

**‘DOOMED TO DISAPPEAR’:  
CANADIAN SOCIETY AND CULTURE FACES POST-WAR  
IMMIGRATION**

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*Abstract*

Immigration to Canada after 1945 dramatically altered the demographic complexion of the country. Typically, Canada's experience is pointed to as an example of admirable tolerance of newcomers and diverse cultures. This paper charts the magnitude of Canada's transformation from a pre-WWII society marked by intolerance to one in which multicultural policies are held out as the chief expression of inclusivity and it is argued here that that change has been a product principally of economic necessity.

In the western industrialized nations the demography of the period since 1945 has been dominated by the baby boom. No other demographic 'event' had such far reaching effects on our societies. While this is undeniably true in many respects, it is possible to overstate the case to the extent that other factors are neglected. In 1939, according to historian Desmond Morton, Canada was 'a poor country, full of people who were generous to those they knew, mean-spirited to those they didn't, and harsh about the distinctions.'<sup>1</sup> The society of Canada that was to receive immigrants after World War II was one in which intolerance was not only evident but enshrined in legislation at the Federal and provincial levels. British Columbia's notorious anti-Asian laws were only one part of this array.<sup>2</sup> Quebec's Padlock Laws, Ottawa's long legacy of restrictions on Asian immigration, the unenviable position of First Nations peoples throughout this period and, most infamously, the internment and subsequent forced exile of many Japanese Canadians from 1942 on indicate the depth of xenophobia.<sup>3</sup> By 1964, however, every adult man and woman in the country, with the exception of lunatics and criminals, had a vote. Racism - institutionalized, formalized and systematic - was in the process of being dismantled. In the 1970s celebrations of a pluralist (rather than dualist) culture were witnessed throughout English Canada and even, to some degree, in Quebec. In 1971 the first multiculturalism legislation was introduced by the federal Liberals and, in the next decade, the Mulroney government furthered Ottawa's commitment to pluralism. And well it might: in the years from 1991 to the present 190,000 people moved to British Columbia, roughly half from Hong Kong, the People's Republic of China and Taiwan.<sup>4</sup>

These legal and attitudinal changes may have been supported by the more liberal attitudes of baby boomers, but the catalyst of change was clearly increased immigration after the war. A 1984 Ottawa-sponsored think-tank on population change in Canada was far from prescient when it concluded that:

The population is the most essential foundation of a society. This means not just the number of people, but also the characteristics and quality of the individuals that make up the society. All were taken for granted in the past, but both eastern and western industrialized countries are entering a new era when their populations are no longer renewing themselves and are aging. If fertility remains at the levels noted in the past fifteen years, all these populations are doomed to disappear gradually unless this shortage is made up through immigration. Recourse to this process, however, presents another problem: in the long term, our society would practically be replaced by another.<sup>5</sup>

*Our society*, if represented by a national family photograph taken in 1939, had long been replaced by another.

In this paper I survey some of the main features of this wave of immigration, identifying how it differs and resembles the great nineteenth century waves which had preceded it. But mainly I examine the ways in which the post-war immigration affected Canadian society as a whole, and how it was experienced, too, by the immigrants themselves. The chief reference point is the experience of the Pacific province simply because the demographic transformation that British Columbia has witnessed since 1945 but especially since 1980 represents an extreme and enlightening trajectory in Canada, perhaps the fullest test of the era of multicultural policies.<sup>6</sup>

Down to 1914 the numbers of landed immigrants were rising annually to a peak of nearly 350,000 in 1911. The effect of the Great War was to interrupt the arrival of newcomers. From 1916 to 1926 the numbers rose from 50,000 to about a quarter million. The end of economic prosperity in the late 1920s killed in-migration for another decade while emigration rose. Even before the end of hostilities in the Second World War, however, the rate of new arrivals was beginning to recover. After 1945 it would never reach levels attained in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, but it would achieve a buoyancy that had not hitherto been witnessed. From 1945 to the 1990s more than six million people arrived in Canada, as many as 282,000 in one year alone.<sup>7</sup> In 1941 there were only 11.5 million people in Canada; the addition of more than half that number by immigration, even over a half century, begs a serious consideration of what "Canada" meant for the WWII generation and what it can possibly mean now.

