

Canada's immigration system is broken, but not beyond repair

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Canada's immigration system is broken. There is little question about it. Unless you are a skilled tradesperson, engineer, or scientist, pretty much forget about coming to Canada to become a permanent part of our country.

That's not how it used to be. Canada was built by people coming here in search of a better life, often working in factories, on farms, or whatever job needed doing, with the hope that the next generation would have a brighter future. But somehow over the past thirty years, we have gone away from that ideal. Now the message to the world seems to be: send us your best and brightest, but nobody else.

Nowhere is this more evident than the expulsion of thousands of Temporary Foreign Workers (TFWs) currently underway. As of April 1, tens of thousands of TFW workers across Canada are being forced to leave. The impact on our communities, including many small businesses, is enormous, and will only get worse, as each passing day means more expired work permits.

According to a change to federal rules back in 2011, TFWs are only allowed to stay a maximum of four years, after which they must leave the country for at least another four. As a result, a large number of work visas expired as of April 1 this year. These are people who came to our country, worked hard, adjusted to life in Canada, and are being shown the door. What a sad and unproductive shame for our country.

Perhaps it isn't surprising. Myths, misconceptions and controversy have continued to plague the Temporary Foreign Worker Program (TFWP) and resulted in ill-advised changes announced by the federal government last June. The changes, coupled with the April 1st deadline, are cutting a vital lifeline for many employers and essentially barring them from utilizing the program in

the specific sectors where not enough Canadians are available to fill low-skilled and semi-skilled jobs.

There continues to be a major mismatch in Canada's labour market. Even though the economy may have slowed a bit, labour and skills shortages still exist in many sectors and regions. Employers are raising wages, improving work flexibility, and looking harder than ever to find enough qualified people. But there still aren't enough Canadians available and willing to work in certain jobs. The challenge is particularly daunting in smaller and more remote communities.

Through the new Express Entry immigration system, the federal government, to its credit, is trying to help employers retain TFWs who are filling more skilled positions and allowing them a pathway to become permanent residents, and eventually Canadian citizens. Provincial immigrant nominee programs also help bring in more skilled immigrants. Unfortunately, for the most part, no such pathway exists for TFWs with more junior skill sets.

We need people immigrating to our country who are aligned with the needs in the economy at all skill levels. That is exactly how Canada was built. In response to these chronic challenges, CFIB has developed a longer-term solution to these challenges that makes better sense for employers while honouring Canada's immigrant tradition. CFIB is calling for the TFW program to be replaced with a new "Introduction to Canada Visa".

Instead of a temporary program, the visa would be the first step toward citizenship, and targeted to workers with more junior skill sets. CFIB's proposed visa would simultaneously address critical shortages for small businesses while providing a clear path for immigrant workers to become a permanent part of our economy, and a permanent part of our communities.

CFIB's proposed new visa would allow immigrant workers in more junior-level categories an opportunity to work with an employer for two years while they integrate into the Canadian economy and adjust to their local environment. At that point, the worker would become eligible to take the permanent residency track.

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There would, of course, need to be strict national and provincial enforcement of the rules, including: paying the same wages for the Intro Visa worker as are being paid to Canadians in each business, requiring employers to have at least one Canadian employee for every Intro Visa worker at same wage rate, and allowing workers to switch employers (but not sectors or regions), if commitments to them are not met.

Hopefully, more and more Canadians will realize that the TFW program isn't really the problem, it's really just a symptom of a bigger malady: an immigration system that is not fully aligned with the needs in the economy, and is not positioned to support our country's long-term growth.

The Introduction to Canada Visa proposal makes sense for all regions and sectors of Canada's economy, and will support our communities, especially in a place like Alberta. Canada's immigration system is broken, but it is certainly not beyond repair.



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