Does Canadian Experience in Immigrant Incorporation Have Lessons for Europe?¹

Jeffrey G. Reitz; University of Toronto; October 19, 2006

Immigration brings both opportunities and problems. With so many countries now playing host to immigrants, there has been a focus primarily on the problems, especially regarding the economic and social incorporation of immigrants. And in addressing these problems, it is sometimes asked whether the long experience of the traditional countries of immigration – principally the United States, Canada, and Australia – contain useful lessons for newer immigration countries including many in Europe. Can Europeans learn from North American immigration policies and integration practices?

I believe there are such lessons. They include some specific policy approaches to be discussed below. However, I will also suggest that the most important lesson is at a broader level. This is that the effort to address problems which accompany immigration should not neglect the opportunity side of the equation. Immigration has produced major benefits for all three of the traditional immigration countries – not only economic but also social and cultural benefits. The benefits are an important reason why these countries are successful nations in the

¹ Text of keynote address presented to Third Annual Conference of the IMISCOE (International Migration, Integration and Social Cohesion) network of excellence in European migration research, Vienna, September 5, 2006. Spanish translation published in Barcelona as "Puede ofrecer lecciones a Europa la experiencia canadiense de integración de los inmigrantes?" Vanguardia Dossier 22 (January-March 2007): 38-46. This was part of a special issue on immigrants, El continente móvil.
modern world, and why they continue to be attractive to new generations of immigrants. And to some extent, the successes and the benefits result from a recognition of immigration as an opportunity.

Admittedly, immigration brings problems. And here, the experiences of the main three immigration countries do have possibly useful lessons to offer other countries. However, it is not that any specific policies or practices regarding immigration or immigrant integration deserve simply to be copied. Even where there are successes, it is often partly because of circumstances that are unique to the particular country – and to the specific historical and institutional context. Local policies may not travel very well. So at the level of specific policies, the lessons to be learned must be considered in the light of the particular circumstances of particular countries.

I will draw mainly on the Canadian experience. In many ways, Canada has been quite successful as an immigration country. In the present period perhaps Canada has been the most successful of the three traditional immigration countries. Many have begun to speak of a “Canadian model” for immigration policy, and this policy model is at least partly responsible for Canada’s success. At the same time, the success is not only due to these policies; it also reflects certain historical and institutional circumstances unique to Canada. At the same time, these circumstances are changing, and a number of emerging problems and new challenges now face Canada. These new circumstances demand that the country re-invent its own hitherto successful policy model. So in considering Canadian experience, other countries should also take these newly emerging Canadian problems into account. They may also find it interesting to consider how Canadians are responding to both the new realities and the lessons garnered from its own past experience.
Cross-national learning is by no means a one-way street. It is not just Canada which offers lessons to the world. Although Canadians are proud of their immigration tradition, they worry about it quite a bit. When immigration-related problems crop up in other countries, such as in the United Kingdom at least since the 1980s, or in the Netherlands more recently, Canadians often wonder whether they will ultimately encounter those same problems. Last year when the disturbances in France were in the news, Canadian policy-makers were very worried, and publically so, about possible ramifications these events might have for Canada.

Canada’s Immigration Program and its Success

One of the most important features of Canada’s immigration program is its large size relative to the overall population. In fact, it is justifiable to use the term “mass immigration” to describe the Canadian policy. As a percentage of the resident population, Canadian immigration has been relatively large for over a century, and an expansionist policy has been pursued more or less continuously since the end of the Second World War. For the last 15 years, the explicit goal has been to take a number of immigrants equaling 1 percent of the total population per year. The actual intake has fallen short of this target – at between 200-250,000 annually for most years since 1990 (see chart 1), the intake represents 0.75 percent of population. This Canadian program is about three times the size of its American counterpart – even including illegal immigrants many from Mexico as part of the American ‘program,’ as some do.

