

Notes for address

By Geoff Meggs

IEBBC awards gathering

April 9, 2015

Thanks, Phillip, for that kind introduction.

I'm happy to bring greetings on behalf of Mayor Gregor Robertson and our entire council - we very much value the work of your organization and are pleased that Dr. Penny Ballem, our city manager, is able to sit on your board.

I'm also very pleased to be invited here today to talk about our city's experience attracting and integrating skilled immigrants.

I doubt there's anyone in this room who disagrees with this goal.

And given your skills and backgrounds, I don't think there's much I could tell you about best practices or the long-term benefits.

So what I'd like to do is give you a look at the problem through the eyes of an elected official - an official who has had the privilege of watching our own city's progress for more than 10 years, first as assistant to Mayor Larry Campbell and later as a member of Mayor Robertson's team.

I should say that my own background as a newcomer is limited to moving from Toronto to Vancouver.

You have to go back three generations in my family to find a real newcomer to Canada, in the sense we mean it today.

That was my father's father, who came to Ontario just after the turn of the last century from Dorset, in England, to find a career in farming.

He was successful - so good with horses that he joined the Canadian Mounted Rifles in 1914 and spent four years in the trenches of France. On his return, he became a clerk for Imperial Oil, for reasons I can't explain.

So my family's story is very much the "British settler" model that long-ago governments felt would be the best way to build a new nation.

In 2003, when Mayor Larry Campbell formed the city's first Mayor's Working Group on Immigration to give him direct advice on how the city could support newcomers and integration, that model remained pretty much intact.

A century after my grandfather arrived, our national government was still inviting newcomers to travel here and to settle, offering the prospect of personal security, prosperity and citizenship.

Sure, immigrants came from all over the world, they were ranked on a points system, but the expectation was that they would find work where they could, they would settle, seek citizenship and, in time, become "Canadians." If one job didn't work out, they would get another one.

Under those circumstances, the role of cities is relatively straightforward. From year to year, Canada would admit tens, even hundreds of thousands of immigrants and a fairly predictable share of that group would head for Vancouver. They might be seeking a new life, joining families already here, arriving as refugees, but their numbers were relatively predictable and the goal was settlement and citizenship.

The cities' role was largely one of providing for growth. To the degree it could, the city made land use decisions that supported economic growth - including small business opportunities -- and allowed for diverse housing opportunities. In Vancouver, we also provided direct support to settlement services.

It was against this backdrop that successive mayors - Sullivan and now Mayor Robertson - invited the continuing advice of a working group of immigration specialists, including representatives of the city's major settlement services, some academics with special expertise and immigration lawyers.

Of course, one of their first recommendations was that the city should seek to be a model employer, given that it is one of the largest organizations in the

region. We did that, with diversity and mentorship programs many of you are familiar with.

The working group explored the impact of the temporary foreign workers program and helped city staff lead important new initiatives like the Dialogues Project, which links newcomers with First Nations, and the Newcomers' Guide to Vancouver.

That was then, this is now. What a difference a decade makes.

I don't have to tell anyone in this room that Canada's immigration policies have undergone a complete revolution in the last 10 years, leaving many leaders of settlement services breathless from the rate of change and unsure what will happen next.

In meeting after meeting, members of the Mayors Working Group compared notes as Ottawa reassumed control of immigration policy from the province and ushered in a dramatic series of policy initiatives.

These changes respond to real problems, but they have made the economic interests of employers - not the national interest of Canada or the interests of newcomers - the paramount consideration in economic policy.

What do "welcome" and "integration" mean in this new reality?

That's one question we now are asking a very broad group of stakeholders to help us answer with our new Vancouver Immigrant Strategy, which is to be produced under the Vancouver Local Immigration Program begun earlier this year.

I want to thank Citizenship and Immigration Canada, which has been a funding partner of several important programs in Vancouver, for its support of this initiative.

This new strategy, which will build on our Welcoming Communities initiative of the last few years, is intended to find new ways to welcome and support the integration of newcomers.

