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# Debating Temporary Foreign Workers in B.C.

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Image by: Vancouver Public Library  
Railway workers, mostly Chinese immigrants, building the Canadian Pacific Railway near Golden, B.C., 1924.

## **B.C. is now taking in more temporary foreign workers than immigrants. Is it the railway all over again?**

Without immigration, B.C. would not have an economy, so experts in the field are perplexed by just how little attention the general public is paying to changes in immigration policy. More than a quarter of B.C.'s citizens were not born in Canada, and that number is growing fast, from 22.3 per cent in 1996 to 27.5 per cent at the time of the 2006 census, showing that B.C. is relying more and more on immigrants to bolster its population. But these numbers only tell of traditional immigrants, people who qualified to become Canadian citizens based on a points system that measures a list of virtues, such as language skills, employment opportunities and education. Those newcomers are being overshadowed by another group: temporary foreign workers, who are brought over just to meet short-term labour needs. The number of temporary workers brought in each year has more than doubled in B.C. since early this decade and in 2008 surpassed the number of permanent immigrants entering the province for the first time.

Discussing what these changes mean to B.C.'s society and economy are Kelly Pollack, executive director of the Immigrant Employment Council of B.C.; Tung Chan, CEO of Success, an immigrant-services organization; and David Green, head of UBC's department of economics.

**What is the state of the immigration debate in this country?**

**POLLACK:** I was in Ottawa at the beginning of the summer for a symposium on immigration policy with leading academics, policy makers and economists. What I walked away with was that our world is shifting and our demographics are changing so dramatically but we haven't had a good, informed discussion on immigration in Canada in quite some time. The federal government has responded recently both when the economy was booming and we had labour shortages, and when the economy took a downturn. But that discussion hasn't really been held at a public level, and I think it is time we had the discussion.

**CHAN:** We need to have a good debate. There are two ways you can look at immigration: One way is to look at it as a hiring hall, and when a job needs to be done, we bring someone in. The other way, you bring someone in and you all build a nation. I think that should really be the purpose of immigration. When our ancestors first got to this country, they never asked the First Nations people about their policy, so now that we're here why should we say, OK now we have to look at the economics of whether we need doctors or engineers? It is too short-sighted.

**GREEN:** Historically, there have always been times where the focus has been almost entirely on trying to fill gaps in the economy. So the points system allocates a certain amount of points for certain occupations. Sometime in about the early '90s, another notion became more the way that policy was run. It said, "This is for the long term, so we're going to emphasize flexibility and not necessarily just turn the tap on and off in recessions." So we've been down both routes in our history.

### **What are the major policy changes we're seeing today?**

**POLLACK:** While I don't criticize the federal government for responding to what's going on with the economy, sometimes we jump too quickly. What's happening is we're creating sort of a two-tiered immigration system: immigrants coming in through the points system and the temporary foreign workers. I would never say that we shouldn't have temporary foreign workers, but we want to make sure the system is evenly balanced, and I'm not sure we've done a great job. We know we aren't doing a great job with those immigrants that are in the system – they're often unemployed – while employers often need access to labour quickly, so there is this disconnect.

**CHAN:** Temporary foreign workers have always contributed to the economic activities of B.C. Some will want to simply come here, work and go back home, but many think, "I want to become part of this country." We need to have a very good pathway to help them become Canadians, and we don't. So they still undergo those cultural shocks – language barriers, isolation problems – but we have zero dollars to help them. The problem for those who stay is their initial experience is bad. And that is not the way to integrate them.

**GREEN:** In B.C. the number of temporary foreign workers has just been really ramped up, completely under the radar as a topic of public debate. Basically, what you're doing is bringing workers in on the notion that there are gaps in the economy, and if one cog is missing, the whole machine breaks down. But the notion of a gap is not an economic concept at all. What you would have potentially is excess demand for a product and then a price adjustment. So when there are "gaps" in the short run, price signals rise. So if we're going to intervene, we're basically saying we don't like the way the price structure is going to be, which is not something I think your readers really like the idea of.

It affects wages, and those spill into prices. In the temporary-foreign-worker program, they created this extra-accelerated program, which covered literally every occupation. So you could fly someone in for a Tim Hortons position, even in the Lower Mainland. Now, what's going to happen if you don't do that? Well, wages will get pushed up for the workers, some of those Tim Hortons may go under and others will just

push their prices up. Potentially, there were politicians who said, “I’m not willing to have the price of a coffee at Tim Hortons go that high.” And I don’t know why. I just don’t know why we’re doing some of what we’re doing.



*Our panellists. From left: David Green, Kelly Pollack, and Tung Chan.*

### **Is it even possible for immigration to respond quick enough to labour demands in a constantly changing economy?**

**CHAN:** While economically you can’t always predict a long-term cycle, I think it’s doable. But we use so much time trying to reach a short-term goal. If we look long term, we can work with a likely source country to figure out how we can help those people come here. We could help upgrade their training courses, for example, so that they’re recognized in Canada. We need to take the long-term, holistic approach, but for now we’re not there.

Success has an office in Fort St. John, of all places, and the local McDonald’s couldn’t find people to do their jobs. And they can’t jack up the prices because no matter how high they put it, Canadians won’t respond. So you need to find people outside of that economic system. It’s not dissimilar to when we built the trans-Canada railway and brought Chinese railway workers in. But what we need to do is think it through from end to end. What happens to those workers when the job is done? We haven’t had that debate.

