

Immigration Reforms and Universal Values

It appears that Citizenship and Immigration Minister Jason Kenney is truly living up to his reputation as an “energizer bunny” in that he just keeps on going with seemingly nonstop major changes to Canada’s immigration laws and regulations.

After all the recent changes that I summarized in last month’s article, the CIC Minister recently announced yet another major change. Simultaneous with the government’s annual budget announcement, Minister Kenney announced the plan to return the applications and refund the processing fees paid by most skilled worker applicants submitted before 27 February 2008. This is allegedly meant to eliminate the backlog and is estimated to affect about 300,000 applicants worldwide, while facilitating the implementation of a “fast and flexible” and “just in time” immigration. CIC states that the affected applicants are welcome to reapply under the new rules, but no doubt many of them will not anymore qualify or will be too burnt to even trust that CIC is still capable of treating their applications in a fair and expeditious manner.

Understandably, this recent news came as a shock to many, especially for those applicants affected and their families. Many of them have patiently waited in the queue for at least four years (and likely much more) in the hope that their permanent residence applications will eventually be given positive consideration. Most of these applicants (or their immigration lawyers and consultants) were unlikely to have expected something like this to happen - for many, it is almost like playing a game where the rules were suddenly changed midway, catching the players totally unaware and leaving them upset, confused and even angry. .

Many are questioning the implications of this development on the basic principles of fairness and on preserving the integrity of the immigration system. Whether CIC will backtrack and heed the critics, is yet to be seen. The CIC Minister has time and again announced that he is determined to reform the country’s immigration system and introduce a new one that will be responsive to the economic needs of Canada. Sadly, I think that this is partly where the problem lies – in putting too much emphasis on the economic dimension, often at the expense of all other relevant and equally important dimensions.

These neglected dimensions include the preservation of fundamental Canadian values of moral responsibility, family unity, human rights, among others. Although these values are not directly and clearly measured in economic terms, they should be given equal weight in any decision-making process involving matters as vital as immigration law and policy.

One cannot argue with the need to match immigrant skills with jobs that will utilize and maximize those skills. However, the proposed measure of allowing the “pre-screening” of applicants’ qualifications by the prospective employers and “choosing the best and the brightest” who can immediately contribute to the Canadian economy sounds like an oversimplification or a “quick fix” to a problem that took several years to develop.

The CIC Minister is often quoted as saying “it’s just common sense,” referring to his economic-based solutions to the current systemic problems surrounding Canada’s immigration programs.

Although the economic issues are admittedly important in ensuring the well-being of immigrants and their families, they should not be the sole basis of any reform initiative. The human dimension of immigration tends to get overlooked when the ultimate objective is measured solely in quantitative standards.

Some examples of this human dimension include the immigration objectives of family reunification, of providing refuge to those fleeing persecution in their home countries, and upholding international standards of human rights, peace and development.

If Canada’s immigration objectives are single-mindedly geared towards recruiting the “best and the brightest” from other nations, how different is that from the colonial and neo-colonial extraction of the natural resources of poor and less-developed countries? As a responsible member of the international community, and even as a self-proclaimed leader in upholding internationally accepted values, Canada should think twice about perpetuating exploitative practices that will only further the already grossly unequal distribution of wealth among nations and their peoples.

It also behooves Canada to treat everyone fairly, including those who seek to enter and live permanently in this country. Instead of imposing drastic measures such as returning their applications after patiently abiding by the rules, Canada should instead consider alternative but fair measures. .

For one, revamping the rules may well be an important part of the solution, but this should be complemented with continuing efforts to provide the necessary supports that are needed by the immigrants to become fully integrated in their new home. Even the “best and the brightest” will undoubtedly benefit from these support mechanisms to help familiarize themselves with their new environment and which will eventually allow them to thrive. Settlement programs should therefore be strengthened and revitalized as they are an important and crucial component to achieving a balanced, healthy, meaningful and successful immigration program.

Hopefully, our energetic and well-meaning CIC Minister will continue to heed reasonable and equally well-meaning voices in the ongoing quest for solutions to the longstanding problems in Canada’s immigration system. Understandably, diametrically opposed political ideologies can affect views as to where immigration reforms should be headed. However, these should not be allowed to serve as a deterrent towards achieving the universal goals of justice, fairness and humane treatment for all, whether in immigration or in other areas of public policy.

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