

***Effective Immigration Policy and Societal Transformation:  
The Benefits and Challenges of a Rapidly Growing Multicultural Population in Canada***

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The Asian Conference on the Social Sciences 2024  
Official Conference Proceedings

**Abstract**

This paper presents the complex historical context and development of immigration policy in Canada and examines the rapid and profound changes and trends in Canadian society which are occurring due to new record levels of immigration. The benefits and challenges of a rapidly growing multicultural population and the evolving relation between immigration and national identity are examined. The continuing transformation of Canadian society through immigration and the impact of immigration on culture, education, business, politics, and international relations are addressed. Immigration policy and outcomes in Canada are compared and contrasted with immigration policies in other countries. The current Canadian immigration policy is highly effective at promoting economic growth and may be an appropriate model for other countries with rapidly ageing workforces and declining populations (Harrap, Hawthorne, Holland, McDonald, & Scott, 2022). As the populations of many countries continue to decline and record numbers of workers enter retirement, the population and workforce in Canada are growing at an accelerating annual rate due to unprecedented levels of immigration. Canadian economic growth, boosted by a steady influx of highly skilled immigrant workers, is currently stronger than that of many other advanced countries. Predictions are made regarding the future direction of immigration policy, diversity, and economic growth in Canada and in other advanced countries based on current and historical data and global trends.

Keywords: Immigration Policy, Canadian Society, National Identity, Diversity

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## **Introduction**

Canadian society has been shaped by successive waves of immigration throughout its history. New, unprecedented, record high levels of immigration are continuing to cause profound changes in Canada's multicultural society. The Canadian government has created a 3-year Immigration Levels Plan that will result in a large, steady increase in permanent residents in Canada and in a new annual record of half a million new immigrants by 2025 (Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada, 2022). Large waves of new immigrants from a growing number of source countries are contributing to the rich multicultural social fabric and national identity of Canada. Immigration policy exerts a significant impact on the society, culture, education, business, politics, and international relations of a country. Increased immigration presents both challenges and benefits. The aging population and record number of retirees in Canada have created an urgent need for more skilled immigrants. Increased tolerance of diversity and multiculturalism have been the keys to Canada's economic success and social stability in the past and are becoming increasingly important.

## **The Historical Development of Immigration in Canada**

The vast territory that is now the sovereign state of Canada has experienced major waves of immigration from Europe for centuries. Jacques Cartier, a French explorer who reached the Atlantic coast of Canada in 1534, declared that the entire vast territory of Canada belonged to his king and country (Gaudreault-Desbiens & Vogin, 2021). The native-Canadian First Nations, comprised of hundreds of different cultures and linguistic groups, had been living in the territory for thousands of years. The French, followed by the English, became the colonial power in the early history of what is now Canada and formed alliances with various indigenous tribes in military campaigns and in the lucrative fur trade, creating a diverse society shaped by many different languages, cultures, traditions, religions, and forms of government (Jeannotte, 2022). Although the French and English were the first Europeans to establish permanent settlements and colonies in North America, other Europeans may have landed in Canada first. Viking explorers and Basque fishermen may have been the first Europeans to discover Canada and its native inhabitants, but they did not establish permanent settlements (Gaudreault-Desbiens & Vogin, 2021). Society in what is now Canada has been multicultural in nature since the beginning of early human habitation.

Soon after the arrival of Europeans, African slaves were transported to the new colonies in North America. The earliest known record of an immigrant of African origin in Canada dates back to an African slave who arrived in 1608 (Pierson, Pupilampu, & White, 2022). Ethnic and cultural diversity has increased steadily over centuries in the territory now called Canada as a result of numerous, complex historical factors leading to successive waves of immigration. For example, thousands of American colonists who were still loyal to the British crown moved to Canada, which was called British North America, after the complete defeat of British forces in the American Revolution. Many of these loyal British subjects, also referred to as Loyalists, remained in touch with relatives in the new nation of America (O'Keefe, 2023). The arrival of thousands of Loyalists after the American Revolution led to a sudden, major increase in the population of Canada and eventually to an increase in cross-border ties through family and business connections.

Canadian immigration policy continued to favor white European immigrants in the nineteenth century and early twentieth century, but worker shortages created a need for immigrants from other parts of the British Empire, especially from Asia and Africa. Large numbers of free

Black immigrants from America were given farmland by the government to convince them to settle in the sparsely populated prairies in central Canada in the 1800s, and successive waves of Caribbean Black immigrants arrived in the 1950s and from many African countries in the following decade (Pierson, Pupilampu, & White, 2022). Black Canadians have contributed to the growth and success of the Canadian economy for centuries.

