



THE NEED TO WELCOME REFUGEES AND IMMIGRANTS – AND ESTABLISHING LEADERSHIP BY WELCOMING MORE...

OLIVIA CHOW
DISTINGUISHED VISITING PROFESSOR, RYERSON UNIVERSITY

Editor's Note

The following text is an edited version of the keynote address delivered on May 13, 2015, at the 8th Annual Conference of the Canadian Association for Refugee and Forced Migration Studies (CARFMS) at Ryerson University, Toronto.

Thank you all for your warm welcome. Today it is my job to welcome you, especially, the visitors to the City of Toronto, and to this annual conference. I want to talk about the concept and the notion of “welcome”. There is a necessity for all of us to welcome more refugees and migrants here in Canada. There is a desperate need of asylum that is faced by so many people around the world.

Canada has been at its best when we have welcomed waves of immigrants and refugees. There are many proud moments in our history. But, we have been at our worst, when we have closed the doors – and there are many shameful moments in our history. Our current federal Government has been taking us backward in this regard. Yet, with the current disparate needs in the world, Canada could and should be establishing its leadership on this issue by welcoming more people who are in need of asylum.

Not only will newcomers integrate quickly when we provide strong, comprehensive settlement services, they can become fully productive citizens of Canadian society.

Canada has been described as a “nation of immigrants.” That is what we are. That’s what I am, and what many others here are. We are all “new comers” to Canada. And, if not first generation, like me, then they are second or third or fourth or fifth or sixth generation immigrants. The majority of Canadians today descend from people who have immigrated to Canada in the past century.

And our history clearly demonstrates that we have experienced successive waves of immigrants from different parts of the world. In 1913, Canada admitted a phenomenal 400,870 people or an immigration rate of 52.5 (per 1,000). That is a number that has never been equalled since.

That was the culmination of a decade of welcoming millions here. In the ten year period, 1905 to 1915, Canada received more than 2.5 million immigrants or more than 250,000 immigrants per year.

That was when our total population was a fraction what it is today. A hundred years later, we should be doing much more. But this is about the net average annual immigration level that Canada has received over the last 25 years, for a total addition of about 6.2 million people to Canada’s population, spread over 25 years.

This is only about 18 percent of Canada’s current population of about 35 million people over the period. We can certainly do much more. We must do more.

Many who have come to settle in Canada have been forced to do so. They are refugees and/or other forced migrants. They have been forced to leave their homes involuntarily, because of war, famine, natural catastrophe, persecution, and discrimination. They have arrived in Canada in search of freedom, security, and a life of human dignity in mutual respect and understanding.

And, while our strength and national identity has been based on this immigrant experience, there are many dark chapters in our history.

Here are some examples of what we can look back on, with utter shame:

Turning away the Jewish refugees in the 1930s, under Mackenzie King (including turning away the refugee ship, *MS St. Louis* – anti-Semitism played a big part.)

The *MS St. Louis* was a German ocean liner in 1939, trying to find homes for 915 Jewish refugees from Germany, after they were denied entry to Cuba, the United States, and Canada, when it closed its doors to these refugees. Historians have estimated that, after the Jewish refugees were forced to return to Europe, approximately a quarter of the ship's passengers died in concentration camps.

Komagata Maru, sailed in 1914 from Hong Kong, and landed in Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada, carrying 376 passengers from Punjab, British India. 352 passengers were not allowed to land in Canada, and the ship was forced to return to India, some to their death.

About a century later, consider the treatment of Tamils on the MV Sun Sea in August 2010, when 492 Tamils undertook in a three-month voyage that included some 49 children and youth. When they arrived in Vancouver they were detained, searched, with the current government opposing vigorously their release by the Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada and contesting orders of release in the Federal Court, even in cases involving children. This was a real disgrace.

Now, let's consider Syrian refugees. We are not welcoming nearly enough of the three million people who have been forcibly displaced in Syria. Canada has committed to resettle just 10,000 Syrian refugees over the coming three years.