Of course, to the degree we can contribute at the city level to the success of newcomers, regardless of their immigration status, we want to do so.

We're told 42,000 immigrants came to the City of Vancouver between 2006 and 2011, 77 percent from Asia, eleven percent from Europe and the remainder from the Americas.

That's a lot of new Vancouverites who need housing, schools, recreation, transit and all the other necessities of city life.

The overwhelming majority, in my view, aspires to permanent residency, probably citizenship. But will they achieve these dreams in the future?

Who's in the driver's seat in the new system, particularly under the "express entry system" now coming into full effect?

It's no longer government, either federal or provincial, and it's not the newcomers themselves - it's their employers. The employers make the job offer, which now is the critical factor, in most cases, to achieve even temporary status in Canada.

In 2013, the federal and provincial ministers of Immigration decided Canada would look to raise the number of "economic class" immigrants - most of whom require a job offer before they leave for Canada - to 70 percent of the total mix, the highest level in Canadian history.

How can a city plan for newcomers who may come - and then go - because an employer decides on a new business strategy? And will newcomers even have a voice in framing the government policies that could have such an impact on their lives? Will they vote, participate in our civil society, make their needs and aspirations known?

I'm not sure.

Too bleak?

Consider some news reports in the last few weeks that hint at the challenge:

- A recent study found that the percentage of newcomers who become citizens has been plummeting in Canada, to 26 percent in 2008 from 79 percent in 2000. I can tell you that governments respond much more quickly to voters than to visitors. This shift alone suggests major problems ahead for integration of newcomers, skilled or otherwise. There may be a formal right of access to permanent residency, but even if newcomers are taking that route, few are continuing all the way to citizenship, the most important form of integration I can think of.
- Then there's the uncertain status of many new arrivals. Many sectors of the economy now rely on Temporary Foreign Workers, particularly for low-skilled or semi-skilled jobs. As we speak, the first wave of these workers to be sent home under the Four In Four Out program - as many as 70,000 workers across Canada -- are packing their bags after a four-year stint in our country. They must go away for four years before they can return. Who can imagine the impact on these workers and their families? Who can tell me what impact this policy will have on the city and its economy? What are the housing needs of these waves of new arrivals and who will take care of them? And what about those, desperate to continue providing for distant families, who decide to remain illegally? Finally, what impact do these policies have on income inequality in our city? I don't know/.
- And then there's last month's news that the 400 skilled workers needed to staff Microsoft's new Vancouver training centre will be 95 percent foreign workers - only about 20 will be Canadian. Many of the 400 will be "rotational" and as many as 50 will be interns, perhaps from overseas schools. Is this nation-building? Is it even building the economy? Let me be clear, I welcome the new jobs and the people who will fill them - but can we not find a way to ensure they have every possibility of remaining to make a permanent improvement in their well-being - and ours?
- Last but not least, let's consider LNG, the centre piece of our own province's economic strategy. Last Tuesday, Ottawa's natural resources

minister saw a silver lining in the crisis hitting the oil industry, speculating that thousands of temporary foreign workers no longer needed in Alberta could quickly redeploy to BC. But yesterday's Globe and Mail quotes Moody's' forecast that the "vast majority" of the LNG plants under consideration in North America will never be built. Our city understands we need to support the economy, particularly the post-secondary institutions that generate knowledge workers and those with skilled trades. But if employers increasingly fill these jobs overseas, who will hire local graduates?

Canadians have never been indifferent to the economic contribution immigrants make. That's very different from turning immigration and settlement into a labour market project, pure and simple.

In my view, today's immigration policies risk turning the goal of nation-building into business-building.

Newcomers are no longer tomorrow's Canadians, citizens with a stake in our collective future.

Increasingly, they are transferable units of labour. We promise little and often deliver less - you're here today and gone tomorrow.

I wonder how any elected official, municipal or provincial, can plan long-term under these circumstances.

I hope our national leaders soon clarify that our immigration policy can be summarized in five words: "Welcome. Join us. Please stay."