During British colonial rule, government policies attempted to create a Canadian society modeled on that of Great Britain, although exceptions were made for the minority French population centered in Quebec. The British colony of Canada was given semi-independence as a dominion within the British Empire and priority was given to attracting white settlers to recreate a predominately white society with the laws, culture, and social norms of Great Britain (Johnstone, 2016). However, the ideal of creating an exact copy of British society in Canada was not practical or realistic. The number of immigrants from Britain was not sufficient to supply Canada's growing economy with workers or to adequately populate the vast Canadian territory, so a more diverse immigrant population became necessary (Johnstone, 2016). The need for more workers created immigration and employment opportunities, both short-term and long-term, for non-white settlers and workers.

Canadian immigration policy in the nineteenth century contained an exclusionary and racist bias which reflected the norms and attitudes of the British Empire at that time. An increase in non-white immigrants, although necessary for economic growth, eventually resulted in growing political pressure and a shift in official immigration policy. The Canadian Immigration Act, passed into law in 1919, was racist in nature and favored White European immigrants (Pierson, Pupilampu, & White, 2022). Immigration policies that were racist in nature continued in Canada until after World War II. Racially based immigration policies in both Canada and the United States after the Second World War were challenged by a shift in societal attitudes which favored human rights and criticized racial discrimination around the world and at home (Triadafilopoulos, 2010). In Canada, changing attitudes regarding immigration affected government policies. An increasing tolerance of diversity in society caused a major modification of official government immigration policy in the 1960s which significantly reduced racial biases in the immigration selection process (Triadafilopoulos, 2010). Acknowledging the growing diversity of increasingly multicultural society, the Canadian government began to implement official multicultural policies in society and in immigration in the 1970s. Race and country of origin no longer played a role in the immigration selection process, and priority was given to humanitarian concerns for refugees in addition to the economic and societal needs of Canada. For example, a large number of doctors trained in Canada began to move to the United States to work and to conduct research in the 1960s, and Canadian government policy encouraged the immigration of doctors from South Asia in response (Wright & Mullally, 2016). The number of source countries of immigrants to Canada has increased significantly since the 1970s, accelerating the existing trend of increasing ethnic and cultural diversity in Canada.

### **Canadian Population Growth and Immigration Trends**

Canada has depended heavily on immigration for population and economic growth throughout its history. Confronted by a rapidly ageing society, low birth rates, a record number of retirees, and worker shortages in many major sectors, the government is encouraging and promoting new, record-breaking levels of immigration. Although Canada is continuing to accept large numbers of refugees in comparison with many other developed countries, the percentage of immigrants selected based on job skills and economic criteria is

increasing. By 2025, 60% of new immigrants will be granted residency status based on economic criteria, work experience, qualifications, and specific job skills, but large numbers of refugees are still being accepted (Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada, 2022). The urgent need for new, skilled workers across Canada has caused a shortening of the immigration process in special cases. New forms of express entry programs have been introduced to accelerate the immigration process for highly skilled workers in Canadian industries with the highest worker shortages, including health care, the construction industry, manufacturing, engineering and scientific research (Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada, 2022). High levels of immigration have become essential for economic growth in Canada.

In order to offset the challenges and costs of an aging population, priority is being given to relatively young immigrants. Over 80% of recent immigrants are under 45 years of age, helping to keep the Canadian workforce relatively young compared to many other developed countries (Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada, n.d.). The number of student visas is increasing, and the large population of foreign students in Canada is growing steadily. There were close to one million international students in Canada in 2019, and the income from their tuition fees and consumer spending exceeded \$20 billion, making higher education a leading industry (Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada, n.d.). Many graduate international students find work in Canada and a path to citizenship. Foreign students have become a major source of income and diversity for universities and an important source of skilled employees for companies in Canada and the United States, and competition to get foreign students is increasing between countries (Walker, 2023). Education for foreign students is a growing and important sector in the economy of many developed countries.

The number of temporary foreign workers is also increasing. The agriculture and health care sectors in Canada rely heavily on foreigners with temporary work permits, and close to 400,000 such permits were issued in 2019 (Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada, n.d.). There are advantages and disadvantages for foreign participants who receive a temporary work visa. Temporary worker programs in Canada offer a faster route to working in Canada but are not popular with some foreigners such as workers from Trinidad because such programs may reduce the chance of obtaining permanent residency status (Leach, 2013). Obtaining permanent residency status requires more time than getting a temporary work visa.

In many countries, large numbers of refugees tend to be resettled in major cities. However, an increasing number of refugees are being sent to small population centers in rural areas of Canada with unique challenges that require careful consideration (Haugen, McNally, & Hallström, 2023). Refugee support programs need to adapt to the specific challenges of different regions.

