

## **A Strategy for Change**

by

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***For as long as I can remember the subject of Canadian immigration has been socially unsettling for some, a political liability for others and the impetus for frequent outpourings of hate and fear. The arrival of Tamils from Sri Lanka seeking refuge in Vancouver reminded us about this. The federal government which again has primary responsibility for immigration has more work to do with our publics so that ordinary Canadians can grow into a reasonable understanding about the nature of our Canadian destiny inextricably linked to the immigration imperative. What is required is a public unveiling followed by relentless public messaging of what appears to be a closeted three-part fact. I make some suggestions below through deconstruction of an initiative tabled in Hamilton, Ontario in 2010.***

Activism and community work focused on the integration and adaptation of newcomers in Canada is an old social movement and my personal icon in this work is Ontario born James Shaver Woodsworth whose first and bold book *Strangers Within Our Gates* was published in 1909. Woodsworth was a tireless advocate for immigrants, refugees and the poor and worked for many years at the grassroots challenging oppressive conventions and seeking ways to enhance the lived experiences of those on the margins of society. Not surprisingly, he later became the first leader of what we now know as the New Democratic Party, then called the Co-Operative Commonwealth Federation (CCF). Woodsworth's pioneering work established wholesome principles embraced by some of us:- to welcome strangers to live among us, to distribute rights, to intervene to improve the lives of the marginalized, to seek to establish cultural bridges across groups and to seek common ground for harmonious coexistence.

On the birthday of J.S. Woodsworth, July 29<sup>th</sup>, a boat load of refuge-seeking Tamils from Sri Lanka was out at sea headed toward Vancouver. They docked here in August 2010 greeted by a small puff of alarmingly hateful rhetoric which signalled social fear from some quarters. But there was also some thoughtful commentary such as the article by Angus Scott of the Tribune . . . *'Time to calm down . . .'* Concerns raised by those signalling alarm and fear included . . . the fear of terrorists sneaking in among asylum seekers, the burdening of our social services and tipping the threatening economic dysfunction, a resentment of the nullification of our immigration laws and setting precedents for future arrivals of more asylum seekers.

Of course, the phenomenon of people seeking refuge at the ports of nations is neither new nor uncommon. So this imbalance between views which signal panic, and those which portray a developed understanding of the Canadian reality (the Scott article) grasped my attention. Canada is one of many nations which receive refugees (also known as asylum seekers) annually and our history shows that those seeking refuge here have come from Western and Eastern Europe, Central and South America, Asia, the Middle East, Africa, the United States of America and other areas. They came both before and after the United

Nations Refugee Convention agreed to by 144 nations in 1951. The 1951 Convention streamlined the process for considering claims made by refugees, and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) tells us, it included a 'comprehensive codification of the rights of refugees consolidated at the international level'. So then, refugees have rights acknowledged by many nations.

In 2009 approximately 377,200 persons sought asylum at receiving nations across the international community. Of those, 286,700 went to European countries, and more than 66,000 went to the United States. In contrast to the noisy August 2010 arrival of Sri Lankans by boat, in 2009 nearly 16,000 asylum seekers quietly arrived in Canada from the following countries:

- Mexico: 7,561
- Hungary: 2,518
- Columbia: 2,292
- Czec. Rep.: 2,016
- China: 1,484

Yet, in spite of the international agreement to grant asylum to those seeking refuge due to an established list of persecutions in their homeland, UNHCR reports that the overall and increasing number of refugees who find sanctuary in new homelands falls far below the number in need:

. . . as a result the number of resettlement places available has neither kept pace with increased submissions by UNHCR nor with resettlement needs. For 2010, UNHCR's multi-year projections were that 747,000 persons would need resettlement. For 2011, the same projections now pass the 805,000 mark, a record high. Meanwhile, the annual quotas offered by states have remained unchanged . . . (UNHCR: website).

The refugee tradition in what is now the nation of Canada dates back to the 1700s. Asylum seekers arrive through whatever means is made available to them and a certainty is that Canada will continue to receive and process them because our need for them is as great as their need for a new homeland. Our uncomfortable reality is that Canada has an established need for population boosts for the foreseeable future. We need more people to keep our economy afloat and our work force viable. Canadians do not produce enough babies and some who settle here subsequently leave for better lives in other nations.

