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Tories tread carefully on immigration policy

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The federal Conservatives are bringing in record numbers of immigrants, while clamping down on illegal refugees and the wearing of the veil, in an effort to placate their socially conservative base and yet still woo immigrant voters.

The key, for the government, is to inject a socially conservative tone into the multicultural debate, while not tampering with the fundamentals.

David Cameron in Britain, Angela Merkel in Germany and Nicolas Sarkozy in France have all declared that multiculturalism is a failure in their country, leading to large, estranged, racially and religiously defined subcultures.

But in Canada, which has been able to control who comes into the country more successfully than its European counterparts, support for immigration and multiculturalism remains robust, according to recent polls. The Harper government, which has embraced immigration as a driver of the Canadian economy, has announced that 280,636 immigrants came to Canada in 2010, the most in 57 years.

“This government is focused on the priorities of Canadians, which are economic growth and prosperity,” Immigration Minister Jason Kenney told the House of Commons on Monday. “We need more newcomers working and paying taxes and contributing to our health-care system.”

Afzal Syed, a Pakistani-born accountant who lives in Mississauga, says he generally votes Liberal. But the Tories' emphasis on bringing in more economic-class immigrants might be enough to make him change his mind.

“[Mr.] Kenney is steering the wheel the right way and trying to meet the country's economic needs,” he said.

But Sharry Aiken, an associate dean at Queen's University's law faculty, is concerned that this economic emphasis comes at the expense of family-class immigrants, whose numbers have been reduced.

Being able to bring over family members “is the underpinning of successful integration” of immigrants into Canadian society, she maintained.

The Conservatives are also supporting a private member's bill that would force voters to show their faces when casting ballots in federal elections.

Mr. Kenney said it is “entirely reasonable” to ask people to show their faces at a polling booth. But Justin Trudeau, Liberal Immigration critic, pointed out that Elections Canada does not require

voters to produce photo identification.

“All they’re doing is further ramping up division and fear and inciting mistrust around a problem that honestly doesn’t exist,” he said.

The move has upset Rajini Tarcicius, a Toronto immigration settlement worker, who says the prospect of such a policy has created a great deal of sadness and confusion in at least one family she works with. She is also concerned about recently announced cuts to settlement agencies tasked with helping immigrants integrate into Canadian society.

“Stephen Harper’s party is not immigrant-friendly,” Ms. Tarcicius said.

But it is of a piece with previous Conservative policies of encouraging immigration but on the government’s terms. Mr. Kenney brought out a citizenship guide that promoted a more forceful approach to the responsibilities of new Canadians.

And while the Conservatives have kept government-sponsored refugee levels steady, they have already passed a bill that would accelerate the process for expelling false claimants, and have introduced legislation to intern claimants who arrive en masse.

Arash Abizadeh, who teaches political science at McGill University, considers the proposed refugee law “outrageous,” because it punishes people who have already been victimized by human smugglers. “It’s a violation of the standards of a liberal democratic society,” he maintains.

But Mr. Kenney insists immigrants themselves are the first to complain about refugees claimants who jump the queues they waited in.

How successfully the Conservatives calibrate their policy of maintaining a high migration intake while circumscribing but not undermining the fundamentals of multiculturalism could well determine their success in an election in which new Canadians dominate many of the suburban ridings where parties' fates are decided.

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