---

As a result, and despite a certain amount of emigration or return migration, we have substantially more foreign-born residents as a percent of population than the United States and most European countries (see chart 2; Australia is an exception, mainly because Australia was in the past equally committed to mass immigration; but since the mid-1990s has reduced its immigration flow considerably).

Since Canada removed country-of-origin barriers to immigration in the 1960s, the origins of immigrants have shifted to sources outside Europe (see chart 3). The impact of the shift to non-European origins is well known in such major Canadian cities as Toronto and Vancouver. Both have gone from having populations of virtually entirely European-origins in 1970 to having large non-European minorities today. In fact, official projections say that within the next 10 to 12 years, and based on current immigration patterns, the majority of the populations in those cities will be racial minorities (they will be so-called “majority-minority” cities).

Yet Canada has been unarguably successful in economic and social terms. The education-based skills of these is high, translating into a considerably degree of employment success. The national celebration of cultural diversity seems to indicate an apparently smooth social integration of minorities within distinct communities and in the wider society.

The program is also successful in political terms, and this may be the most important success indicator. There is relatively widespread acceptance and support for immigration policy in Canada, and relatively little of the kind of acrimonious debate often seen elsewhere. Public opinion polls show that for the last several decades, in every year but one (1982, a recession year), a majority of the population has either supported immigration levels or has wanted them increased (see chart 4). In most countries, the reverse is true: there is less immigration, and a
majority still wants reductions. Most telling, there’s no debate of immigration during Canadian
election campaigns. Canadian political parties all espouse pro-immigration policies; the public
rarely asks them to defend their policies. The word “immigration” is rarely if ever even
mentioned in the nationally-televised leaders’ debates.

**Canadian Model**

Internationally, this success has been noticed, and as mentioned earlier there are frequent
references to a “Canadian model” of immigration policy and immigrant integration. The
implication is that Canadian success is due to the country’s policy model. But what is this
model?

There are two key aspects of Canadian policy: immigrant selection policy, and immigrant
integration policy.

Regarding selection of immigrants, the best known feature is the skills-based selection
criteria, the so-called “points system” for selecting skilled immigrants. There is also a certain
amount of provincially-controlled selection (particularly in Quebec, but now in every province).

Regarding integration policy, the best known facet is probably the country’s official
policy of “multiculturalism,” now enshrined in the constitution. As well, there are a large number
of programs to encourage settlement and effective integration into local communities, including
language training, fast-track citizenship, an array of human rights and equality guarantees, and
increasingly efforts to promote better utilization of immigrant skills and recognition for foreign-
acquired qualifications in the Canadian labour market.

Two of these salient features in the Canadian immigration landscape will be discussed
here, namely, the points system and multiculturalism.

**Points System for Immigrant Selection.** The points system, in particular, has been effective in enhancing the employment potential of immigrants in Canada, and this has been a significant benefit to Canada. Introduced in 1967, this points system selects immigrants on the basis of education, knowledge of one of the official languages, work experience, and other predictors of employment success. It was copied by Australia, and there have been influential advocates for its adoption in other countries. The points system in the Canadian case serves as a means for ensuring that large numbers of immigrants will have minimum qualifications for survival in a modern economy. For Canada, with its goal of mass immigration, the points system responds to the desire to make large-scale immigration contribute to the development of the Canadian economy. Simply stated, skilled workers are needed in the kind of knowledge economy Canada aspires to develop.

From the standpoint of public perception, this selection system feeds directly into one of the basic reasons why Canadians support immigration, the belief that immigration contributes to the economy. The politicians give many other reasons, as well. There is political rhetoric about nation-building, and about Canada’s vulnerability as a small country with a low fertility rate, located next to the world’s only superpower. Some say that immigration supports Canada’s status as a multi-cultural country, a proud point of presumed distinction from our southern neighbor. Some believe that immigration helps offset population aging, but although without the enthusiastic support of most demographers. In recent years, however, an emphasis on the immediate economic benefits of immigration is probably the most important key to popular support for immigration. To be sure, economists in Canada and elsewhere do not endorse the
view of immigration as an important economic plus. The consensus in economics is that immigration is a plus but only a small plus. However, Canadian policy makers – and the general public – have ignored this advice. They support immigration is a boon to the economy, not only for meeting labour shortfalls, but for being a source of economic stimulation. They believe immigrants support the economy by adding size, new ideas, creative potentials, international awareness and linkages critical in a global economy.