Our Prime Minister was among those who voiced alarm and apparent uneasiness with the Tamils' arrival. In a public statement his words seemed not well chosen:

"We are a land of refuge, but at the same time, I think Canadians are pretty concerned when a whole boat of people comes — not through any normal application process, not through any normal arrival channel — and just simply lands." (Prime Minister Stephen Harper)

Prime Minister Harper appeared to be reacting to the concerns of some Canadians . . . for the Tamils' negation of the normal Canadian administrative process. However, I believe that any refugee will attest that the refuge-seeking process is never orderly . . . more likely lengthy, unpredictable and dangerous but certainly not normal! A normal application process for refugees seems a contradiction in thought. People die during the process of seeking refuge! Some people never make it out of refugee camps. Children are born in and

die in refugee camps. These are the stories we hear from those who live to tell. Other stories of the nearly 20 million awaiting an opportunity which takes them to refuge we may never hear.

Considering our foreseeable dependence on population boosts through immigrants and refugees we need a social fix which will ease population angst and fear and minimize the ever present hate of '*strangers within our gates*'. Some of this work is already occurring and steps have been taken recently to extend the mandate and scope of creating more accepting communities for newcomers. I wish to focus on the trend-setting community building work being undertaken in Hamilton, Ontario.

So, then, the work pioneered by J.S. Woodsworth and others in the early 1900s continues today but often with diminished resources and with much less vision, courage and clarity. Today's process is often convoluted by protocols which privilege the sensibilities of the 'us' Canadians and pit their interests against the 'them' newcomers. Accordingly, progress is slow and compromised and the process fails to make clear to some longer term resident Canadians the historical value of the newest immigrants in Canada, and moreover, Canada's historical dependence on new people joining our labour force in order to reinforce our economic production.

Contemporary visionaries echoing the spirit of Woodsworth are still with us though. Many can be found at Settlement and Integration Services Organization ([siso-ham.org](http://siso-ham.org)) which has been an institutional feature of Hamilton Ontario for more than fifteen years. SISO is contracted by the Government of Canada to receive and settle convention refugees brought to Canada through arrangements between UNHCR and the Canadian state. A central core of SISO's message to publics has always been that the process of settlement must include adjustments by both the host population and newcomers. In addition, the case has been made by some SISO advocates that the Canadian dependence on foreign labour creates a situation of an ever-changing landscape requiring social flexibility and a newly defined and articulated tolerance. The latter requires a new kind of commitment by the federal government with co-operation and contribution from provincial and municipal bodies.

The Government of Canada recognizes that it owns the responsibility for the adaptation of the labour it imports either as immigrants or as refugees. Some of this work is shared by provinces which promote a less clear agenda concerning citizenship enhancement. An examination of federal government administrative documents which outline the scope of newcomer services under their *Immigrant Services Adaptation Program (ISAP)* shows some understanding of this but its courage and vision fall short. Because we will continue to require immigrants and refugees for our continued existence as we know it our federal government must unveil the secret about this dependence in unrelenting waves of unambiguous communication. Important too is for the federal government to tell Canadians that, desirably, people who are selected to come to Canada, or those who arrive in Canada seeking refuge will not always be white. Finally, that communication should make clear that we are not like any other country: we are geographically large with a diverse and scattered population. Our regional needs are in competition, we are under-populated in many regions, underdeveloped in many ways and bursting to grow up economically and socially through the assistance of newcomers.

