



Who Should Get In? Rethinking Immigration Priorities

February 28, 2001

Glenn Gould Studio

Toronto, Ontario

Moderator

- **Richard Gwyn**, Columnist, The Toronto Star

Panel

- **Donna Dasko**, Senior Vice President, Environics Research Group
- **Amy Go**, Director, Long Term Care, Yee Hong Centre for Geriatric Care
- **Haroon Siddiqui**, Editorial Page, Editor Emeritus, The Toronto Star

Do we see immigration as being primarily about filling short-term labour market gaps, or long-term economic strategies? Is it about reunifying families or supplying enough young workers to the labour pool? Or is immigration first of all about building a vibrant, diverse, healthy society? Are we looking for only the wealthiest, best educated and most skilled, or for anyone who truly wants to adopt this country as their home and has the skills and the ability to land on their feet? Where do our humanitarian commitments fit into the scheme, and should they be subject to quotas? What are our priorities as a nation, and what role does immigration play in meeting those priorities?

In order to raise the level of public debate about immigrant and refugee selection in the context of Bill C-11, the proposed Immigration and Refugee Protection Act, the Maytree Foundation sponsored the session Who Should Get In? Rethinking Immigration Priorities on February 28, 2001 in Toronto.

Summary of proceedings

Donna Dasko, Senior Vice President, Environics Research Group led off the discussion by revealing that Canadians' attitudes towards immigrants are more positive than they have been for many years. She said that according to recent polling by Environics, 54% of Canadians disagree with the proposition that, overall, there is too much immigration to Canada. This is the highest rate of disagreement since the pollster began asking the question in 1977. Similarly, 76% of respondents said they agree that immigration has a positive impact on the Canadian economy, up from just 35% a decade ago. And while a majority of those polled over the last decade agreed that immigrants take away jobs from other Canadians, more recent polls indicate that 67% of Canadians now disagree with the statement.

“After seeing the data, I’m convinced that there is a very profound relationship between the state of the economy and attitudes towards immigration.”

Donna Dasko

Improving attitudes towards immigrants can be attributed to several factors, said Ms. Dasko. She pointed to a more general evolution in Canadian social values, the growth of communications technology, and Canadians' greater connection to the rest of the world due to economic globalization. At the same time, however, she cautioned that economic prosperity is also a major force driving Canadians' tolerance of diversity. This of course is a double-edged sword: during the recession of the early nineties, attitudes towards immigrants and multiculturalism became appreciably less generous. She urged immigration advocates to take advantage of the current positive environment to promote more liberal immigration policies.

“If we’re talking about services and resources..., the municipalities have a better sense of what’s needed in their communities. If they had more resources, I think they would be the best level to deal with that aspect.”

Donna Dasko

Haroon Siddiqui, Editorial Page, Editor Emeritus, The Toronto Star, urged people interested in immigration policy to shift their focus from the question of numbers to a debate about underlying principles. He argued that the pre-eminent principle should be the right of immigrants to settle anywhere they wish in Canada (as directed by the labour market).

“Family reunification must remain a fundamental tenet of immigration policy.”
Haroon Siddiqui

Mr. Siddiqui warned that Canada’s immigration system is becoming less and less “colour blind,” due to a variety of “stresses and strains.” As examples he pointed to:

- the lack of coherence between the high demands on immigration offices in South Asia and the Middle East and few resources allocated to those offices;
- the presumption of immigration officers that every applicant is a potential fraud (and Mr. Siddiqui questioned whether this presumption was more commonly applied to applicants from the Third World than from Europe);
- the abandonment of settlement services by the Ontario government, as well as its failure to reduce the barriers to regulated trades and professions;
- the racialization of poverty in Toronto.

Mr. Siddiqui argued that these issues need to be addressed as part of the immigration debate. He concluded his remarks by acknowledging that his own profession has failed to do so, faulting it for its coarse, unsophisticated and “extraordinarily nativist” discourse on immigration.

“In today’s world immigration is a two-way street. They want to come here because we want them here. We do not do anything for altruistic reasons, but because we are looking for talent or enterprise. So, we need to create a new relationship of equals ...”
Haroon Siddiqui

Amy Go, Director, Long Term Care, Yee Hong Centre for Geriatric Care used the Yee Hong Centre as a case study to highlight some of the problems in the immigration system, and some potential solutions. The Yee Hong Centre was founded in 1994 to provide nursing care to Chinese-speaking seniors in Toronto who were underserved by mainstream institutions. While the Centre clearly met a need, it soon ran into difficulties finding licensed Chinese-speaking nurses. There was no shortage of healthcare workers who had been trained in Hong Kong, China or Taiwan; however, these workers were having great difficulty gaining licensure. Without a license to practise in Ontario, the best that many of these fully trained doctors and nurses could do was take jobs as health care aides, maintaining hospital equipment, or working in the Centre's kitchen.

