

Why Canada needs to debate immigration

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Body

Simon Fraser University political scientist Sanjay Jeram is bravely going where few Canadian scholars - and virtually no politicians - dare to go.

In the face of an unspoken **taboo** against seriously debating **immigration** policy in Canada, Jeram says the time has come for Canadians to start openly **discussing** the migration issues they've been avoiding.

Housing, employment, urban congestion, the welfare state and training are all affected by Canada's **immigration** policies, says Jeram, who has a PhD from the University of Toronto, the city in which he was born and raised.

Instead of Canadians and the media getting worked up about race-related migration issues(<http://vancouversun.com/opinion/columnists/douglas-todd-exaggerating-extent-of-racism-is-all-too-easy>) that Jeram thinks are largely irrelevant - such as the short-lived "barbaric cultural practices" hotline - he astutely urges discussion of the influence of **immigration** on economics.

"The hidden consensus in Canada is we don't talk critically about **immigration**. The **taboo** against **discussing** it is very real," said Jeram, who understandably believes Canadians are almost alone in this regard.

"(Prime Minister Justin) Trudeau campaigned on openness to **immigration**(<http://vancouversun.com/life/how-migration-shaped-canadas-election-and-will-test-the-liberals>) without limits. I have never heard him talk about the potential consequences that **immigration** has for overcrowding, housing, opportunities for domestic workers or the welfare state."

Housing is on the top of Jeram's **immigration**-issues list, since Metro Vancouver, Toronto and other cities are experiencing an affordability crisis.

The rental and housing markets in Canada's cities are increasingly shaped, he said, by federal **immigration** policies, which have tended to bring to Canada two financially opposite groups of newcomers: the wealthy and those with low incomes.

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Strong offshore in-migration into Metro Vancouver, including an influx of international students(<http://vancouversun.com/opinion/columnists/douglas-todd-foreign-students-make-a-big-impact-on-vancouver>), Jeram said, has "created competition for low-end rental spaces in the city(<http://vancouversun.com/news/local-news/in-rental-crisis-b-c-has-no-plan-for-housing-foreign-students-critics>)," which is struggling with a shortage and exorbitant fees.

"There is also pressure on the higher end of the housing market" because of the arrival of many well-off immigrants and foreign investors, he said. "Money from the outside has turned middle-income properties into high-end properties."

As a result, said Jeram, most of Metro's millennial generation(<http://vancouversun.com/storyline/douglas-todd-lets-end-generational-wars-over-housing-in-metro-vancouver>) is being required to financially "stretch beyond the breaking point." Most do not have pockets deep enough to buy detached homes or even condominiums.

"As a country, we don't want to discourage foreign investment, but foreign investment in housing is not going to be productive or benefit us in the long run."

He recommended new housing policies that restrict the "amount of foreign income, which is not produced in Canada, that can be used to purchase properties" in the country.

Since more than four out of five immigrants to Canada move to its major cities(<http://vancouversun.com/life/why-vancouver-housing-is-unaffordable-and-what-to-do-about-it>), added pressure is not only on housing, but on infrastructure, traffic and transit.

It contravenes human rights law to restrict the mobility rights of anyone in Canada, so Jeram thinks politicians should follow the lead of European nations and create incentives for immigrants and others to settle outside the Toronto and Vancouver metropolitan areas.

The job market is also being affected by **immigration**, said Jeram, 35, who admires the work of noted Oxford migration economist Paul Collier,(<http://vancouversun.com/news/staff-blogs/immigrants-refugees-and-the-poor-rethinking-compassion>) a leader in migration, refugee and developing world studies.

Even though a majority of Canadians tell pollsters "**immigration** is good for the economy," Jeram said some don't realize their per capita financial well-being may be shrinking as corporations bring in immigrants to make up for skill shortages.

"Instead of offering internship programs or on-the-job training, they just import new workers from elsewhere. That leads to a smaller piece of the economic pie for host-society workers."

It should be no surprise, he said, that corporations advocate more immigrants and temporary foreign workers.

"They have no skin in the game in regards to income levels at the low end of the scale. High **immigration** has no negative impact on them. Only positive."

Canada's federal politicians have to be forced to think more carefully, he added, about whether **immigration** policies are reducing public support for the country's social safety net.

"The welfare state requires we all pay into it(<http://vancouversun.com/news/staff-blogs/thousands-of-metro-vancouver-mansion-owners-avoiding-taxes>). And some will be worse off to sustain it. There may come a time when the Canadian consensus to support a high-tax society will fray."

Most Canadians tell pollsters that bringing in more young and middle-aged immigrants who pay taxes will advance the welfare state.

"But it just doesn't add up, because a working immigrant comes with dependants(<http://vancouversun.com/news/local-news/new-trend-sees-adults-with-families-entering-b-c-as-foreign-students>).

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And with rising **immigration** rates, that can become expensive and unsustainable. It's nothing to do with race. It's just economics."

Contrary to conventional North American wisdom, Jeram said, "bigger is not necessarily better" for creating equitable financial well-being. "Most wealthy societies are very small."

Will Canadians ever again be able to have a fair debate about **immigration** policy(<http://vancouver.sun.com/news/staff-blogs/what-do-canadians-think-about-immigration-levels-three-poll-results>)?

"That's the million-dollar question," Jeram says. "Politically it's become too much of a hot potato."

Canada is unusual in the way every major federal political party treads cautiously on **immigration**, Jeram said. All go out of their way to "placate" immigrant voters that dominate in many electoral ridings in major cities like Vancouver, Toronto and Montreal.

But if Canadians don't soon start having rational discussions about the economics of **immigration**, Jeram said, working-class nativist movements bent on opposing globalization and reducing immigrant flows could quickly rise to the surface, as they have in Europe and the U.S.

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