The mechanism for going viral with this messaging already exists. But there must be federal collaborative agreement with provinces, territories and municipalities. Immigration as a national subject must be extricated from the fine-printed end notes and articulated in each budget statement at all levels of government, with Auditor Generals and Speeches from the Throne reporting with clarity concerning what the nation's bureaucracies are doing well and what requires further attention. By necessity and in the spirit of good governance this messaging must embody all-party consistency! Specific to the issue of immigration, the traditional inter-group political fighting which targets identified programs, issues or events for gainful political posturing is bad for social consumption. When some politicians decry or utter ambivalence regarding immigration, the viral message received in some population quarters is that immigration is bad for Canada. Increased immigration cannot continue to be the issue with the potential to get politicians unelected; there is a need to make peace with and come clean on the issue of our immigration dependence. Any credible politician has to agree and communicate that immigration is the life blood of Canadian economic existence. If not, then many of us would like to hear and consider their plan for an economically viable Canada which not only excludes immigration but also millions of transient exploited seasonal labourers.

The shaping and management of the expectations of Canadians concerning newcomers in our midst is only the start of an essential but delicate process. The communication and programming at the provincial, territorial and federal government levels should be shared according to their jurisdictional responsibilities without the historical tensions. At the municipal level - at social ground zero - where people live, struggle, work and play, a different kind of work will be required. But what must supersede this local work is the national messaging which is consistent and clear enough to be embedded in the everyday consciousness. That message should make clear the reality of a future-constant-stream of newcomers. Only then can meaningful local work begin. An example follows.

In June 2010, a municipal election year, while the boatload of Tamils across the ocean purposefully headed toward Canada, the City of Hamilton, Ontario, finally and quietly voted to endorse an 'Immigration Strategy and Action Plan' supported by nearly \$400,000 of federal funding. This municipal endorsement was the culmination of years of community advocacy and cajoling, later spearheaded by the *Hamilton Immigration Partnership Council*. Endorsement of the Strategy and Action Plan represents two things: (1) it has symbolic importance (2) in spite of the vague intangibles which convolute its message it signals recognition that social reconstruction must become priority work for Hamilton. This cautious local political action follows a recent troubled history in Hamilton. Racist outbursts and acts of hate led to intervention to make civic inclusion a priority. Community pioneers spearheaded this work and along the way co-opted the local government. What is praiseworthy is that the City of Hamilton finally had the courage to agree to endorse the initiative at all. Articulated aims of the Strategy include:

- 1) Collaborative leadership through strategic partnerships
- 2) Identifying gaps and areas for improvement in the delivery of newcomer settlement services
- 3) Building a welcoming community with the broader community and local stakeholders

- 4) Improving the evidence base and data on new immigrants and the diversity of Hamilton's population in order to better inform local policymaking and service provision

The symbolic importance of the strategy depends on Southern Ontarians knowing about it and understanding its significance. It is unknown how many Hamiltonians know about this undertaking. Yet, they should in order to move this Strategy beyond bureaucratic window dressing which only serves to garner unearned kudos. The 'action plan' which requires refinement signals intention to address some pressing issues. Aims (1) and (2) reflect the voluntary administrative co-operation currently occurring among some organizations. Aims (3) and (4) embody the potential to move toward real work with measurable outcomes but also with social and political risks.

The first aim . . . Collaborative leadership through strategic partnerships . . . suggests that community organizations and institutions in Greater Hamilton should work together. One aspect of this work occurs on a voluntary basis now with those special interest organizations focused on immigrant settlement talking to each other and informing each other about some projects to be undertaken. Information sharing between state-funded organizations is selectively cautious and prudent because most organizations funded to provide similar work in the same geographic area compete for the same government dollars. In this scenario duplication is financially hazardous. Issue-specific collaboration also occurs; members attend each other's conferences and community meetings and endorse some events. This is however stakeholder to stakeholder grassroots collaboration which has questionable impact on the chattering publics.

The specificity omitted from the related action plans of aims (1) and (2) pertains to the day-to-day political risks to be undertaken by the municipal politicians who endorsed the strategy. This work must go beyond earning a seat at the table with provincial and federal immigration officials. The collaboration has to be between the municipal politicians and their local community at large. City Councillors must look their constituents in the eyes during the ritual hand-shake and say '*. . . by the way . . . I need to talk to your neighbourhood or organization about immigration and immigrant inclusion in our work forces . . . because our city needs more immigrants and we desperately need to find a new way to include our newcomers with less transition trauma and greater ease . . . and I know we can do this together!*' Municipal politicians would need to transcend their personal preoccupation with pandering and commit to leadership with its inherent risks. Immigrant well being should be integrated (but not subsumed) into their list of people-survival issues (poverty, safe neighbourhoods, jobs). They should be required tell the broader community annually what they have done to improve lives for new immigrants and to dismantle racist exclusion and with what results.

