



## **Immigration Crucial To Our Future**

By Dr. Lorne Foster

The first census figures of the new millennium, released recently by Statistics Canada, show that Canada's population growth rate has slowed to an all-time low.

The country's population reached 30,007,094 in 2001, representing a 4-per-cent increase since the 1996 census, which matches the lowest five-year growth rate in Canadian history.

Suffice it to say, Canada's future will only be as sound as its long-term population policy plans and immigration strategy.

In light of the new census data, statisticians forecast that the population will stop growing entirely without increased immigration. In fact, just to stand still in terms of population, we are going to have to increase our immigration every year, because Canada's fertility rate is just 1.5 children (the average number of children a woman will have over her lifetime), well below the rate of 2.1 children per woman needed to sustain the current population. Forty-five years ago, the average Canadian woman had four children over her lifetime.

Today, approximately half of Canada's current population growth comes from immigration. However, given the decline of domestic birth rates, by 2011 newcomers will likely account for all the growth in Canada's labour force. By 2026 they will be responsible for all growth in the country's overall population.

According to the demography guru, Joseph Chamie, Director of the United Nations Population Division, immigration will become one of the most crucial issues of the century for countries such as Canada that have declining birth rates. As a result, he predicts a kind of global immigration selection and recruitment contest in the not so distant future, where we will have to compete with other countries for "talented, skilled, unskilled and semi-skilled workers."

Unfortunately, this may not bode well for Canada.

Despite the international marketing tool of multicultural diversity, little has been done in everyday Canadian life to actually protect it. Immigrants have long endured racial abuse and discrimination in the fields of employment, education, housing, and government services. Licensed occupations, including medicine and dentistry, continue to impose restrictions and deny accreditation, which results in blocking the entry of immigrants with foreign degrees or credentials outside Canada.

In a corroborative research report by Ekuwa Smith for the Canadian Council on Social Development, she points out that the employment rate for immigrants who have arrived in Canada since 1985 and been here for five years was only 68 per cent in 1996, down from 86 per cent 15 years earlier. Even with the economic recovery in the late '90s, poverty among recent immigrants in 1998 stood at 27 per cent overall, including a crushing 41% of racial minorities. This is compared to a 13 per cent rate among the rest of the Canadian population. In addition, their pay was a third less.

“Unfortunately, the situation of recent immigrants compared to other Canadians has worsened considerably. Almost all the new jobs created in the period from 1988-1999 were part-time or self-employment ... [And] there was little new hiring in larger private and public sector workplaces that offer more security and chances for promotion ... Since three out of four of these recent immigrants are visible minorities, we must also recognize the impact of racial discrimination on employment, income and poverty,” the report concludes.

But cities, which receive most of these immigrants, the provinces and the federal government aren't doing enough about the problem. “Mostly it is left to the labour market and the little that immigrant organizations can do on their own,” said the author Smith.

What's needed, Smith capsulated, are effective policies on employment equity, recognizing and promoting the hidden skills of new immigrants to prospective employers, better language and skill training programs and methods to speed the recognition of foreign credentials.

Of course, the difficulty of enacting a comprehensive population policy that capitalizes on immigration by empowering immigrants is the general state of denial in the country regarding diversity issues. Canadians by and large have not yet confronted the reality and challenges of a racially and culturally diverse society, and are reluctant to endorse creative and far-sighted measures that encourage inclusiveness and accommodation. So, rather than being more expansive in their thinking about the importance of immigration for society-building in the global age, they are developing fortress mentality to preserve the entrenched interests of the status quo, to the detriment of the whole and the future.

In the end, however, as all census-indicators now confirm, the dictates of history will not be ignored, and diversity will either be cultivated or suffered.