“We have doctors working as health care aides or doctors who work in our kitchen, or maintenance department. The lack of access for immigrants still happens.”

Amy Go

As the nursing shortage became increasingly acute, Yee Hong decided to address the problem directly. In collaboration with St Michael's Hospital, Woodgreen Community Centre and Kababayan Community Services Centre, and with funding from The Maytree Foundation and the Ontario government, the Centre developed and launched a project to help foreign-educated nurses gain licensure in Ontario. The project goal is to have 400 nurses go through the program in the first two years, with a qualifying test pass rate of at least 65% (the current pass rate is under 25%).

Underlying the project is a desire to tap the skills of those already in Canada instead of recruiting health care workers from developing countries, a practice of the USA, the UK, and several other developed countries. (This overseas recruitment approach has been criticized both because it hurts both those in the developing countries who are left without sufficient health care providers, and because it ignores the skills and experience of immigrants already in Canada.) Ms. Go was very optimistic about the likely success of the project.

“You could make a very good argument that lower levels of government should be much more involved in immigration and refugee settlement and integration.”

Richard Gwyn

Who Should Get In?

The **question and answer session** moderated by Richard Gwyn of The Toronto Star dealt with a wide range of issues, but tended to follow several thematic threads:

Attitudes towards immigration:

A participant asked what factors might be underlying the fact that, according to a recent poll, 53% of Americans believe that immigration levels are too high, while in Canada just 45% hold that view. Panelists pointed to a variety of issues, such as Canada's generally more progressive social values, and the complicating factor in the US of large-scale illegal immigration. (Though it was also pointed out that illegal immigration actually benefits many Americans who are able to hire "illegals" at grossly substandard wages and working conditions.)

One of the panelists called on Canada to abandon the old conception of immigration as Canadians doing prospective immigrants a "favour" by inviting them into "our house." In the new age of global mobility, the panelist argued, Canada will have to start looking at immigration as a two-way street, in which there is a relationship of mutuality and equality.

Racism and discrimination

An audience member commented that while Ms. Dasko's polls indicate that Canadians are becoming more positive towards immigration, this improvement in attitude seems to have been accompanied by an increased tolerance of inequality and racism in Canadian society. Several participants gave examples:

- large numbers of Chinese Canadians report having experienced discrimination when dealing with police;
- a recent study by York University sociologist Michael Ornstein shows very significant socio-economic disadvantage experienced by visible minorities in Toronto;
- foreign-trained tradespeople and professionals continue to face very significant barriers to licensure and employment in Canada.

A panelist observed that changes in the political climate and cutbacks to many social agencies have also eroded much of the support for and commitment to antiracism.

Discussion also addressed discriminatory attitudes and behaviours *within the immigration system itself*. Participants reported that immigration officers in developing countries are very suspicious of applicants, and applicants in those countries experience very lengthy delays in the processing of their applications. (It was questioned whether this was a result of simple lack of sensitivity to local climate and customs or was a deliberate policy of the federal government.)

There was also some discussion of the high degree of discretionary power given to immigration officers, and the lack of accountability mechanisms. One panelist suggested that lack of resources was a reason for the inadequate supervision and accountability in the Immigration Department; another pointed to larger systemic and structural issues. A panelist proposed that the federal government establish a Royal Commission to look into discrimination and racism throughout the immigration system.

Jurisdictional Challenges

The audience raised the question about settlement services for immigrants and refugees in relation to urban governance and the panelists responded by stating:

“You could make a very good argument that lower levels of government should be much more involved in immigration and refugee settlement and integration.”

Richard Gwyn

“If we’re talking about services and resources..., the municipalities have a better sense of what’s needed in their communities. If they had more resources, I think they would be the best level to deal with that aspect.”

Donna Dasko

Objectives of the immigration system

There was some discussion about the objectives of Canada’s immigration system. While panelists argued that refugee protection and family immigration should remain fundamental tenets of the system, panelists and audience members observed that in fact the federal government is focusing increasingly on economic objectives with respect to immigrant selection. Concerns were raised that this shift to “the best and the brightest” was being done without any substantive public debate, and that the new focus is inconsistent with Canada’s traditions and history. In addition, it was observed that the process of “skimming” the best educated from other countries was bad for the economies and societies of those countries, especially if they happened to be developing countries.

The session concluded with a commitment from The Maytree Foundation to continue the discussion in other fora, and to bring the concerns expressed by participants to the attention of policy makers.