In 1945 - and well into the 1950s - there was a strong public and political resistance to immigration which was rooted largely in economic concerns. Anxieties about the impact of newcomers on culture were vocal, predictably more so in Quebec than anywhere else.<sup>8</sup> And the residuum of wartime animosities was slow to disappear (witness the deportation of Japanese-Canadians after 1945 and the rapid 'assimilation' and disappearance

of Germanic Canadians).<sup>9</sup> More general, however, was the belief that newcomers would tend to create an oversupply of labour, leading to a downward spiral in wages, higher unemployment, displacement of skilled native-Canadians who would head to the USA, and an inevitable return to 1930s-style depression.<sup>10</sup>

These anxieties were slow to lift but rising demands for labour clearly played a critical role. Prime Minister William Lyon Mackenzie King hit upon a characteristically inoffensive compromise policy in this respect, opening the door to greater numbers while emphasizing preferential treatment for 'sponsored relatives', a feature that (a) reassured Quebec, and (b) favoured immigration from 'traditional' sources.<sup>11</sup> Coupled to this were policy initiatives meant to dismantle the anti-Asian framework in place. South Asians and Chinese-Canadians received the vote in 1947 and Japanese Canadians did so in 1949. Outwardly more significant was the repeal of the 1921 Chinese Immigration Act in 1947, but this was effectively nullified by Mao's revolution, which cut off much of the supply of Chinese immigrants after 1949.<sup>12</sup> Realistically, Ottawa's change of heart toward Asians did not extend much farther than allowing into the country a small quota of about 300 Indians, Pakistanis, and Sri Lankans in 1951.<sup>13</sup>

Subsequent administrations did progressively less. Under John Diefenbaker - perhaps ironically Canada's first 'ethnic' Prime Minister - policy continued to pull in opposite directions. The Tories increased the quota from non-traditional sources but in 1962 funding for overseas recruitment offices dried up. At that time there were 28 such offices in Europe and only three more elsewhere. In any event, Diefenbaker had sent a clearly negative signal to the Asian-Canadian community in 1959-60 with police raids on Chinese-Canadian organizations in response to tales of illegal immigration.<sup>14</sup>

These latter developments were pivotal in driving the 'ethnic' vote away from the Conservatives and into the Liberal camp by the mid-1960s. What made this significant was the distribution of the post-war newcomer population and its economic position. Late nineteenth and early twentieth century waves of immigrants had been overwhelmingly oriented to new agricultural regions like the prairies, the Peace District, and BC's fertile Okanagan Valley. One consequence was that Canadian nativism was rooted in an urban fear of the cultural, political and moral impact of eastern Europeans in rural Canada - which includes remote resource extraction centres in the Nickel Belt of Ontario, BC's Kootenays, and in coal mining communities from Cape Breton to Vancouver Island.<sup>15</sup>

Post-war immigration, by contrast, was dominated by skilled urban workers. They concentrated in Toronto, Montreal, Hamilton, Halifax, Winnipeg and Vancouver.<sup>16</sup> They provided the wherewithal for growth in important industrial sectors at a time when as few as 46% of high school-age Canadians were actually in school getting skills.<sup>17</sup> The immediate failure of

the Canadian education system to meet the demand for skills was to work to the advantage of immigrants who were able to fill these niches and enjoy a rising standard of living. All of which made the new Canadians of the 1950s and 1960s an increasingly important block of votes in urban areas. While some individuals and some ethnic groups embraced assimilation, others recognized their collective potential, developing cohesive cultural organizations as means of mobilizing and articulating their newfound political clout.

An indication that immigrants' status and respectability had improved was to be found in the 1966 White Paper on Immigration. For the first time, since before the First World War, immigration was explicitly identified and lauded as an engine of economic growth.<sup>18</sup> This view is far from unproblematic, but the continued expansion of the economy had several effects which buttressed a belief in a key link between population increase and economic growth. What is more, changing economic conditions broadened the criteria of skills required in Canada. One of the most poorly kept dirty little secrets of Canadian immigration policy to 1966 had been that skill requirements served as an effective racial filter.<sup>19</sup> That is to say, the skills Canada ostensibly needed would come from populations in other western industrialized nations, rather than from the Third World. Growing demand for lower, semi- and even unskilled labour in the 1960s blew this wide open for a spell, attracting Caribbean, Latin American and Asian immigrants in larger numbers than before through the 1970s.

