

Does the New Immigration Minister have a New Immigration Plan?

Canadians elected a new Government which claimed it will bring new and innovative solutions to Canada's challenges. During the election they stated that Canada's Immigration practices and policies require a major overhaul if Canada is going to address the realities of our aging, and potentially declining, population, labour shortages, and our desire to be a high-tech and high-skilled economy.

Now that the election is over and the Conservatives are starting to govern, the question remains: Does the New Immigration Minister have a New Immigration Plan?

I had the honour of attending a luncheon with the Minister of Immigration and Citizenship, Monte Solberg, last week. At this luncheon he presented speech about the government's plans for immigration. The extent of the government's immigration plan was clear – the conclusions we draw from this are much less clear. Everyone in the room agreed that the Minister has no plan. No plan to deal with the reprehensible processing delays; no plan to deal with the industry-specific labour shortages; and no plan with respect to the government's immigration priorities.

It is clear that the government has no plan regarding Canada's immigration practices and policies. What is not clear is how we should react to such a non-existent plan. Should we be discouraged that to Conservative government has spent so little time thinking about these important issues, or should we be pleased that the slate is clean and that this is the time to propose new ideas since no ideas have taken hold?

I believe that there may be no better time to push for improvements to the immigration system. It is obvious that the Conservative government's primary goal is to win a majority government in the next election. They know that immigrants in Canada have, for the past 50 years, voted mostly Liberal and, if the Conservatives want to win a majority, more immigrants will have to vote for the Conservative Party. They also know that the best way to win people's votes is to implement policies that benefit those people. The Conservatives have already implemented some policies aimed solely at the immigrant community. The reduction of the Right of Permanent Residence fee from \$975 to \$490 is a purely political decision since most immigrants would rather pay a larger fee and get better service instead of paying a lesser fee and receiving terrible service. Instead of improving service – which they knew they couldn't – they decided to give some money back. The government has also made it possible for foreign students to work anywhere – not just on-campus. These new policies are a strong sign that the Conservative government wants to improve relations with immigrants.

The Ontario government is also in the process of creating a provincial plan for immigration. Every province, except Ontario, has a special category of immigration that has been developed specifically to meet the province's unique needs. With the Ontario Liberals facing re-election in 2007 they will likely be receptive to suggestions to improve relations with Ontario's huge immigrant community.

Canada's Immigration system has been rather dysfunctional for many years. It is slow, impersonal, unreceptive to economic realities, and largely unaccountable to anyone. The immigrant community might, or might not, finally be in a position to propose significant improvements to the system. Now is an ideal time to push all levels of government to develop policies that will assist worthy immigrants to come to Canada and ensure their successful integration when they arrive.