

MOSAIC IN MOTION

The Unfinished Experiment with Humanity

An Essay on Immigration, Identity, and the Canadian Idea

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"Canada has no cultural unity, no linguistic unity, no religious unity, no economic unity, no geographic unity. All it has is unity." — Kenneth Boulding

Introduction: A Country Assembled from the World

There is a photograph that ought to exist but probably doesn't — a composite face, algorithmically assembled from the portraits of every Canadian alive today. It would be an impossible face: simultaneously South Asian and Ukrainian, Chinese and Cree, Lebanese and Haitian, Somali and Scottish. Warm-eyed. High-cheekboned. Indefinable. That face is Canada, and it is still becoming.

Canada is not an accident of ethnicity or the inheritance of a single bloodline. It is a project — deliberate, argued-over, sometimes contradicted, and perpetually unfinished. Its most daring bet is that people of radically different origins, faiths, languages, and memories can share a geography, a legal order, and a civic identity without being required to abandon who they are in order to belong.

The world is watching this experiment with a mixture of admiration, scepticism, and, in 2025, considerable anxiety. Populist movements across Europe and the Americas have made immigration the defining fault line of democratic politics. Borders are hardening. Old fears are dressing themselves in new vocabularies. In this environment, Canada's continued commitment to managed, ambitious, and pluralistic immigration is either an act of visionary courage or an act of magnificent naivety — and this essay argues it is the former, while acknowledging the very real tensions that make it resemble the latter on difficult days.

What follows is an honest reckoning with the case for liberal immigration policy in Canada: its demographic and economic logic, its most persistent failures, its philosophical underpinnings in the mosaic rather than the melting pot, the challenge of retaining the talent it generates, and the ultimate argument — contested but defensible — that diversity is not merely a tolerable side-effect of population growth, but an active source of national strength.

Part One: The Arithmetic of Arrival — Demographics and Economics

A Nation Running on Borrowed Time

Canada faces a demographic reality that no amount of political will can simply wish away. Its total fertility rate sits at approximately 1.4 children per woman — well below the 2.1 required for natural population replacement. Its median age is climbing steadily toward 42. And its old-age dependency ratio — the number of retirees for every working-age adult — is on a trajectory that, without immigration, would approach the crisis levels currently being experienced by Japan: a country where adult diapers outsell infant diapers and entire rural villages have been abandoned.

Statistics Canada's population projections, updated in January 2025, are sobering. Without sustained immigration, Canada's working-age population would begin to shrink in absolute terms within a generation. The pension system, the healthcare system, the tax base that funds both — all depend on a ratio of contributors to recipients that is deteriorating with each passing birth cohort.

Immigration is not a cure for all of this. But it is the most immediate and practical lever available. In 2024, Canada admitted 483,640 permanent residents — roughly in line with federal targets — and as

of January 1, 2025, the national population reached 41.5 million. First-generation immigrants now comprise 23% of the population, a figure that is projected to grow significantly across every plausible future scenario.

The Economic Case: More Complex Than a Bumper Sticker

The economic argument for immigration is compelling, but it requires honesty about its conditions and complications. At its strongest, the case runs like this: immigrants fill labour shortages, start businesses, pay taxes, consume goods and services, register patents, and — through their diverse cultural backgrounds — bring cognitive approaches and market connections that native-born Canadians cannot replicate. A growing body of research from the United States documents immigration's beneficial effects on entrepreneurial activity, innovation, trade balances, and even the wages of native-born workers.

Canada's points-based Express Entry system was designed to capture precisely these benefits, selecting immigrants for language ability, educational credentials, professional experience, and adaptability. The economic stream has historically accounted for the majority of admissions, reaching 64% of the overall plan by 2027 under current federal targets.

But the honest version of the economic argument also acknowledges the complications. The surge in immigration volumes between 2020 and 2024 — responding to pandemic labour shortfalls and ambitious Century Initiative targets — exacerbated pressure on housing, healthcare, and infrastructure that was already under strain. Youth and newcomer unemployment rates rose. Per capita GDP growth stagnated even as headline GDP increased. The federal government acknowledged these pressures in its revised 2025–2027 Levels Plan, stepping back from the volume targets to 395,000 admissions in 2025, dropping further in subsequent years.

A further complication is the mismatch between credential and opportunity. Canada recruits engineers and doctors and then employs them as cab drivers and call centre workers. Professional licensing bodies, controlled by their existing memberships, have been stubbornly slow to recognize foreign credentials. The result is what economists call 'brain waste' — a perverse situation in which highly educated immigrants from Lahore or Lagos work below their capacity while Canadian hospitals advertise unfilled physician positions. This is not merely economically inefficient. It is a moral failure, a broken promise embedded in the very process that selected these individuals.