This is far short of what is required as there is no firm commitment of how many would arrive in

2015. Further, Canada's Syrian resettlement commitment will need to be accommodated within its existing resettlement numbers. This would mean that the commitment to the Syrian refugees is at the expense of other refugees, who are also very much in need of resettlement. We are thinking, in particular, of refugees in Africa, who have long been neglected.

As you may know, in December 2011, the then Citizenship and Immigration Minister, Jason Kenney, announced, at a meeting commemorating the 60th anniversary of the *1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees*, on the world stage in Geneva that, "We pledge to increase the number of refugees we resettle by 20%." Now, that would be 5,000 extra refugees per year. Not a lot, but better than nothing. However, this commitment seems to have amounted to nothing. It does not appear that this pledge has been met.

In 2011, Canada's target for resettled refugees, at the low end, was 11,200 and Canada, in fact, resettled just under 13,000 refugees. The low end target for 2015 is just 11,900. Not an increase of 20 percent. Rather, a sad decline and an abysmal failure. The UNHCR's request for Syria is in addition to its annual appeal for resettlement numbers. The Government of Canada's response should be the same.

We need to welcome more and this should be based on need. Refugees should be selected for resettlement on the basis of need, and without discrimination based on religion, Muslim or any other religious minorities.

Like many of you, I have been deeply concerned at reports at the end of last year that the Canadian Government may be considering restricting its commitment to resettle Syrian refugees to religious minorities. In 2012, in selecting priority populations for resettlement to Canada from among refugee groups recommended by the UNHCR, the Minister of Citizenship and Immigration rejected Somalis and Afghans, two populations that are mostly Muslim. More recently the Government stated that it will give priority to religious minorities in responding to Syrian refugees, thereby, implying discrimination against Muslim Syrians.

To enable us to welcome more, family members should be able, of course, to help.

There should be special measures for Syrians with family in Canada. Temporary Resident Permits, with the possibility of access to permanent residence later, would allow for a response to people still within Syria, who cannot benefit from the Government's resettlement program.

But, sadly in Canada, we are seeing increasing difficulties for family reunification -- shades of the disgraceful Chinese Head Tax. And, this is sheer craziness, because strengthening families is a basis of a stronger community and a stronger country, and a more stable society. But, the wait for sponsoring your children is now 17 months. And, it is three years for children who are the family members of refugees. And, if you happen to be from Africa it is four years. This type of separation is cruel and definitely not healthy. We need to speed things up.

We also need to help people more – welcome them better when they arrive. It is very troubling to see the impact of the cuts to the Interim Federal Health Program in June 2012. Despite the restoration of some services in November 2014, privately sponsored refugees continue to be denied Interim Federal Health Program coverage for medications and prostheses. This is shameful conduct on the part of our Canadian Government.

Now let's consider welcoming Temporary Foreign Workers (TFW). The Government has taken us backwards with the four year rule. But, clearly, if people are good enough to work here, they should be good enough to stay here.

We should be pledging long term work. Not just seasonal employment. Moreover, there has been a tremendous growth of numbers. Far more TFW have been admitted to Canada than refugees and other forced migrants.

We need to do more, and ensure that this era in our history is not part of the shameful past, but, part of a hopeful future reflecting the proudest moments in our history.

Canadians have shown that we know how to open doors and welcome refugees.

Here are some things we can look back on, with pride:

Consider the response to the Irish in 1847 in the then new City of Toronto – this should be our model. In a few short months, close to 40,000 Irish escaping the great famine in Ireland arrived in Toronto, which had only a 20,000 population at the time. This was an extraordinary mass influx of refugees to our City of Toronto.

Civic and religious leaders were sympathetic, gained popular support, established a Board of Health –

welcomed the immigrants and made it work. And we saw magnificent heroism. Dr. George Robert Grasett was the Chief Medical Officer at Toronto's Emigrant Hospital (Fever Sheds).

In 1847, Dr. Grasett died of typhus while treating recently-landed Irish migrants. So did nurse Susanne Baily and Edward McElderry. But, they worked tirelessly to save thousands of refugees. It was a truly phenomenal humanitarian gesture and should be an inspiration to us all.

That is what we need to remember, today. Welcoming people, and helping them when they arrive regardless of their status or religion or origin, or state of health.

