

# Immigration: winners and losers

by Jim McElgunn

Few Canadians realize that our immigration policy is at a crossroads. Are we prepared to maintain a racially non-discriminatory policy even as the source of immigrants shifts dramatically? Are we tolerant and flexible enough to absorb large numbers of non-whites into a predominantly white society without a violent backlash?

Canadians have traditionally prided themselves on an easy-going tolerance of minorities; on avoiding the racial upheavals which have plagued Americans. Yet this tradition is mocked by an undercurrent of xenophobia seldom acknowledged publicly.

Occasionally, this fear and distrust of certain ethnic groups has permitted the government to enact legislation which would bring a storm of protest today. For example, the crippling head tax placed on Chinese migrants in the early 1900s by the Canadian government and their refusal to allow Chinese wives to accompany their husbands contradicts the claim that Canadians are immune to racism.

Even greater hostility met early immigrants from India. In 1910, an angry mob of British Columbians refused to permit a shipload of Sikhs to disembark in Vancouver. To pacify them, the Canadian Parliament enacted legislation specifying that any Indian immigrants must arrive on a direct ship from India to Canada. Needless to say, there were no direct ships from India to Canada.

Even as recently as the 1940s, Japanese residents of British Columbia were forced into internment camps in the interior of B.C. and in Alberta. Their possessions were seized and sold, and no compensation has ever been paid them. Ostensibly these actions were taken to prevent the Japanese-Canadians from aiding Japan's war effort. If this was the case, why were such harsh measures not enacted against the Germans and Italians?

The method chosen to erase this past injustice was the adoption of the point system, which is still in effect. To qualify, the potential migrant must score 50 of a possible 100 points based on the following distribution:

- education and training 20
- occupational skill 10
- occupational demand 15
- arranged employment 10
- French and English skills 10
- area of destination 5
- relatives in Canada 5
- age 10
- officer's personal assessment 15

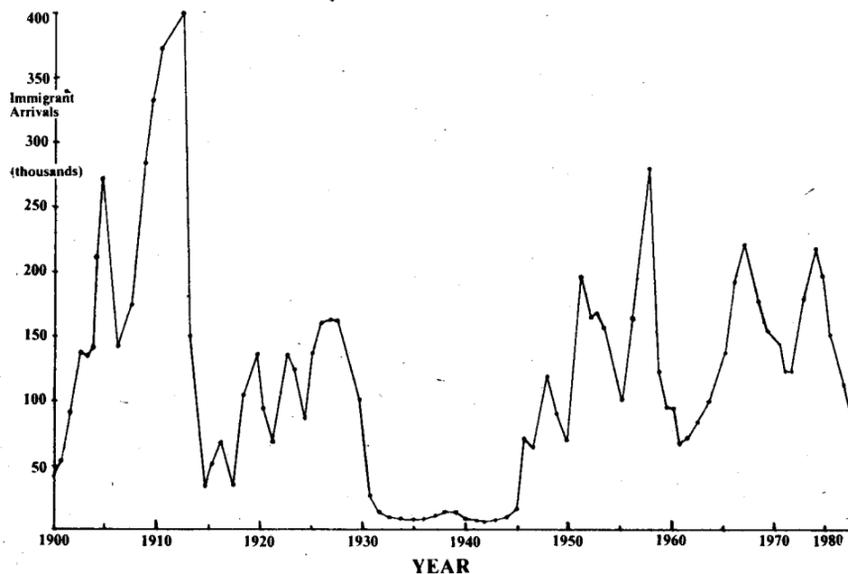
Clearly, the potential for racial discrimination remains, especially in the last category. Another problem — there are still more immigration offices in Europe, Australia and the United States than in South America, Africa and Asia. Thus access is limited for Third World emigrants. Aside from these reservations, the policy is officially blind to all but the immigrant's potential contribution to Canada.

As expected, the 1966 law and the decline of Europe as a source of immigrants has dramatically altered the picture. The table illustrates the magnitude of the change.

To date, the impact of this change on public opinion has been less than one might expect. To be sure, the immigration issue has been more passionately discussed in this decade than in any since the 1910s. For various reasons, however, the debate has not reached the intensity it might have.

One reason is the cumulative nature of immigration. The change is still very recent: the ten largest ethnic groups in Canada are all white. A perceived threat exists, but it will be a few more years before it is well-established.

A more important reason for the present low intensity of the debate is the woeful state of the economy. Un-



This chart illustrates the fluctuations in immigration during this century.

first time, a bare majority of immigrants are not white.

Despite a slowly falling unemployment rate, tension builds as the traditional cry "They're stealing our jobs!" rings through the country. This time, however, it is accompanied by ugly incidents of racial violence in the major cities. A backlash builds among a large portion of the population as a move to severely limit non-white immigration gains support. Divisions deepen and become more bitter.

Is this what our immigration policies will lead us to? Many people agree, and point to the race riots and emergence of the National Front in Britain as an example not to follow. Canada, they say, should put up with a little less growth rather than create a serious race problem for itself.

This argument looks plausible, but is guilty of exaggerating the potential for conflict and minimizing the damage Canada would do to itself by adopting a "Keep Canada White" policy. Although some racial clashes are inevitable, the analogy with Britain is a poor one. Britain's economy is nearly stagnant, its social structure stratified and rigid, its people not used to adapting to large numbers of outsiders. In contrast, Canada's economy is still expanding, its social structure is much less rigid and its people are accustomed to assimilating newcomers.