By this stage, too, the 'ethnic vote' was being much more aggressively courted by all parties, most noticeably in Toronto. In the 1960s Ontario finally passed Alberta as a preferred destination for newcomers and it passed British Columbia (albeit only slightly) in the 1970s. It was hardly coincidental, then, that from 1972 to 1987 six of the ten federal ministers responsible for multicultural affairs came from the ballot-belt of the Ontario metropolis.<sup>20</sup> The drive for an official policy of multiculturalism has its roots there too. Taking the view of the larger national cultural debate, the 1970s saw a shift away from the old Canadian model of dualism to pluralism, from two coherent and discrete founding nations to a more atomistic, individually-oriented nation of many races. The immediate motivation was to 'counterbalance to an excessively dualistic view of Canada' in the wake of the Quiet Revolution in Quebec, and certainly linguistic dualism was not in any sense abandoned.<sup>21</sup> Nevertheless, it looked very much as though central Canada had belatedly caught up with the western Canadian experience of pluralism.

Pierre Trudeau's leadership in this was timely, to say the least. Dedicated to a belief in individual rights - rather than collective rights - Trudeau was in this respect pushing at an open door. If you look at *that* photo, the most celebrated and widely reproduced picture in Canadian sports history,

just behind Derek Sanderson is Phil Esposito. Italian-Canadians were a political powerhouse, organized around an impressive chain of Colombo Lodges, Garibaldi Clubs and credit unions. And they had their sports icons too. Not only was the Canadian hockey triumph over Russia in 1972 one in which Italian-Canadians participated significantly, a national soccer team without a Lenarduzzi or two would be incomplete, and the BC Lions football team without Louis Passaglia would be unimaginable. Reviled by nativists before the war, the southern and eastern European presence was now integral to the national fabric.

The relative 'visibility' of some immigrant groups made their situation more complex. Much like the Italians and Ukrainians, by the 1970s older generations of Sikhs, Chinese, and Japanese Canadians had earned their spurs as well. MPs, mayors and publicly acclaimed artists were coming out of 3rd and 4th generation Chinese and Japanese families, although the rise of Sikh elites would take another decade to be noticed by the mainstream.<sup>22</sup> These rising generations in themselves provoked a small resurgence of the old racism, particularly in BC where the concentration of peoples of Asian descent was greatest. With the exception of the brief reappearance of the Ku Klux Klan in the early 1980s, this kind of racism was restricted mostly to muttering.<sup>23</sup>

The same could not be said for the veritable explosion of a new kind of racist sentiment in the 1980s. This followed on the heels of Britain's agreement with Beijing to hand back Hong Kong in 1997. Connections between Vancouver, Hong Kong and Japan had accelerated and grown dramatically from the late 1960s. By the 1980s large numbers of Hong Kong immigrants were buying up real estate and businesses in the BC metropolis as a hedge against the Beijing takeover. This produced a white and, significantly, old-Asian-Canadian backlash that was unique in the annals of Canadian racism, but indicative of how much the society as a whole had changed since 1945.<sup>24</sup> Nineteenth and early twentieth century anti-Asian feeling was centred in the white working class. Fears of unfair wage competition, closed and dangerously mysterious 'foreign' communities, perceived Asian 'vices' like opium smoking, crib prostitution and gambling, and falling living standards mobilized successful white trade union and majoritarian population opposition to Asian immigration.<sup>25</sup> While this was mostly dissipated after the Second World War - in part because the Asian population had been so effectively marginalized and constricted in its growth - anti-Sikh sentiment was characterized by a similar racist discourse into the 1970s. Nevertheless, it was in multi-ethnic blue collar suburbia that multi-racial propinquity helped to effectively desegregate British Columbia and stymie the persistence of working class racist feeling.

That this was not equally true in the WASPish middle-class neighbourhoods on the west side was made abundantly clear in the 1980s.