In 1969, Canada became a signatory to the *1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees* and its *1967 Protocol*. And, we did make some progress:

About 5,700 Ugandan Asians who were expelled in 1972 by Dictator Idi Amin were welcomed to Canada. Some 7,000 Chileans who opposed General Augusto Pinochet after he seized power in a coup d'état in 1973 were welcomed to Canada.

Throughout our history, we occasionally stood up for those humanitarian ideals we hold dear, that have recognized and honored fundamental human rights and the respect for human dignity.

We have had moments of pride, when we demonstrated that Canada can serve as a refuge for the world's oppressed and those who seek freedom and a better life.

Consider as well, the Vietnamese boat people... Canada accepted some 77,000 Indo-Chinese refugees or "boat people" at the end of the Vietnam War from 1975, and the fall of Saigon, to 1981. Many of those who arrived in Canada came through the Canadian Private Refugee Sponsorship Program. In fact, Canadians right across the country came together to sponsor the Indo-Chinese refugees who were fleeing not only Vietnam but also Cambodia and Laos.

The plight of the Indo-Chinese refugees touched me personally, as a young university student. It triggered my first involvement with politics and social activism.

Canada showed leadership by opening the doors. This was during the short lived Joe Clark Conservative Government and when Flora MacDonald was Canada's Minister of Foreign Affairs. Canada showed real leadership in the world on the Indo-Chinese refugee crisis at this time.

From the mid-1970s to the end of the 1980s, the Canadian Government, and some 7,500 Canadian private sponsors, brought 120,000 Indo-Chinese refugees to Canada. This still remains the single largest resettlement program in Canada's history. Indeed, since the mid-1970s Canadians have welcomed more than 200,000 Indo-Chinese refugees alone to Canada.

Indeed, Canada's contribution to the plight of the world's refugees was recognized when the "people of Canada" were honored by the UNHCR in 1986 with the Nansen Medal. This has been the only time that the UNHCR has ever awarded the Nansen Medal to a "people."

I truly believe most Canadians would like to see this kind of leadership in our refugee and immigration policies.

And that means welcoming more – but also doing more to help refugees and other forced migrants.

To welcome refugees and immigrants by establishing leadership with strong settlement services and, especially, mental health services, to help to ensure that these people can successfully integrate and settle in Canada.

We are known for the provision of our settlement services to newcomers in Canada. Canadians are a generous people at heart.

We need to consider and help welcome with mental health services, which can be vital for immigrants and refugees dealing with a new land, culture, and language, and usually with poverty.

This was my mom's experience. My father was unable to find good employment when we immigrated to Canada when I was 13 years old. And, the strains on his mental health led to domestic violence and to great challenges for my mother. But, there was really nowhere to turn back in the 1970s for immigrants with little English and few family ties.

We need to do more.

Canadians are at our best when accepting, and strengthening our society through diversity. We are at our best when we are beacons of light and hope when we demonstrate our positive and uplifting values. We truly do have humanitarian ideals and traditions – let us continue to build on those.

But, when we allow for racist policies in immigration or close ourselves off to differences of race or religion or culture we diminish ourselves not only as Canadians but as human beings. Openness, acceptance and diversity are part of our identity as Canadians and are critical for demonstrating leadership. Fostering belongingness, which starts with welcoming newcomers and especially the world’s most vulnerable, refugees, is absolutely in line with our most basic values and our positive humanitarian traditions and that strike at the very core of what it means to be a Canadian.

So let us open our doors to those in their hour of need and who are seeking refuge from persecution and/or who are searching to live a life of human dignity, to which we are all entitled by virtue of being human beings. Refugees are escaping despair, trauma, oppression, imprisonment, rape, torture, civil war, abuse, family rupture and loss, culture shock, language barriers, poverty... and so on. Unimaginable stresses.

Just as Torontonians opened their doors and provided health services heroically to the Irish refugees in 1847, we should show leadership with the provision of social, economic, medical, including, mental health, services today.

Let’s consider the opportunities to transform despair to hope.

That is the true Canadian spirit.

Let’s become who we are.

Let’s learn how to welcome. Welcoming more, and doing more.