As evidence, one might notice that those areas of the country not now the major areas of immigrant settlement – places other than Toronto, Vancouver and Montreal – are hoping to attract immigrants. And these places are not only those such as Alberta, a province where the oil industry has created a currently-insatiable demand for workers of all kinds, but also places like Atlantic Canada, where there are relatively few jobs and immigrants are sought as a way to create them. The points system contributes to this perception of immigration as an economic boon.

The points system in Canada does not completely satisfy the desire for highly-skilled immigrants, because given the large numbers sought, compromises and trade-offs must be made. In fact the point of the points system is to administer those trade-offs. Most points are given for high levels of education, but without a university degree, sufficient points for admission might be scored by other indicators of employability, such as an arranged job or relative youth. Although most immigration officials want immigrants with 4-year university degrees, in 2005, and because of the large numbers taken, over 20 percent of the points-selected immigrants in 2005 did not have a four-year university degree.

For admitting smaller numbers of skilled immigrants, there are other ways to administer selection. For example, the United States uses an employer nomination process with government
certification that no native-born Americans are suitable, which, coupled with a minimum education standard of a 4 year university degree ensures high skill levels. Some of those adopting a so-called “points systems” in Europe are borrowing the Canadian label but not the Canadian policy, since they are not seeking mass immigration. For example, what the UK now calls a “points system” has a very high selection criterion, but small or non-existent numerical goals. The UK system is open to the admission of Nobel Prize winners in science, or similarly accomplished individuals. But the country seems unlikely to get demographically-significant numbers using this scheme.

**Multiculturalism.** Multiculturalism policy also has been labeled as part of the Canadian success story. It too has been exported, including to Australia and later in Europe. What is Canadian multiculturalism? When Nathan Glazer says, with some regret, “we are all multiculturalists now,”3 he projects a particular view of multiculturalism in American political discourse. Similarly, in Europe Amartya Sen has discussed multiculturalism as a Canadian import but with undesirable uses to justify an extreme cultural relativism, what he calls ‘plural monoculturalism.’4 But the question remains: precisely what is Canadian multiculturalism?

The Canadian policy was first formulated by Pierre Trudeau in 1971, in a speech to parliament. In his statement, he equated multiculturalism with cultural freedom, and at the same time, specified the following four specific “supports” which emphasize the connection of minority groups to the whole: 1) promoting contribution to Canada; 2) full participation in

---


Canadian institutions; 3) interchange between groups in the interest of national unity; and 4) acquisition of an official language. This makes quite clear that Canadian multiculturalism is not tantamount to extreme cultural relativism, or to cultural decentralization. There is little in Canadian discourse which would exemplify such an interpretation.

Rather than negative impacts, one might more legitimately raise the question for Canada whether or the extent to which the multiculturalism policy has had any major impact at all, either on immigrant communities or on the broader society. If as a result of the Canadian policy, compared to the US laissez-faire approach, for example, there are differences between the countries in the formation of immigrant ethnic communities, in their retention of distinct culture or persistence over time, or even their degree of their acceptance in the mainstream society, these are not dramatic differences. Cross-national comparative research shows little such difference.\footnote{Jeffrey G. Reitz and Raymond Breton, \textit{The Illusion of Difference: Realities of Ethnicity in Canada and the United States}, Toronto: C.D. Howe Institute, 1994.}

And are Canadians actually more strongly committed to the idea that immigrants should be encouraged to maintain their distinct cultures? Not according to the data: it’s actually the Americans who are more sympathetic to this idea, particularly those with a more individualistic outlook. Tellingly, the Canadians who support multiculturalism are those who are more interested in asserting a Canadian difference from the United States.