**GREEN:** That’s an interesting example, because in some ways those workers are a proud part of our tradition. Our kids are taught about that in school because those were hard-working men who came and did a really awful job. But it’s also a point of great shame because they weren’t treated well on the job and they weren’t treated well afterward. With the temporary-foreign-worker program, it’s like we’re recreating it, and that’s the thing a lot of Canadians don’t know. The problem is we’re not treating it as a nation-building exercise. We’re not investing in these people as citizens; we’re investing in them as labour.

**POLLACK:** And we can’t have the debate in isolation of immigrant integration into both society and the labour market. When the economy was booming and we wanted to make sure we were getting the right people in, the government introduced the 38 top occupations they wanted to fast-track. One of those was physicians. But that’s a regulated profession and internationally trained doctors who come to Canada have a great deal of difficulty ever getting their credentials recognized. So there is a great disconnect, and we’re having a lot of trouble recognizing that.

### **Are we succeeding in helping new immigrants integrate into Canadian society?**

**CHAN:** I think we need to be very clear when we talk integration. Most data we've seen now show that recent immigrants are having a more difficult time achieving the same earning power. They are also talking about people not integrating socially. We're seeing, for example, an aggregation of South Asians in Surrey and Chinese in Richmond. So people are saying they're not integrating into a broader society. OK, what are we talking about? Are they living in Canada? Yes. Are they participating economically? Yes they are. Are they participating culturally? Yes, in their own culture, which is, in a multicultural society, as valid as any other culture. If that person just goes to watch Chinese opera, that is, by the Canadian definition, a part of Canada. So then, what are we talking about in difficulty integrating? We need clarification about that.

**GREEN:** If you go back and look at, say, the Irish coming to Ontario, you see a lot of the same concerns: "Oh, they only stay to themselves," "They don't take part in the culture." You look back on it now and you laugh. It's the same with Italian Canadians or Greek Canadians. Gradually, things dissipate. It's true what you said about economic integration; the most recent cohorts of immigrants are having a harder time. One of the things we should be paying more attention to is the second generation, which tends to integrate better. They usually have higher educational outcomes, higher outcomes on the economic side and, yeah, they start taking part in society on the broader side of things.

**POLLACK:** I think we focus too much on the occupational characteristics of the immigrant rather than the things that will help them integrate into society and the labour market, such as education, language and contacts, because these are some of the barriers that immigrants run into. Language is a critical one. We consistently hear back from employers that the biggest challenge they face is language levels, so someone's ability to actually function within a workplace.

**CHAN:** In Hong Kong and when I came here, I had a TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language) score of 250, which is almost the top of the scale, but I might not have been able to carry on a conversation. So language alone should not be the only determinant; that would be a mistake. But we need to do everything possible to help people, before they come here, to acquire English. I was in the banking sector before, and Scotiabank in Seoul, Korea, actually offered free English-language classes for people who had applied to come to Canada. Why? Because every account opened in 1996 was worth \$750, and if I spend \$200 teaching them English in Korea, I'm still ahead. So it doesn't always have to be the government.

**POLLACK:** Absolutely. But how do we get our employers to be part of the solution? Tung is right; there are some employers out there who are very progressive, but it's fairly narrow at this point.

**CHAN:** When I worked at TD, I told my HR person, "Look at me: yellow face, black hair. Send me to Chinatown and I'll get you lots of business." She said, "No, Tung. We're going to make you a good banker first." My first posting was West Vancouver. Not a lot of Chinese there. My second posting 18 months later? Kelowna. But those were the best things the bank did for me. I was lucky that I was in an environment where I could afford to learn, and many people that come here cannot do that. The people who read this magazine need to step up to the plate to help new Canadians integrate. I was talking to someone who recently immigrated to China, and he said when you're in China and you say you have international experience, they hire you first. In Canada it's just the opposite. If you have international experience but you don't have any Canadian experience? Go away!

**GREEN:** It actually shows up in the data. (It's always interesting when the things I do in my office actually turn out to be useful.) If you look at determinants of earnings over the last 15 years, the returns to an extra year of Canadian experience is an extra three per cent, but a year of international experience returns zero per cent, and some years it actually comes out as a negative.

**CHAN:** We've got to change the attitude.

**POLLACK:** That is the challenge. It's happening far too slowly. How many employers not only hire immigrants but consciously think about it and build it into their business plans, not their HR plans? It's a shift in thinking. And it isn't about me telling them why it is the nice thing to do; it makes sense because we're all part of nation building, and they're part of building their businesses. So in Tung's example, even though he had language challenges, his employers still recognized all of the other skills and attributes that he had and kept him.

### **What is working in our immigration system, and what isn't?**

**CHAN:** I think that governments are working in tandem with each other. We now have a federal representative on our first ministers' table, and the labour ministers have a working group on trying to tackle the foreign-credential recognition process. That's working together as a country; at least, it's beginning to. What is not working is the business sector. Businesspeople are not responding. We need to put more into it, not for altruistic reasons but for businesses' survival and for prosperity, because the demographic is changing.

**POLLACK:** I don't completely agree that the business community is not working. It isn't as black and white as that. I think what we need to do is see immigrant employment as a system in the same way we talk about the education system and the health-care system. And in those systems, the government has a role in regulating and providing dollars for programs. I don't think we've invested a lot in giving the employers the necessary tools, the resources and the education they need.

**GREEN:** What I think is working is immigration. The fact that Canada has a constant infusion of new blood is what makes Canada work. What's not working is policy in general. It's contradictory at different levels, it's not integrated with non-immigration policy and it's not really being sold to Canadians on the level of nation building. If you just stress it the way we have been as filling gaps, you should expect everyone to just want to shut it down eventually because they're going to want to see the bottom line all the time. But the point is, if it's part of something bigger, then that's not the way we look at it. And just as Kelly said earlier, we have not had a real conversation about it.

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