

An Open Letter to the Immigration Minister

Dear Minister McCallum:

First of all, this is to congratulate you on your appointment as the new Minister for Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship. Your and your party's election platform and promises, especially with respect to immigration policies, have given many people great hope for a better, fairer and more humane Canada.

Thank you for your leadership in the government's valiant efforts to admit and resettle as many Syrian and Iraqi refugees to Canada as soon as possible. We understand that resettling refugee families to Canada is literally about saving precious lives hence the extreme urgency of Canada's response to this great humanitarian crisis. We also understand that targets and timelines need to be adjusted but are glad that the noble objective of saving as many lives as possible, remain.

We trust that the current focus on Syrians and Iraqis however, will not lead to a neglect of Canada's commitment to resettle refugees from other parts of the world who were similarly forced to flee their homelands in search of peace and safety and whose applications may have been languishing for years at Canadian visa offices.

We also trust that that you have not forgotten the many other aspects of Canada's immigration policies which equally deserve immediate attention and corresponding action.

Among others, you must be well aware of the thousands of temporary foreign workers who have lived and toiled in Canada for years but who continue to live their lives in limbo either because of the lack of a clear path to permanent residence or due to the arbitrary refusal of their immigration applications stemming from human errors or unfortunate technicalities.

There are likewise numerous Canadians, permanent residents and foreign nationals in Canada, who have long been waiting to be reunited with their families in Canada. However, due to the ever-increasing processing times for sponsorship and other immigration applications, many of these families continue to endure prolonged and painful family separation.

It is welcome news that some of the existing problematic issues were specifically addressed by the Prime Minister in his mandate letter to you which states, among others, that:

- "As part of the Annual Immigration Levels Plan for 2016, bring forward a proposal to double the number of entry applications for parents and grandparents of immigrants to 10,000 a year.
- Increase the maximum age for dependents to 22, from 19, to allow more Canadians to bring their children to Canada.
- Develop a plan to reduce application processing times for sponsorship, citizenship and other visas.
- Modify the temporary foreign workers program to eliminate the \$1,000 Labour Market Impact Assessment fee to hire caregivers and work with provinces and territories to develop a system of regulated companies to hire caregivers on behalf of families."

In fairness, we do not expect all of your promised reforms to occur overnight. We understand that there are administrative and other relevant aspects to consider before these changes can be enacted and implemented. So we will wait, but hopefully, not for much longer.

Meanwhile, we also respectfully call your attention to a few related issues which deeply affect the Filipino community in Canada, particularly those who came as temporary foreign workers and/or as caregivers.

As you are well aware, the previous government introduced a myriad of changes to the Temporary Foreign Worker Program (TFWP) in general and to the Live-in Caregiver Program (LCP) in particular. While some of these changes have benefited some TFWs including caregivers, many more have in fact been prejudiced by these very same changes. More specifically:

- The four-year cumulative duration limit which mainly affects so-called low-skilled TFWs, have left many of these workers in limbo and/or working precariously in the underground economy. Having lived and worked in Canada for years and contributed their share in nation-building, it is only fair to grant them and their families the opportunity to permanently reside in this country instead of being removed after a limited period of stay.
- The creation of new pathways to permanent residence for caregivers as an alternative to the LCP may have some positive features (e.g. quick processing times and removal of the live-in requirement) but it has also imposed additional requirements on caregivers which prevent many of them from applying under these new pathways
- The new features which are causing hardship for many caregivers include the added cost of meeting minimum levels in the official English language test and education credential assessment, a second medical examination requirement (which had been removed under the LCP) and the limited ability to apply concurrently for open work permits .
- While many of those who applied for permanent residence under the new caregiver pathways are being processed quickly, those who applied for permanent residence under the LCP are still waiting several years (even lasting up to a decade!) for their applications to be finalized. As a result, many of them continue to suffer insecurity arising from their temporary status, on top of the sad consequences of prolonged family separation such as marital breakdown and estranged parent-child relationships.

Past experience proves that the introduction of piecemeal changes to the TFWP and the LCP will likely lead to further problems arising from precarious immigration status and the need to fulfil certain conditions before being granted permanent residence in Canada. If the TFWP is completely overhauled in that temporary workers are granted permanent residency at the outset, many of the issues identified above will be greatly reduced if not eliminated.

The grant of PR status upon arrival may sound too idealistic, even impossible - but not so, if there is strong political will. We are counting on you, Mr. McCallum, on Prime Minister Trudeau and the rest of your leadership team, to exercise that political will and to make true your promise of a government that will bring about "real change."

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