decide where to settle in Canada and suggest preparatory work that can be done while still overseas. There is already work underway with four federal departments to create a national portal to provide information to immigrants and others interested in Canada. This work needs to be accelerated and coordinated with the provinces.

Third, update and expand language training programs in order to meet the needs of industry and the new profile of the skilled immigrant.

Future investments in language training must include a meaningful focus on workplace communications skills. Many immigrants have the technical skills necessary to practice an occupation but lack the occupation-specific terminology and communication skills required. Current language training funded by the federal Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada (LINC) program provides basic language skills and is not oriented to participation in the labour market. At TRIEC, employers have been clear that workplace communication skills are critically important. Immigrants also identify this as one of the most significant challenges they face.

Fourth, expand successful labour market integration programs such as internships and mentoring, working with employers and other partners.

The federal government needs to work closely with employers, employer associations and labour to identify opportunities to support them in being more effective in bringing skilled immigrants into their workplaces. And as one of the country's largest employers, the Government of Canada also needs to be a leader on this issue and participate directly in internship and mentoring opportunities for immigrants. At a local level, TRIEC has introduced a program of paid internships for skilled immigrants, Career Bridge. Even in its pilot phase, more than 80 per cent of the internships have resulted in permanent employment, including one at Manulife in our Investments division. This is a good news story that can be easily replicated and expanded across Canada, especially in our large urban centers. TRIEC will soon be launching a mentoring initiative that will link skilled immigrants with their employed counterparts along occupation-specific lines. In these initiatives, we are working not only with government, but also with community organizations, educational institutions, and employers.

Fifth, recognize the special role of Canada's largest metropolitan areas as key partners in immigrant settlement and implement a "bottom up" approach.

Cities, particularly those that attract large numbers of immigrants must have a policy and program role in the labour market integration of immigrants. Local governments are most likely to understand the specific labour market needs of their community and are most likely to leverage local partnerships that can create change. Like most Canadians, immigrants live and work primarily in cities. It is at the local level that services, training, and jobs exist. For there to be a seamless and systemic approach to labour market integration for immigrants, all stakeholders – employers, labour, educational institutions, occupational regulatory bodies, community agencies, immigrant organizations, and governments – need to collaborate and work together at the local level. As the vast majority of immigrants settle in cities, it is crucial that cities be at the table. It is this approach that is working in the Toronto region through TRIEC.

And finally, develop and implement regional strategies, in collaboration with provincial, regional and municipal governments, to expedite labour market integration of immigrants.

Because the labour market integration of immigrants cuts across a number of departments and ministries, at both the federal and provincial level, coherent and coordinated strategies are a challenge. Current federal-provincial agreements on labour market training rarely include programming for immigrants. Only those eligible for Employment Insurance can be targeted for training programs provided by the EI fund, and recent newcomers to Canada do not qualify.

Federal/provincial agreements on immigration rarely focus on labour market issues because that is outside the mandate of Citizenship and Immigration Canada. It is time to find new ways of ensuring federal-provincial collaboration on this issue. And most importantly, the inclusion of regional and municipal governments in this conversation is necessary in order to anchor the strategies and solutions within a meaningful context. A results-driven agenda for skilled immigrants can only be delivered with the close cooperation of all orders of government. In the absence of formal agreements in the region of Toronto, TRIEC has begun the process of facilitating this collaboration, which must be strengthened with the leadership of your government.

Each of these points has merit on its own, but combined they present a robust plan that has the promise of creating meaningful and lasting change for immigrants. We urge you as the Prime Minister to champion this effort, so that all Canadians gain maximum benefit from the skills and experience of the newest members of our society.

Sincerely,



Dominic D'Alessandro
Chair, Toronto Region Immigrant Employment Council
President and CEO, Manulife Financial



An initiative of the Toronto City Summit Alliance and the Maytree Foundation, TRIEC's mission is to create a vibrant and sustainable bridge that links immigrant skills with labour market needs in the Toronto Region.

Established in September 2003, TRIEC is a multi-stakeholder collaboration comprised of members representing employers, labour, occupational regulatory bodies, post-secondary institutions, assessment service providers, community organizations, and all three orders of government.

TRIEC has three main objectives:

- Increase access to value added services for skilled immigrants;
- Change the way stakeholders value and work with skilled immigrants;
- Change the way that all orders of government work together on this issue.

For more information on the work of TRIEC visit www.triec.ca.

For more information on The Maytree Foundation visit www.maytree.com.

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