General support for immigration remains high in officially multicultural Canadian society, and all major political parties in Canada support increased levels of immigration in sharp contrast to the political environment in many developed countries. The strong, general support for increased levels of immigration in the Canadian government and bureaucracy are factors which contribute to the successful outcomes of immigration in Canada (Paquet, 2021). Canadian immigration policy evolved rapidly in the second half of the twentieth century along with changes in society. Canadian immigration policy and practice based heavily on race and on countries of origin shifted towards immigration based more on individual merit, job skills, and humanitarian concerns in the 1950s (Elrick, 2022). Current trends in immigration policy favor an increased priority on the economic needs of the country.

Economic factors and needs have strongly influenced the long history of immigration in Canada, and economic goals continue to play an increasingly important role in Canadian immigration policy (Green & Green, 1999). Canada has become one of the most ethnically and culturally diverse countries in the world and has a growing need for highly skilled immigrants. According to national census data in 2021, 23% of Canadians had been born outside of Canada, the highest level of immigration in the history of Canada, and the main countries of origin were India, the Philippines, China, Syria, Nigeria, the United States of America, Pakistan, France, Iran, and the United Kingdom (Statistics Canada, 2022). The current trend towards increased diversity in Canadian society through merit-based immigration is accelerating further due to economic pressures and societal needs.

### **The Challenges and Benefits of Immigration in Canada**

New immigrants face many social and economic challenges, and immigration policy needs to adequately address a wide range of support services and programs for immigrants. Some immigrants may suffer from elevated levels of stress and domestic violence as a result of cultural differences, communication and language challenges, invalid qualifications, and racism, an experience similar to native Canadians under colonial rule (Lorenzetti, Mancey, Walsh, & Lantion, 2023). An inadequate level of fluency in English or French can create serious social and economic problems. The immigration department in Canada enacted a series of changes to immigration policy during the Covid-19 global pandemic in an attempt to continue rapidly increasing the number of permanent residents in Canada, and many potential candidates had difficulty meeting the necessary language fluency standards (McLeod, 2023). A wide range of community-based English and French language programs exist for immigrants, but more money may need to be invested in language training.

The problem of racism still exists to some degree even in Canada's increasingly multicultural society. Some international students in Canada who are Southeast Asian or Black may face discrimination in the workplace after graduating and be limited to low-paying jobs with little job security (Ellis, 2023). Unless they are completely fluent in English or French and are highly skilled and educated, some new immigrants may struggle economically. Finding rewarding, stable work in Canada is sometimes a major challenge for immigrants, and some immigrants may struggle to avoid living in poverty (Dungan, Fang, & Gunderson, 2013). Currently, high rates of inflation and rapidly rising rents and property values are major challenges for new immigrants. The acute lack of affordable housing in Canada and rising rents in major cities are creating severe economic stress for large, recent waves of Asian, African, and Middle Eastern immigrants to Canada (Singh, 2022). The high cost of living has become a serious problem for many Canadians and recent immigrants.

The benefits for immigrants of living in a free, democratic, wealthy and peaceful society may be offset by a wide range of social and economic challenges, but the benefits of immigration for the Canadian society and economy are numerous and clear. For example, immigrant doctors who were trained in foreign countries have become an essential component of the Canadian health care system over the past few decades, and the process of evaluating foreign medical qualifications and of obtaining a license to practice medicine in Canada has been improved and the required time reduced (Bartman, Touchie, Topps, & Boulet, 2022). The Canadian health care system relies heavily on doctors, nurses, and medical researchers who were born and trained abroad. Economic studies have clearly indicated numerous, significant, positive impacts from increased levels of immigration in Canada, including such factors as national increases in consumer demand, worker productivity, tax revenues, and gross

domestic product (Dungan, Fang, & Gunderson, 2013). Immigration has always been critical to the stability and growth of the Canadian economy. Regional entrepreneur support programs in Canada have created many new opportunities for international foreign students to start and manage new businesses in Canada (Graham & Pottie, 2022). Immigrants are reducing worker shortages and creating new businesses and job opportunities for Canadians.

### **Immigration and National Identity in a Multicultural Society**

Large-scale immigration over a long period of time can cause profound changes in the culture and national identity of a nation. One of the first major examples of a Canadian colonial government trying to directly support and promote domestic Canadian culture dates back to 1849 when the government introduced a subsidy to help pay for the delivery of Canadian newspapers (Jeannotte, 2022). Canadian officials have often been concerned by the major cultural and economic influence of the United States of America.