A lack of multicultural policy or program impact in Canada is perhaps not surprising, given the small size of the official multiculturalism budget. In fact, what would be surprising is if a program costing about $21 million a year could produce any major social re-engineering.
Emerging Problems of Canadian Immigration

So the two best-known elements of the Canadian policy (the points system and multiculturalism) have certain limits. They are limited in what they can accomplish – the points system because of the mass nature of Canadian immigration, and multiculturalism because it is largely symbolic. In fact, the success of Canadian immigration is probably due to a variety of circumstances other than these policies. These might be thought of as the institutional context of Canadian society – including certain features of Canadian labour markets and related institutions – and within this context, certain changes are producing concomitant changes in Canadian immigration.

A prime example of a non-policy circumstance that has helped Canadian immigration is Canadian geography. The geographic isolation of Canada from all countries other than the United States has limited illegal immigration and has made legal immigration more attractive. This has been important in sustaining the political perception of Canadian immigration as being controlled in the national interest.

Yet a number of factors, which might be summed up under the heading of “globalization,” are now creating greater opportunities for migration and a much more visible flow of illegal immigrants into Canada. As a result, the immigration program is facing significant political pressures. With respect to immigration, globalization is undercutting the previous benefits of Canadian geography.

Other things are changing too, and associated problems are emerging. Skill-based selection has not prevented a significant decline in the labour market performance of immigrants and a related increase in immigrant poverty. Furthermore, increased racial inequality is now
evident, making it clear that despite their popularity, multiculturalism and other related policies have not resolved the ambiguous status of racial minorities in Canada.

If changing circumstances affect Canadian immigration and threaten the success of the “Canadian model” in Canada, we need to look closer to draw implications for elsewhere – or for Canada itself. I want to look in particular at two issues: the decline in employment success of the most recent cohorts of immigrants and emerging race relations issues.

**Declining Employment Success for Immigrants in Canada.** Recognition of the employment problems was somewhat slow in coming, because general trends over several decades were to some extent masked by the ups and downs of the business cycle. But the 2001 census, and with evidence on immigrant experience during a period of fairly robust economic growth, showed there is a serious problem. Frenette and Morissette\(^6\) documented a significant decline in the earnings of successive cohorts of new immigrant since the 1970s – virtually the entire period during which the points system has been in place (see chart 5). What the 2001 data suggest is that the much-touted policy framework is no longer working.

This decline was puzzling to many, as there were major upgrades in the selection policies throughout the 1980s and 1990s which were expected to have prevented the decline in immigrant employment success. For example, the points system was upgraded, maximizing the proportion of immigrants selected on the basis of points and minimizing the proportion admitted for family re-unification. Both produced significant increases in the educational attainments of immigrants, 

so that by 2000, 45 percent of arriving immigrants had university degrees. And still there was a decline.

There is a debate about the causes of this trend, and the following factors have all been cited as relevant:

1. Declining employment opportunity for all new labour market entrants;
2. A shift in the immigrant origins (more in the 1970s and early 1980s than recently);
3. Increased credentialism, compounding low returns to education for immigrants;
4. Declining returns to education for immigrants (probably small);
5. A decline in the returns to foreign labour market experience for immigrants;
6. A shift to the “knowledge economy,” with implications for the transferability of immigrant skills;
7. Increased labour market inequality.

The evidence supports some of these explanations more than others, but most of them refer to broader institutional bases as causes – and, in most cases, they don’t lead to solutions based on elaborations or ‘fine-tuning’ of the existing policy model.

