

Immigration and the population of Canada: The role of policy

Roderic Beaujot

Professor Emeritus of Sociology

University of Western Ontario

rbeaujot@uwo.ca

As a demographer, I look at questions of immigration and associated policy, in part through the numbers of immigrants (see Beaujot and Raza, 2013; Kerr and Beaujot, 2013). While immigration is too important to be left to demographers, I would propose that the number of immigrants is an important consideration.

Theoretical context: migration in population history

In looking at migration in population history, and in theorizing about migration, it is useful to start with the concept of a “mobility transition” that accompanies the demographic transition (Zelinski, 1971). The dislocations and the population growth associated with modernization and the demographic transition brought emigration pressure out of Europe, which was associated with colonialism and out-migration, not only to North America, Australia and New Zealand, but European movement to South America, Asia and Africa. Since about 1950, the demographic transitions in Asia, South America and Africa are bringing out-migration pressure, this time from the South to the North.

The penetration of capital into subsistence farming areas, the monitorization of exchanges, with the associated displacement of labour, along with centre/periphery dynamics, bring mobile populations and demand for labour in the largest cities (Massey et al., 1994). Once a migration stream is established, there is a tendency for it to be sustained, as those who have already moved seek to bring others, and as various networks, institutions and agents come to have vested interest in sustained migration (Simmons, 2010). As these agents and institutions help people to leave, along the way, and to get integrated, their interactions with migrants can also be exploitative and they also have vested interests in continued migration.

Phases of Canadian immigration

The phases of Canadian immigration are very much defined by changing contexts, inside and especially outside of Canada. In each phase, there are policy elements encouraging immigration, but others setting limits to immigration. This paper argues that, since 1989 we are in a new phase associated with strong globalization, the ascendancy of capital over labour, and a high level of immigration. That is, the constraints which operated in earlier phases, associated with exclusions, perceived absorptive capacity, and a reduction of immigration during periods of high unemployment, are not operative.

Socio-cultural diversities

The diversities by places of origin have brought a decreasing proportion with European backgrounds, growth of the visible minority population, an increase in non-Christian religions, but not a large change in the proportions speaking the official languages of English and French. For instance, while 20% have mother tongues that are neither English or French, only 12% have these “other” languages as the most frequent language spoken at home, and less than 2% can speak neither of the official languages, with 18% speaking both languages. According to the 2011 Census, the first official language spoken is as follows: 75.5% English, 22.7% French, 1.1% both, and 1.8% neither. That is, French is down from its historic figure of about a third of the population.

The proportions foreign-born are already higher than those observed in the United States, and current patterns suggest that these proportions will be larger than those of Australia and New Zealand, some quarter century from now. That is, immigration is becoming a larger factor in population change in Canada compared to that observed in other traditional countries of immigration.

Declining economic welfare over cohorts

Since the early 1980s, the average entry wages have largely declined from cohort to cohort (Picot and Sweetman, 2005, 2012). This is happening in spite of the high proportions with university degrees, the high proportion in the economic class, the expansion of a knowledge-based economy, along with public statements that we need immigrants for economic reasons. These patterns are very different from those observed for post-war immigrants (the 1946-60 cohort) who were found to have lower average incomes than the Canadian born in 1961, but given age-sex groups largely had higher average incomes than the Canadian born in 1971 (Richmond and Kalbach, 1980). The cohorts of the 1970s have had similar experiences, but it took a longer period to reach average incomes of the Canadian born (Beaujot and Rappak, 1990). Subsequent cohorts will probably never reach the average incomes of the Canadian born, controlling for age and gender.

In seeking an explanation for these patterns of declining economic performance over cohorts, Picot and Sweetman (2005) propose: (1) changing characteristics of immigrants by source countries, education, language ability and such factors, (2) decreasing economic returns to foreign work experience, and (3) a general decline in labour market outcomes of all new entrants to the labour force. Some authors have argued that the changing characteristics of immigrants hides questions of discrimination toward visible minorities. However, not all evidence supports this explanation. For instance, comparing 15 birthplace groups in the 1981 census, and

controlling for age, women from Africa and Southeast Asia had incomes 9% to 10% above the Canadian born, while men from Africa and South Asia had incomes 3% to 4% above the Canadian born (Beaujot et al., 1988: 54). While the overall patterns between 1980 and 2000 were for a larger proportion of recent immigrants to have low income, this did not apply to immigrants from South-East Asia, the Caribbean and South and Central America (along with United States and Western Europe). At the same time, the increasing levels of low income apply not only to recent immigrants from South Asia, East Asia, West Asia and Africa, but also from Northern Europe, Eastern Europe, and Southern Europe (Picot and Hou, 2003). It is also the sending areas of South Asia, East Asia, West Asia, Eastern Europe and Africa from which an increasing share of immigrants were arriving over the period 1980-2000.

A further explanation is proposed, having to do with the difficulty of integrating the higher numbers of immigrants who have been arriving in the current phase of globalization, especially since 1989. While the post-war immigrants of 1946-60 were following a hiatus where there had been little immigration, the immigrants of the period since 1989 have faced the opposite situation of large numbers of immigrants in preceding years. It can be argued that “high levels of immigration cannot be sustained if the economic integration of immigrants remains an objective” (Laplante et al., 2011; Bélanger, 2013; Bélanger and Bastien, 2013) and that open immigration is contrary to a welfare state (Grubel, 2005).

Questions associated with the level of immigration may also be relevant to comparisons between Canada and the United States. Over the period 1990-2000, the entry wages of university-educated immigrants declined in Canada relative to the Canadian born, while wages of new immigrants increased in the United States (Bonikowska et al., 2011). This may be related to the higher immigration in Canada: over the period 1990-2005, the net immigration relative to the 1990 population represented 8.9% in Canada compared to 7.6% in the United States. During the period 1990 to 2000, the percent of new adult immigrants who had university degrees increased from 25% to 47% in Canada, while the increase in the United States was only from 30% to 34%.

Instead of pushing the argument of a labour shortage, which is perpetuated by the interest of capital, we should instead better equip Canadian workers with the education, training and skills that employers are seeking, and mobilize unemployed workers to work in areas with a greater need for workers (McQuillan, 2013, see also Drummond, 2013). Besides serving the interest of employers rather than labour, and putting a downward pressure on wages, a high level of immigration, and of foreign worker entries, can undermine other adjustments in the labour market based on working conditions, wages, training and internal migration. Other relevant considerations are policies for parental leave and child care that can increase work-life balance and the labour participation of both parents (Beaujot et al., 2013).

Conclusion

Canada benefits by receiving a diversity of immigrants, based on immigration classes, areas of origin, occupations and education or skills. The challenge of policy is to maintain this diversity while also ensuring that the number of arrivals does not exceed the levels that can be effectively integrated, and that immigration does not undermine the opportunities of other Canadians, including youth, Aboriginals and persons with disabilities.

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