



## **Robert Falconer: The open society, Canada's best response to immigration**

Robert Falconer

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The world is experiencing the largest displacement and movement of people of any period since the Second World War.

Canada is not immune to these flows. Almost one in four people living here were born outside Canada, with one million more arriving in the next three years.

We recently passed our neighbour to the south in resettling more refugees than any other country in the world, mostly due to vast reductions in refugee admissions under the Trump Administration, but also in part due to increased resettlement under Prime Minister Justin Trudeau.

Since 2017, approximately 150,000 asylum seekers have claimed protection in Canada, many of whom crossed the border to do so. Under these conditions, questions by Canadians are to be expected.

Some questions will be raised by bad actors. These individuals will not be satisfied by reasonable answers or potential solutions on the issue of immigration or asylum in Canada.

A few of these may stoke fears or unfounded claims about newcomers. Many more Canadians, however, have genuine concerns, worries, or fears about the arrival of newcomers to their communities.

They do not have animosity toward individual immigrants, but they may have concerns regarding border security, the integrity of Canada's immigration system, or the values and beliefs immigrants bring with them to Canada.

It is this group that policy-makers, academics and journalists should address with open ears, facts, and ideas. Some of these include addressing the following on immigrant integration and social cohesion.

Defining integration is difficult, but some common measures include immigrant official language capability, sense of belonging to Canada, and the adoption of Canadian norms and values. By these measures, Canada is wildly successful at integrating its newcomer population.

The 2016 census showed that approximately 93 per cent of all immigrants in Canada can speak English or French. The census also showed that the majority of immigrants choose to speak English or French in the home.

This high number might surprise some, but it should be noted that official language capability is one of the selection criteria for immigrants seeking to move to Canada.

Official language capability is also one of the citizenship requirements — with the exception of the very old and the very young. Even more fundamentally, there is a workplace advantage that comes with speaking either language.

Official language capability and citizenship requirements may not be relevant if only a few immigrants became citizens, but at approximately 85 per cent Canada has one of the highest naturalizations rates in the world. The United States sits in the mid-40 per cent range.

This means the vast majority of immigrants will, at some point, pass a language test and successfully answer questions on Canadian history, culture and values, culminating in the oath of citizenship to Canada's Queen, its laws, and the duties associated with citizenship.

Immigrants also tend to show high levels of belonging and civic pride in Canada. Researchers at Statistics Canada found that 93 per cent of newcomers have a strong or very strong sense of belonging to Canada. Some of these (24 per cent) show an affinity only for Canada, while more feel a sense of belonging to Canada and their home country (69 per cent). Only three per cent feel a higher level of attachment to their home country.

When broken down by pride in specific symbols or institutions, such as the Canadian flag, Parliament, or even hockey, immigrants placed greater or equal importance in these than natural born Canadians.

This makes intuitive sense when considering why immigrants choose Canada. Alex Nowrasteh of the Cato Institute has pointed out that most immigrants self-select, meaning that those who are most dissatisfied with Chinese communism, the Ayatollah, or Venezuelan socialism are the most likely to leave, and the least likely to bring those values with them. They choose Canada because they identify with the norms and values that make Canada.

That is not to say there aren't issues. Canada is struggling to process a backlog of 75,000 plus asylum seekers, many of whom will have less than well-founded claims of persecution. That speaks to a processing issue at the federal level, rather than an issue with immigrant integration in Canada.

A backed-up system is more likely to attract those with unfounded fears of persecution. The solution is not to stigmatize newcomers, but to ensure that our immigration and asylum systems remain "fast, fair and final," able to process claims in a timelier manner.

For those who are already here, Canada's best tool for integrating them is open access to our political system and jobs market.

Some have cited Alberto Alesina's work on fragmentation, the idea that greater population diversity is associated with social strife. This is true in countries with weak democracies and restricted labour markets, where the political and economic systems favour a select few.

Alesina's subsequent works have shown that diverse populations reap economic benefits and remain relatively cohesive when everyone has a fair shot at becoming an MP or getting a job. Open societies enjoy strong trade relationships with other countries, a diversity in goods and services, and stronger workforces. Under these settings the work of integration takes care of itself, with newcomers and their children identifying with Canada and its values.

In that light, the work of integrating newcomers within the fabric of Canada is less about exclusion, and more about maintaining, celebrating, and safeguarding Canadian institutions, entrepreneurship, and our open society.