National holidays are effective cultural tools that can be used to shape and strengthen a sense of national identity and of national unity. Canada Day, originally called Dominion Day, was first celebrated on the first of July, 1958, and continues to be an annual occasion to celebrate the achievements of Canadians and the liberties that they enjoy (Hayday, 2010). A common sense of belonging and of shared values help to maintain the stability of a society. Historically, large-scale waves of immigration have been essential to the continuing growth of the Canadian population, and a clear majority of Canadian citizens and officials favor high levels of immigration (Wayland, 1997). As Canada has become more diverse, support for immigration has continued to increase. Military parades and an emphasis on Canada's British cultural connections were key components of the original Dominion Day, but multiculturalism, respect for the first native Canadians, and the importance of diversity have become the major themes of current Canada Day celebrations (Hayday, 2010). Canada's national identity has become less militaristic and has moved increasingly away from the original British culture in its colonial past.

Canada is an officially multicultural country in a world with increasing ethnic conflicts. Acknowledging the multicultural nature of Canadian society and the importance of continuing official multicultural policies in society and in immigration, the Canadian Parliament passed the Multiculturalism Act in 1988, but many Canadians remain concerned by the impact of immigration on Canada's identity as a nation (Wayland, 1997).

A majority of Canadians welcome increased diversity but wish to strengthen the sense of national identity, especially in relation to the United States, a much larger and culturally influential country. The National Film Board and the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation were formed in the 1930s to help protect and strengthen a distinctly Canadian national identity (Jeannotte, 2022). Regulations in the film and television industry have served to protect and promote a sense of Canadian national identity, but new digital communication technologies pose new challenges to regulators.

Canada is also an officially bilingual nation, and both English and French are official languages, but an increasing number of new Canadians are not native speakers of English or French. Educational policies which support and promote the teaching of heritage languages in schools can serve to maintain multiculturalism and increase respect for and understanding of cultural diversity in Canada (Hyekyung, 2022). Multiculturalism has become an important theme in Canadian education, promoting understanding of and respect for different cultures.

The Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms has influenced constitutional law and government policies in many countries around the world, and Canadian society has become increasingly tolerant over decades, a trend which has caused diversity to become a key element of national government policy since the 1960s (Gaudreault-Desbiens & Vogin, 2021). While the influence of British and French culture remains, the importance of the original colonial cultures has been weakened over generations and successive waves of immigration from an increasing number of countries. In a country as diverse as Canada, the basic concept of tolerance in a free and open society has become the practical cornerstone of a national identity.

### **Immigration Policy in Developed Countries**

Canadian immigration policy has been highly successful at integrating new immigrants into Canadian society and into the work force, allowing them to become productive members of a country with high social mobility, but improvements can still be made. Canada and Australia have been successful at using immigration policy to improve national economic performance, although Canada may need to do more to include companies in the immigration process, to improve the evaluation process of foreign qualifications, and to increase the economic rewards for immigrant workers (Harrap, Hawthorne, Holland, McDonald, & Scott, 2022). Measures have been taken to accelerate the process for immigrant applications, and more foreign qualifications are being recognized and accepted. Immigration policies in Canada and in countries such as New Zealand and Australia are focusing increasingly on attracting highly skilled foreign workers, high-paying foreign students, temporary work programs for foreigners, and on settling immigrants in a wide range of regions instead of concentrating on major urban centers (Akbari & MacDonald, 2014). The competition between many developed countries to attract highly skilled and educated foreign workers and students is intensifying each year.

Current immigration trends are similar in countries such as Canada, New Zealand, Australia, and the United States which have historically relied on immigration for population and economic growth. Canada has had higher rates of immigration than most developed countries from an increasing number of countries and cultures around the world for decades and this trend, unlike the situation in many other developed countries, is supported by a majority of the population and by all the major political parties (Trebilcock, 2019). The political consensus on the importance of and the need for increased immigration helps the Canadian government to formulate coherent, effective, long-term immigration policies and support programs with substantial benefits for the national economy. If current immigration trends continue, Canada's growing multicultural population could surpass the population of many major industrial nations such as Germany, Japan, France, Italy, and Great Britain before the end of the century.

### **Implications and Conclusions**

The current size of the Canadian population and economy cause Canada to be considered a middle power in the world, but a rapidly growing population combined with efficient economic management and increasing international trade and cultural connections may result in a substantial increase in Canadian influence in world affairs in the coming decades. The merit-based Canadian approach to immigration is effective at increasing economic results and may become a model system for countries faced with declining populations and the possibility of economic stagnation (Harrap, Hawthorne, Holland, McDonald, & Scott, 2022).

Multicultural countries such as Canada which are able to successfully and rapidly integrate high numbers of skilled immigrants while maintaining social cohesion in a peaceful, tolerant, and prosperous society, may be able to substantially increase their economic power and to continue to improve the standard of living of their citizens.



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