Throughout Canadian history, one finds instances of ethnic groups which have at first been feared and despised, but have eventually been accepted. For instance, the thousands of Irish who fled starvation at home in the 1840s were met with signs like "No Irish or Dogs on These Premises" and exploitation at the hands of their English and Scottish predecessors. With the passage of more than a century, the Irish have integrated themselves so completely into Canadian society that some of the early stories sound like fantasy.

The Ukrainians who were so important to the agricultural settlement of the West during the period 1900-30 endured similar hardships, largely due to the wide gulf between the culture of Eastern Europe and that of Canada. Two generations later, the still-popular Ukrainian jokes are one of the few traces of a prejudice which is mostly past history.

The most dramatic example of a group which has moved from being largely disliked to being widely accepted is the Chinese community. Scorned and exploited mercilessly after their arrival as railway workers, Canada's Chinese were only tolerated on the condition that they keep quiet and do the dirty work. Today, poverty and discrimination persist, yet the Chinese have successfully penetrated the mainstream of Canadian society, a remarkable achievement in light of the past.

The group which has suffered the most in terms of resentment and discrimination in the 1970s is undoubtedly the East Indians. Most of the community is recently-arrived, and the difference in looks, customs, and religious preferences for many has provoked hostility in the white majority. This hostility is usually expressed in vicious ethnic jokes, social ostracism, and other forms of harassment, but violence has played a part as well. As the community expands and becomes more visible, more turmoil seems likely.

Over the years, however, the same process which has worked for other groups will begin to occur. As the East Indians (especially in the second generation) adopt more and more Canadian customs and as personal relationships with the majority flourish, tension will slowly start to ease.

Ultimately, of course, prejudice is never completely eradicated. Attitudes are slow to evolve, and many newcomers from such places as the West Indies and Africa may find acceptance slow in coming. Learning to live with different people is frustrating and even dangerous.

But look at the alternative.

## What are the alternatives?

People who argue that we are unable to absorb large numbers of non-white immigrants also down-play the contribution of immigrants to our social, political and cultural life. Their vision of Canada is an unattractive one: the last thing an already isolationist Canada needs is to retreat into a narrow racist mentality.

Certainly, there is a price to pay for having a non-discriminatory policy, but the question remains: is this enough to convince us to slam the door, to admit that we are not open-minded enough to live with those different than ourselves? To say yes would be a betrayal of one of this country's finest traditions.

Nevertheless, the alternative does not look too attractive either. Must the price of a racially-tolerant policy be violent conflict in our communities?

Fortunately, the long-run future does not look that bleak. While far from perfect, Canadian society has proven its adeptness at coping successfully with the problems of immigration. Over time, Canadians have learned to live with an amazing diversity of peoples, and this augurs well for the future. The process whereby new groups in society are absorbed may be a slow and painful one, but it is ultimately effective.

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TABLE A  
Percentage of Immigrants by Geographical Area

	Europe	Asia	West Indies	U.S.	Latin America	Africa	Other
1956-60	83.9	3.2	0.8	8.0	1.4	0.4	2.2
1961-66	73.5	5.1	2.0	12.5	1.5	2.1	3.3
1967-70	60.6	12.6	5.7	12.5	3.0	2.0	3.7
1971-75	40.6	21.7	9.0	15.0	6.3	4.6	2.8
1978	32.7	28.8	10.3	9.3	18.8	18.8	18.8

Such explicitly racist policies were consistent with the immigration policy existing here through most of this century. Passed in 1910, it reflected the prevailing view that Canada was an overwhelmingly white country and should remain so.

In practise, this policy was based on the concentric rings theory, where ease of entry depended on how close one's ethnic group was to the center of the rings. The center ring was occupied by British, white Commonwealth, and American migrants (except black Americans, who were usually barred). After that came the French, Germans, and other northwestern Europeans, then the southern and eastern Europeans, and finally, everyone else.

As long as enough workers could be attracted to Canada from the "traditional sources" to prevent chronic labour shortages, this policy was workable. During the 1950s and early 1960s, more emphasis was paid to job and language skills and restrictions on non-white immigration eased. Not until 1966, however, was the discriminatory policy of 1910 replaced by one of the world's most liberal immigration laws.

A major reason for the changes was that rapidly-rising living standards in Europe were choking off that source of workers at a time when the unemployment rate had fallen below four percent. Aside from economics, however, a major change in public attitudes had occurred. Many Canadians protested against the old policy which so obviously discriminated against immigrants from the Third World.

employment has stayed above seven per cent since 1976 and seems poised to jump as the country slides into a recession. The number of immigrant arrivals in 1978 consequently plunged to only one-third that in 1974, the lowest rate of immigration since World War II (see graph).

Meanwhile, the labor force has continued to expand at a very rapid rate. The entry of the tail end of the baby boom and a rising female participation rate have pushed its growth rate over three per cent.

For a brief period, then, Canadians have been spared some hard choices; our reputation as tolerant people is a bit tarnished but relatively intact.

But for how long? The economy will not be in a slump forever, and a recovery will stimulate a sharp rise in immigration. The rate of entry into the labour force will begin to drop by about 1982 as precipitously as did the birth rate in the 1960s.

An expanding economy threatened with stunted growth because of labour shortages? This is a very familiar problem in Canada, as is the traditional response: "Bring in more immigrants!" But will this time be different?

There is reason to think so, as can be seen in the following scenario:

Canada's recovering economy begins to attract more immigrants, but a similar recovery in Europe and the United States means that less than 40 per cent of immigrants come from these areas. Instead, the needed workers arrive from Hong Kong, India, Pakistan, Jamaica and so on. For the