Take one item on the list which seems least institution-related: declining returns to foreign experience. It’s not at all clear why there should be declining returns to foreign experience. Some say that with technological change, foreign experience may be less relevant in Canada. But this seems contradicted by the fact that foreign education is not become less relevant as well. Moreover, globalization should be expected to move us in the other direction, towards more consistent types of experience. Another possibility is that rising educational levels in the
native-born population are reducing opportunities for immigrants in the specific occupations in
which they have experience, so they are being deflected to other occupations, and since the value
of experience is occupation-specific, their experience is less valued. Some still hope for a
selection-based solution to declining returns to foreign-based experience: put greater selection
emphasis on youth and less on employment experience. This has not yet happened.

Most of policy responses to the decline in immigrant employment success have been in
the area of labour market reforms. There has been an effort aimed at increasing the recognition
and use of foreign-acquired skills in the Canadian economy. These include encouraging
professional licensing agencies to remove sometimes bureaucratic barriers to the acceptance of
foreign qualifications, providing bridge-training programs which would “top-up” foreign-
acquired skills to enhance their relevance in Canada, providing mentorship programs (a kind of
apprenticeship so that immigrants can “learn the ropes” and the workplace-specific practices in
Canadian firms), and offering other similar programs.

These programs are still under development. They may work, or they may turn out to be
quite difficult and expensive. And if the mounting problem of immigrant poverty is indeed an
offshoot of the “knowledge economy” only now emerging in Canada, similar problems may be
expected to surface in other countries as well. They certainly exist in the United States; skilled
immigrants in that country have lower relative earnings than in Canada, and their earnings are
also in decline. But the US focus is on other problems, mainly the Mexican border, which they
regard, perhaps with good reason, as more serious.

Racial tensions. Officially, Canada celebrates its multicultural diversity. At the same
time, the racial composition of the Canadian population is rapidly changing, particularly in the major cities. This is a dramatic transformation in the face of Canada.

Despite multiculturalism, there are continuing concerns about persisting racism and discriminatory treatment in key areas such as employment, housing, and policing. Although the impact of this has been debated by researchers, and largely treated as a marginal issue by politicians, the perceptions of discrimination are quite widespread in the Black and Asian communities in Canada. As a result, there is a racial disagreement on racial discrimination in Canada.

Not surprisingly, perhaps, the declining employment situation affects the racial minorities more than other groups, and there is greater poverty among racial minorities in Canada. But there are other mounting concerns which compound the problem. For example, Canadians worry about the social integration of immigrants, especially since viewing the events in France, and since the arrest of persons allegedly planning a terrorist attack in Toronto. There are also concerns about gun-related gang violence in some parts of the Black community, again in Toronto. All are likely to have an impact on the treatment of racial minority immigrants.

Some recent evidence from national surveys backs up the argument that racism and discrimination exist in Canada. Our national statistical bureau, Statistics Canada, conducted a massive study called the “Ethnic Diversity Survey” in 2002. Over 40000 interviews designed to provide a portrait of inter-groups relations in Canada were conducted. In particular, the survey looked at the attachments and commitments of individuals to the society as a whole, using indicators such as “sense of belonging,” trust in others, feeling “Canadian,” and becoming a citizen. It examined satisfaction with life in general. Finally, it assessed not only attitudes but
relevant behaviours, such as participation in volunteer activities and voting in Canadian elections.

My own analysis of the data (with Rupa Banerjee)\(^7\) compares racial minorities with persons of European origins. It also compares persons by length of time in Canada, paying careful attention to the Canadian-born second generation, which as experience shows, has a special significance for long-term integration. Most incidents of activism and violence in immigrant communities – including in Britain and France – have occurred on the part of those born in the host country.

The overall findings of the EDS survey data are these.

First, on most counts, visible minorities are less integrated into Canadian society than their white counterparts. Thirty percent fewer identified themselves as “Canadian,” and 30 percent fewer bother to vote in federal elections – largely due to lack of will rather than lack of eligibility, because visible minorities actually become citizens more quickly. Smaller, though quite significant, gaps exist with regard to life satisfaction and trust in others, differences which are partly related to the recent arrival of many racial minorities.