When the new Chinese arrived in those largely lily-white communities in the early 1980s, they did not come as low-status coolie labourers meekly hoping for tolerance. Confident, economically vital, highly educated and worldly, the Hong Kong wave dismissed local parochialisms, while demolishing charming older homes which they replaced with splendid and opulent - if somewhat out-of-character - 'monster houses'.<sup>26</sup> (Tellingly, the buildings destroyed in this process were always described as 'homes' and their successors as 'houses'.) The bitter elite of Vancouver coined the phrase 'Hongcouver' to illustrate its sense that a new, wealthy 'yellow peril' was pounding at their garden gates.<sup>27</sup> Evidently a tolerant, inclusive multicultural attitude was endorsed by the middle-class only when it was all about tolerating *ethnic workers*.

The experience of Hong Kong billionaire Li Ka-Shing is indicative at one extreme of the anxiety and hostility mustered by the established Canadian community<sup>28</sup>. In 1988 Li's development and investment company, Concord Pacific, won the bidding to develop a parcel of prime downtown land vacated after Expo '86. Li had been instrumental in the rescue of the Bank of B.C. (now the Bank of Hong Kong), and his critics and opponents alleged that he had been given an unfair advantage in his play for the Expo lands by a grateful Provincial Government. Given that the same government very nearly tore up the deal so that a Social Credit Party fund raiser could have a second stab at obtaining the leases in question, the allegation of favouritism for Li seems unfounded. While the Canadian press - even the Toronto *Globe and Mail* - criticized the Li deal, the Hong Kong media shot back with accusations of 'plain racism . . . beneath the veneer of Canadian tolerance.' Fuel was added to the fire when all of the units in a Concord Pacific apartment project in Vancouver were sold overnight to Hong Kong buyers. To critics this looked like further proof that Li and his ilk weren't committed to playing fair; the truth was, however, that the units went on sale on a prearranged day and, of course, the day begins 16 hours earlier in Hong Kong than in Vancouver. Investors in Hong Kong seized on the opportunity while Vancouverites literally slumbered.<sup>29</sup>

Ottawa was not about to be drawn into another round of Asia-bashing by xenophobes on the west coast. Nor was it willing to kill the Asian goose that was busily laying golden eggs. While simultaneously reducing quotas for less well-off Third World immigrants and raising quotas for bona fide refugees, Ottawa introduced a Business Immigration Programme in the late 1980s. A \$250,000 investment in BC, Ontario, Alberta or Quebec could effectively purchase citizenship.<sup>30</sup> This drew howls of protest from the Vancouver press as the local middle-class braced itself for a new wave of rich immigrants from the Asian Tigers. The title of one of many books - alarmist or otherwise - that appeared at this time tells much: *Hong Kong Money: How Chinese Families and Fortunes are Changing Canada*.<sup>31</sup>

It appears, then, that the 1984 Think-Tank's concern that 'our society would be practically replaced by another' reflected concerns felt beyond the government salons of Ottawa. But was its conclusion anachronistic nonetheless? Superficially we can see changes in the social fabric that suggest a dramatic and recent 'replacement'. In the Vancouver suburb of Richmond, where Hong Kong money has created a second 'Chinatown' of gleaming malls, restaurants and blue-chip traffic jams, the old order passeth. A *Maclean's* interview captured this a few years back when a Hong Kong-born shopkeeper in one of the posher suburban malls said of her clientele, 'We don't see many foreigners out here', meaning Euro-Canadians.<sup>32</sup> But that is an enclave, as was (and still is) the older, disadvantaged Chinatown at the city's core, or the Jewish quarter in Montreal, Little Italy in Toronto and Winnipeg's North End. Can such sub-communities be said to have a broader impact or are their effects contained to a few city blocks?

There are several factors which suggest that the transformation of Canadian society by immigrant waves since '45 has been muted. First there is out-migration and return migration. Nearly two-thirds of all emigrants from Canada since 1945 have been return migrants. Put another way, as many as a third of all immigrants have chosen not to stay in Canada, most of them returning to their countries of origin.<sup>33</sup> This has surely mitigated the effects of immigrants on Canadian society.

