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Sidestepping the pathway: promise and failure in immigration (and refugee) policy

A view from the trenches on current goals and tactics, with criticisms and suggestions for change

For 25 years and probably more I have been writing articles, “op-eds”, conference papers, making speeches, spewing forth in print words on the immigration topic now numbering a million or two. Today I have about twelve minutes to distill all this into what amounts to two standard-size op eds for the Winnipeg Free Press. Here goes.

We got it wrong 100 years ago. The nation-building agenda of Macdonald and Laurier evaporated with the First World War, then the great Depression, and the Second World War – a triple whammy. It has never come back. Laurier’s goal was 100 million people by the year 2000; we only achieved a third of that. What happened? Why did we lose our national vision? Why have we never achieved greatness? Why did we, apparently and so far at least, like Esau sell our birthright – this vast and glorious land mass, this second largest piece of national real estate on the planet -- for a mess of potage?

Let’s pause for a moment and look at Japan, the United Kingdom, and Germany – all countries with far more influence, wealth, and importance than Canada. Japan – 127 million people on 378 square kilometers of territory, the UK with 64 million on 244 square kilometers, and Germany with 83 million on 357 square kilometers. That’s 274 million people on a total land mass - depleted of natural resources - smaller than the province of Ontario, population 14 million. Yet in Japan, the UK and Germany they thrive on a standard of living equal to ours.

The reason is simple. Their people are their natural resource. Here in Canada we relish our natural resources and we list them as things like water, minerals, forests, and land to plant and harvest. But we never, never think of our people as a “natural resource”. That’s a big mistake.

It shows in our attitude to immigration. I remind clients every day that Canada is a hard country to get into. Demand to get into Canada is *three times* what we let in, every year. The **fundamental** of our immigration policy is to keep people out. Canada is a gated community with the same elitist, and fearful, attitudes that this moniker implies elsewhere.

Oh we say that we need immigrants because we have a birthrate below population replacement, and our population is growing old. The ratio of people of working age to people retired from work is worse now than it was a decade ago. So, relative to demand, we let in a few to maintain the status quo.

But we want just the right people like any gated community. We emphasize ‘skilled immigrants’ because the shallow thinking, nodding heads in boardrooms and around cabinet tables of our nation say so, and it plays well to the peanut gallery. But that’s not how you build a nation; that’s *not* how Canada was built. It’s a denial of our history and reflects the arrogance and the prejudice of --- of --- well, somebody.

Well, where *did* this policy come from? It's a protectionist policy. It's as out of date as opposition to free trade. It mimics the ostrich with its head in the sand. Our leaders, whether political or otherwise, over the past century seem to have come to, and maintained, a collective conclusion that we must protect what we've got, our entitlements; and the only wise way to do that is to keep our country gated, and to ration entry to a level that inevitably keeps things in tension.

Not only *tension* from all kinds of angles that you know about and that I haven't time to describe here, it has ensured our mediocrity as a nation when our birthright offered us so much more. It has also ensured our weakness, like Czechoslovakia in 1938.

Now you may be bristling; we're not mediocre, we're wonderful. Of course we are. But that's a self-assessment. On the world stage we're a small player, and we're going to get smaller as other countries grow. We *count* our wealth of character and of things - like an un-sharing miser. But we are sidestepping the pathway to prosperity that lies in immigration. The promise was once there but we have failed to see and to embrace it.

My work, my primary concern, is with refugee immigration. My agency has landed, in the eleven months of 2016, 1,070 privately sponsored refugees. Ninety-nine percent of these are related to people already here. That is typical of this movement. It is a family reunification movement. *Most* immigration is family-driven. We force people to qualify in the various silos of immigration policy, numerically limited by the annual "levels plan."

But the overarching reality is that most people who choose Canada are related to someone already here. I call this "relational immigration." Our silos and our rules pretend otherwise.

The resettlement success of privately sponsored refugees is researched and documented as being exemplary. It's because of the relational factor. Yet this short-term focus, however satisfying, says nothing about the achievements of successive generations.

Canada is a country largely built by people one can classify as refugees, and their progeny. Scottish crofters displaced for sheep in the Highland Clearances, Irish peasants from the potato famine, Blacks from slavery. All four of my grandparents were descendants of United Empire Loyalists, the refugees of 1783 from the USA. In recent times we had the huge wave of "displaced persons" from Europe after World War Two, the Hungarian revolution, the Ugandan Asians, the Vietnamese, Laotians, Cambodians, the Cold War refugees, the Central Americans, the Yugoslavians, the Africans, the Sri Lankans, the Burmese, the Afghans, the Iranians, the Iraqis, the Syrians... The list seems endless - because sadly it is.

Whether pogroms, revolutions, religious or political persecutions, wars, volcanic eruptions, earthquakes, or famines, *this country was largely built by refugees* and their children and their children's children. They brought drive, energy, a zest for freedom and democracy - and gratitude.

That's how you build a country.

My life in the immigration trenches for the past five years has been frustrating. Because of the restrictions on refugee entry in the annual “levels plan”, the government’s backlog build-up of sponsored cases from previous years, and the “caps” on new sponsorships imposed at the start of 2012. I’ve been turning people down, spending a difficult hour every working day, explaining government policy and why I can’t sponsor to Canada their refugee family.

One young man told us last week of his family, refugees in Uganda. They live in “poverty and fear”, he said. He went on to say, “I can handle the poverty; I send them money every month. But I can’t handle the fear - mine and theirs. What do you do about fear?”

On October 21, I decided to stop being an apologist for the government and a destroyer of hope. I decided to take a “waiting list” of sponsoring requests. At least there could be a glimmer of hope. In the past six weeks, from Winnipeggers, we have received request to sponsor over 26,000 refugees.

When we finally know how many “spaces” we might get allocated for sponsoring in 2017, we’ll have a lottery. I’m going to call it the “Sophie’s Choice” lottery, because that’s the reality.

A moment of shame in Canada’s history was Mackenzie King’s refusal to allow the ship St. Louis to land its cargo of refugees in Halifax, Jews fleeing the Holocaust, sending them back to their fate in Europe. How is that blunt approach different in result from our bureaucratic, clever, rules that keep refugees out and accomplish the same outcome today?

Open the gates to immigration if you want a pathway to prosperity. We won’t be “overrun”. The notion that the world waits, bags packed, waiting to get here, is a myth. Despite all the human migration of the past 100 years, only three percent of the planet’s population lives in a country where they were not born. People prefer to stay close to home. And even if we had Germany’s 83 million we would only have a population density equivalent to that of the Russian Federation.

Refugees can lead the way, as they always have. My grandchildren had ancestors on the Mayflower, seeking religious freedom in America. Some also have Polish grandparents who came through Pier 21 after WWII.

We need to open the gates to the greatest natural resource any country can have – people.

And build Canada!