Second, the EDS survey shows that certain important differences for immigrants actually grow over time and with more experience in Canada. The racial gap is greater for the children of immigrants – those born in Canada – than for the parents. This is true despite the high levels of education and employment success of the second generation. The trends for the second

generation are most pronounced for Blacks, but they are prevalent among all racial minorities.

Overall, there are problems for the integration of visible minorities in Canada, and these problems seem to be growing. The survey data show that impact of race on the social outlook of racial minorities is greater for the children of immigrants than for the immigrants themselves (see chart 6). Whatever the impact of policies such as multiculturalism in paving the way toward the social integration of immigrants, it clearly has worked less well for racial minorities than for white immigrant groups. Over time and into the second generation, a racial gap is emerging in Canada.

Lessons for Europe?

In summary, I think Canadian experiences carry implications for other countries. This is not to say that others should copy either our points system or multiculturalism. In fact, Canadians need to reinvent both policies in the light of new realities.

What, then, are the lessons to be learned?

First, Canadian experience suggests that skill-selective immigration can be effective in promoting the economic integration of immigrants, with the caveat that foreign-acquired skills must be transferable. Unfortunately, this is not automatic.

Second, other countries should note that economic integration does not guarantee social integration. In Canada, for example, more attention should be paid to the perceptions of discriminatory treatment of minorities. Although in this instance, existing approaches to multiculturalism will be insufficient to address the problem, what is needed is not so much the
abandonment of multiculturalism as policies to address equality issues directly. Canadian multiculturalism may not be for everyone, but other countries will find that immigrants and their descendants need to feel they have a meaningful place in the society. They must feel that they are fairly treated and that they are recognized and respected for their efforts. The inclusiveness of any society cannot be taken for granted, and both a policy and a reality of equal rights – including certain cultural freedoms – is essential. What is needed is to find more effective ways to promote equality which are not only supported by the majority, but are viewed as authentic by minorities.

These observations bring me back to my original point about opportunities. Opportunities should be the focus both for the mainstream population and for the immigrants. Both segments of society need to see something in it for themselves. It is crucial to ensure that the population retains its confidence in the value of immigration and the contribution of immigrants to the society. Given that solving the problems of immigrant integration may require careful thought and significant resources, it is important that both be available. Up to now, Canada has managed to do this but challenges remain ahead.

In my view this may be the real lesson to be learned from Canada. Immigration can be a major plus, as long as the population is convinced that it is necessary and positive, and remains committed to finding solutions to emerging problems.
Chart 1. Permanent immigrants to Canada, 1971-2005

Immigration to Canada by Year of Landing

Source: Citizenship and Immigration Canada
Chart 2. Immigration nations: percent foreign-born, 2005

Chart 3. Shifts in immigrant origins, Canada

Source: Census of Canada, 2001
Chart 4. Canadian opinion on immigration levels

“If it were your job to plan an immigration policy for Canada at this time, would you be inclined to increase immigration, decrease immigration, or keep the number of immigrants at about the current level?”

Source: Gallup Canada, Inc.
Chart 4. Canadian opinion on immigration levels

“If it were your job to plan an immigration policy for Canada at this time, would you be inclined to increase immigration, decrease immigration, or keep the number of immigrants at about the current level?”

Source: Gallup Canada, Inc.
Chart 5. Earnings trends for immigrant men

Source: Frenette and Morissette, Statistics Canada, 2003
Chart 6. Effect of Visible Minority Status on Most Indicators of Integration Becomes More Negative Over Time


Note: Regression effects for Canadian Identity, Trust in Others and Volunteering are based on logistic regression and represented as odds ratios; regression effects for Sense of Belonging and Life Satisfaction and standardized OLS coefficients.