Second, although 'business' category immigrants have been increasing in real numbers - by about 400% from the early 1980s to the present, they represent a smaller proportion of immigrant population than general opinion has it. It remains the case, too, that although recent immigration contains a higher proportion of individuals with post-secondary education than in the general Canadian population, it also contains a higher proportion of individuals who did not progress any further than Grade 9.<sup>34</sup> The impact of an infusion of influential elements thus has to be balanced against the bulk of immigrants beyond whose grasp lay influence of almost any kind.

Third, while immigrants since 1945 have tended to settle in the big cities where they have enjoyed some of the advantages of a greater critical mass, mid-sized towns and rural Canada remain largely what they were fifty years ago. There are exceptions, particularly in resource extraction communities, but the Italian and Asian waves especially have had only localized impacts directly. The essential white anglo-saxon Protestant-ness of pre-WWII English Canada survives across much of the country, especially in the Maritimes; outside of Montreal the *pûr laine* francophone element remains heavily dominant throughout southern Quebec.

Yet those pockets of newcomer settlement have proven able to box above their weight. For one thing, the consolidation of all major media in Canada's regional metropolises has made it possible for broadcast versions of urban multiculturalism to be widely consumed. For another, immigrants in the

late twentieth century have done well on the whole, adjusting to the labour market's demands with an economic performance that 'compares favourably with that of comparably qualified native-born Canadians.'<sup>35</sup> And as a political force they've capitalized on this solid survival record. Jacques Parizeau's referendum might outburst that the struggle for Quebec sovereignty had been scuppered by what he called 'the ethnics and the rich' had some validity in the larger urban areas. Most commentators on Quebec sovereignty seem to agree that these demographics - a large, and mostly more fecund immigrant population - including Haitians and Vietnamese in large numbers - combined with a profoundly low fertility rate among the French-Canadian majority doom the sovereigntists' goals. As it does so, it also confounds the old dualist model of Canadian political culture. In the 1960s, as the Baby Boom tapered off, the idea that 'empty cradles can be replaced with immigrants' took hold; to suggest in the 1990s that an officially sponsored rise in fertility among the 'founding nations' might turn back the tide of cultural change would at the very least fly in the face of more than a generation of dynamic feminism.<sup>36</sup> Besides, everything we know about rising living standards and the threat of reduced spending power augers against higher fertilities, whether in Quebec or elsewhere.<sup>37</sup> Even among recent immigrants, the trend is to smaller families.<sup>38</sup> If population growth continues to be seen as an essential factor in economic growth (and this is the present - if debatable - orthodoxy),<sup>39</sup> then immigration to Canada will likely become only a more important consideration.

To appreciate the significance of these developments we need to go back again to the question of Canadian identity in the modern era. Modern nationalism - that is, the nineteenth century variant - coupled geopolitical ideas of sovereign space to concepts of the nation as a coherent, usually fairly homogeneous race. Put more simply (perhaps), 'nation' and 'country' were conflated. Canadian dualism, as conceived as early as the 1850s, was an exciting and unusual idea in that context for it explicitly argued that a nation-as-country could consist of two nations or, if you prefer, races. The 'nation-building' of Macdonald, Cartier, Mackenzie and Laurier was thus both an economic project and a cultural experiment intended to bind the two as one.

Since the 1960s, if not since 1945, this dualistic view which relied on fairly hermetically sealed compartments of English and French, has become increasingly obsolete. Quebec is no longer a *pâr laine* province, despite *Péquistes* attempts to mythologize it as such. The Mohawk or the Cree certainly take the view that Quebec was never a monolithically French enclave.<sup>40</sup> In English Canada the loss of a singular cultural blueprint has been even more thoroughgoing. There was a time, very recently, when the notion of the so-called 'hyphenated Canadian' underlined the multitude of backgrounds to be found in any schoolyard or workplace or neighbourhood. But hyphenation itself is now passé.

