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## **Ontario Liberal plan to aid immigrant employment raises question of fairness**

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### **Proposal aims to provide tax credits for employers who hire professionals new to Canada**

Fairness. It has become a buzzword in immigrant communities and on the Ontario election trail, prompted by a contentious election pledge by the Liberals to introduce a training tax credit for employers who hire immigrant professionals.

That debate centres on what assistance the province should give to new Canadians and immigrant communities, vote-rich groups that every party in this election are trying to bring into the fold.

Most politicians across party lines share the same baseline assumptions of what services are essential for new Canadians - immediate help upon arrival in the country, access to language instruction and more recognition of international credentials and experience.

Beyond that, however, what exactly is fair? How much special attention should immigrant communities receive?

"People want to accelerate their licences, to get recognized as a professional," said Wafik Sunbaty, Progressive Conservative candidate for Mississauga-Streetsville and an engineer who came to Canada from Egypt in 1994. "But I'm not waiting for a tax credit. Give me the job!"

"In some ways, people who are new to Canada need extra services to help integrate," said Jagmeet Singh, NDP candidate in Bramalea-Gore-Malton. But over all, "in terms of policies, new Canadians feel that their concerns are similar to everyone else's concerns."

**But statistics show that immigrants are still underperforming economically. Less than one in four internationally educated immigrants work in the field for which they trained. Too many are working in service jobs, the only ones they can get. It's worse for recent immigrants, who now have an unemployment rate more than double that of people born in Canada, according to a July, 2011, York University study. In economic terms, their work experience overseas counts for nothing - it results in no salary benefit once they arrive in Canada.**

Anton Norbert of Brampton, Ont., immigrated from Sri Lanka 13 years ago, and got jobs in telecommunications despite his passion for the airline industry, in which he'd worked in a senior capacity in Sri Lanka and Europe. The 51-year-old married father of three has been out of work since February and wouldn't qualify for the Liberals' tax credit.

"I feel like I've been pigeonholed in telecommunications, despite all my other soft skills," Mr. Norbert said.

Cases like Mr. Norbert's are hard to solve because of built-in problems in the labour market, and because governments find it difficult to bend that market to place immigrants in their desired jobs.

Many cite the inherent and natural risk-aversion of small business, the would-be employers of many immigrants.

"They don't have HR people," says Ratna Omidvar of the Maytree Foundation. Nor do they have the time or inclination to examine an immigrant's international credentials - especially with those with Canadian experience waiting in the wings.

**Connecting immigrants to employed mentors is a proven benefit, says Ryerson University's John Shields. Mentors provide a network for future employment and help new Canadians get the soft skills they need to succeed in an unfamiliar workplace.**



**"The problem is that mentorship programs are small-scale and labour-intensive," Prof. Shields said. And if a government tried to create a wide-ranging mentorship program open only to new Canadians, the cries of unfairness would likely rise again.**

Guessing what the labour market will require, and picking immigrants accordingly, is tough. In the early 2000s, after the tech crash, this led to a glut of internationally trained, unemployed information technology workers.

For many in the immigrant community, breaking the implied promise of immigration - that you get to work in your chosen field - is a manifestation of unfairness.

Governments could move to abolish Canadian experience requirements in some professions altogether. "We may get to that place, in 20 years," said Ms. Omidvar - but likely not without battling well-resourced professional colleges, who would say that fairness does not imply absolute equality.

Governments can also try to help immigrants by pushing for wider policy change, inviting battles with other levels of government in the process.

Ontario has pushed for changes to the Employment Insurance regime that would help those in immigrant-heavy suburban and urban areas qualify for EI more easily. The Federation of Canadian Municipalities this week said immigrants need more than just settlement services: They need better housing and public transit, too.

What's fair? The skirmish over the immigrant training tax credit shows two different philosophies at play - one that focuses on additional help for those who need it most, and one that takes a "rising tide lifts all boats" approach. The political and policy debate shows that those philosophies are still very much in dispute.

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