Print, voice and visual media should also become allies in this new messaging because when the next boat load of refuge-seeking persons arrive from either Ireland, Scotland, Sri Lanka or South Africa there should be no repeat of August 2010 in this community. Radio talk shows in Hamilton are an instructive window into day-to-day social relations in the region; print media plays its part in reflecting the social mood. And even though print media (the Hamilton Spectator) was represented on the Hamilton Immigration Partnership Council which created this Strategy the action plan does not unambiguously acknowledge, identify and prioritize their essential and important role in community education through developed messaging. Improvements to social relations in Hamilton will not occur without the help of media regardless of the genius of the symbolic gesture in the form of this Strategy.

The strongest section of the 'action plan' pertains to the '*. . . reduction of public apprehension, anxieties and misconceptions about immigrants and immigration to Hamilton; and, the elimination of racial discrimination . . .*' clearly embodying a leading role for media. Laudable, since not many public documents actually name the scourge of 'racial discrimination'. Naming racism as a social problem is the necessary first step even though this always offends sensibilities. The claiming and identification of racism, as a work in progress, is as urgent as identifying immigration as a national priority. It is equally important to spell out the connection between immigration and racism. . . *We need people to join our labour market in Hamilton; those selected to join us will not necessarily be white people but all are entitled to the same rights and protections. . .* The 'reduction of public apprehension . . .' action plan can be enhanced by some specifics:

There could be focus on:

1. Researching the causes of the social fear of immigrants
2. Best ways of educating the community toward minimization of that fear
3. Best dissemination practices of non-threatening facts about immigrants
4. Ways of de-ghettoizing neighbourhoods
5. Ways of including faith-based groups in community education
6. Ways of including higher education bodies in messaging for broad-based audiences
7. Ways of including majority population youth groups in positive messaging
8. Ways of reaching and engaging street youth in enhanced dialogue
9. Ways of committing exclusive (wealthy) community members to a reformed intra-group dialogue

Aims (1) and (2) can lead to aim#3. Currently, the phrase 'welcoming community' is a cliché. The aim should include specifics about current social dysfunction and cite some of the work being currently undertaken by, for example, SISO and HCCI. Action might include, for example:

1. Create messages to critique racism in the broader public domain
2. Publish measurable steps to eradicate racism in institutional life (community housing, work and social life)
3. target identified workplaces and assist with labour force equity through sustainable measures (examples exist)
4. Enhance steps to improve the representation and marketing of non-white images in media
5. finance inter-group collaborations with purpose and specificity

Aim #4 implies research and application with a specific view to community accountability.

In general, fear of immigration or the resentment of the arrival of newcomers signifies social educational gaps. People resort to knee-jerking and fear in the absence of context. The tradition has been that the federal government brings newcomers without an uncompromised plan to market the fact of our immigration dependence. This creates a social information vacuum which later engulfs both newcomers and the intellectually fragile longer-term resident in a struggle. This power to people our landscape without the

corresponding responsibility to prepare the population with facts has lead to immeasurable social tensions.

Early visionaries such as J.S. Woodsworth, and the assorted associations which spearheaded early-century settlement work understood that an immigration agenda which resettled citizens from various cultures and political traditions under one nation shaped by productive capitalism, could be perilous. The immigration agenda always required much more than post-arrival chance. Those who understood social justice, like Woodsworth, saw the virtue in deliberate state intervention in mediating rights and mandating outcomes. The current hands-off, by-the-grace-of-any-god stance of our assorted levels of government is unacceptable. Under current circumstances the post-Tamil arrival trauma and fear was quite understandable and will continue. The Hamilton Immigration Strategy has merit and potential and it would be unfortunate if it too is to be hijacked by privilege or political indifference.