Post-modernists - or post-structuralists, take your pick - emphasize the alternative and often conflicting identities of contemporary and historic individuals. Gender, age, occupation, class and religion are the familiar categories used in the literature, but race seems to be the least permeable and negotiable. In post-1945 Canada one effect of successive waves of immigrants was to provide an increasing number of Canadians with multiple racial identities. It once made us squirm uncomfortably to see an anglo- or franco-Canadian Prime Minister wearing Blackfoot regalia or a Hebrew prayer shawl; in the 1990s it is possible for a WASP with a name like Belshaw to say of a David Lam, a Roy Romanow, a Joe Ghiz, a George Manuel, or a Mennonite host of Reimers, Dycks and Epps, that these are my people too - and to do so without a hint of the old politicians' cynicism. Neither a melting pot of indistinguishable parts, nor a cultural mosaic of discretely different elements, the Canada of the post-1945 period is more a kaleidoscope, the elements of which shift and shuffle, overlapping and moving in and out of one another's frame almost imperceptibly. In this sense - and in many others - that narrow, pinched society of ours in 1939 *was* replaced, doomed by economic necessity to disappear. Or, to quote the 1984 Think Tank once more, the presence of newcomers 'among us . . . prevents us from growing dull in the typical uniformity of middle-class societies.'

### **Author Note and Acknowledgements**

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### **Endnotes**

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- 3.For the Padlock Law and its implications for immigrants, see John Herd Thompson and Allen Seager, *Canada 1922-1939: Decades of Discord* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1985) pp.284-285.
- 4.Robin Brunet, 'Goodbye "British" Columbia: media cheers cannot hide the problems of Vancouver's ethnic transformation', *BC Report*, v.9(14), 1 December 1997, pp.18-21.

5. Jacques Henripin et al., 'Demographic Aspects of Immigration: Report of a Meeting for Academics and Officials of Employment and Immigration Canada', Montreal 1984, unpublished paper, University of British Columbia Microlog #86-02312, p.15.
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9. Warren E. Kalbach and Wayne W. McVey, *The Demographic Bases of Canadian Society* (Toronto: McGraw-Hill, 1971) pp.152-153.
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11. Roderic Beaujot and Kevin McQuillan, *Growth and Dualism: The demographic development of Canadian Society* (Toronto: Gage, 1982) pp.96-97.
12. Jean R. Burnet with Howard Palmer, *'Coming Canadians': An Introduction to the History of Canada's People* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1988) p.171.
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14. Burnet, *Coming Canadians* p.174.
15. Donald Avery, *Reluctant Host: Canada's Response to Immigrant Workers, 1896-1994* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1995) chapters 1-5.
16. Kalbach and McVey, *Demographic Bases of Canadian Society*, p.161.
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19. Beaujot and Kevin McQuillan, *Growth and Dualism*, pp.96,99.
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21. Augie Fleras and Jean Leonard Elliott, *Unequal Relations: An Introduction to Race, Ethnic and Aboriginal Dynamics in Canada* (Scarborough: Prentice-Hall 1996) p.330
22. A recent biographical approach to Sikh community affairs in Canada is Tara Singh Bains and Hugh Johnston, *The Four Quarters of the Night: The Life-Journey of an Emigrant Sikh* (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's, 1995).
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25. Ward, *op.cit.*
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28. A thorough account of this episode is recalled in Anthony B. Chan, *Li Ka-shing: Hong Kong's Elusive Billionaire* (Toronto: Macmillan 1996), pp.127-131.
29. *Ibid.*, p.129.
30. Beaujot, *Population Change in Canada*, p.123.
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- 33.Roderic Beaujot and S. Peter Rappak, 'The Link Between Immigration and Emigration in Canada, 1945-1986', *Canadian Studies in Population*, v.16 (1989) No.2, p.203.
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- 36.Henripin et al., 'Demographic Aspects of Immigration', pp.5,10.
- 37.See, for example, Ellen M.T. Gee, 'Fertility and Marriage Patterns in Canada: 1851-1971', unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of British Columbia, 1978, pp.311-315.
- 38.Carl F. Grindstaff, 'The Baby Bust Revisited: Canada's Continuing Pattern of Low Fertility', *Perspectives on Canada's Population: An Introduction to Concepts and Issues*, Frank Trovato and Carl F. Grindstaff (eds.) (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1994) p.171.
- 39.For a critique of the view that immigration is essential to economic growth see James Stafford, 'Welcome But Why? Recent Changes in Canadian Immigration Policy', *Perspectives on Canada's Population: An Introduction to Concepts and Issues*, Frank Trovato and Carl F. Grindstaff (eds.) (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1994) pp.322-341.
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