The solution is not fewer immigrants but better integration: accelerated credential recognition pathways, bridging programs, mentorship structures, and employer incentive programs that reward

companies for hiring at qualification level rather than defaulting to the path of least bureaucratic resistance.

The Drawbacks: An Honest Accounting

A defence of liberal immigration that ignores its genuine costs is not an argument — it is a recruitment pamphlet. The drawbacks deserve clear-eyed acknowledgment.

Housing is the most acute. Canada's housing supply has not kept pace with population growth for decades, but the rapid acceleration of immigration in the early 2020s brought this failure to crisis visibility. In Vancouver, Toronto, and Calgary, rental markets became punishing for newcomers and long-term residents alike. The narrative that immigrants are responsible for the housing crisis is too simple — the real culprits include exclusionary zoning, under-investment in social housing, and speculative finance — but it is not entirely wrong to observe that demand acceleration without supply response produces pain, and that some of that pain falls hardest on the most recently arrived.

Social services face similar pressure. Schools, hospitals, settlement agencies, and language training programs were not designed at the scale that recent intake volumes require. Capacity has lagged behind ambition. And when service quality degrades, it tends to degrade unevenly — falling furthest in the communities that can least afford the loss.

Finally, there is the psychological dimension. Public opinion surveys in late 2024 showed that nearly 60% of Canadians believed the country was accepting too many newcomers — the first majority in that direction since the year 2000. And yet the same polls showed a majority also believing that immigration was beneficial to Canada overall. This paradox is not confusion. It is a perfectly rational distinction between support for the idea of immigration and concern about the pace and management of it. Policy-makers who dismiss this distinction as nativism are making a serious political and analytical error.

Part Two: Reversing the Brain Drain — From Exodus to Exchange

The Original Wound

In the 1990s, Canada watched with quiet alarm as a parade of its best-educated citizens headed south. The numbers, documented by Statistics Canada analysts in a landmark 2000 study, were striking: a full quarter of newly graduated doctors left for the United States in 1996–97. Nearly half of adult Canadians who migrated to the U.S. in the preceding five years held university degrees, compared to just 12% of the general population. Canada-to-U.S. émigrés were seven times more likely to report high incomes.

The reasons were familiar: higher salaries, lower taxes, more dynamic research environments, and the irresistible gravity of American scale. Silicon Valley was not merely a place — it was a gravitational field, bending the career trajectories of talented engineers from Waterloo and Guelph as surely as it bent those from Mumbai and Seoul.

The Turnaround: A More Complex Story

But the narrative of irreversible Canadian brain drain always concealed a more encouraging truth. Even as Canada lost graduates to the south, it was gaining graduates from everywhere else. The same Statistics Canada study found that Canada gained four university graduates from abroad for every one it lost to the United States. As many immigrants entered Canada with master's degrees or doctorates as Canadian university graduates at all levels departed for the south.

In the technology sector, immigrants accounted for roughly a third of the employment growth among computer engineers, systems analysts, and programmers through the 1990s. The brain drain was real. The brain gain was real. And the net position was considerably less catastrophic than the popular narrative suggested.

Canada then began to act strategically. The Canada Research Chairs program, launched in 2000, created 2,000 funded academic positions specifically to attract and retain world-class researchers. The Canadian Institute for Advanced Research (CIFAR) gave top scientific minds an intellectual home base that could compete with elite American institutions. The Canada Excellence Research Chairs (CERC) program went further still, providing up to \$10 million over seven years to a small number of globally exceptional researchers.

More recently, Canada's Global Skills Strategy reduced the processing time for high-demand foreign workers to two weeks — a radical simplification that signalled Canada's intent to compete seriously in the global talent market. As U.S. immigration pathways became increasingly congested and politically fraught under various administrations' restrictive policies, skilled workers who might once have defaulted to Silicon Valley began considering Toronto, Vancouver, and Waterloo instead.

The New Brain Drain: A Warning

There is, however, a newer form of brain drain that Canada must not allow itself to be complacent about. Members of Canada's Asian diaspora — particularly from China, India, and South Korea — are increasingly being pulled back to their countries of origin by expanding economic opportunity, frustration with the so-called glass ceiling in Canadian institutions, and a sense that their qualifications are undervalued or underutilized here.

This reverse migration is not simply an economic loss. It is a warning signal about the quality of inclusion Canada actually offers versus the quality it advertises. If Canada recruits the world's brightest minds and then confines them to credential-recognition limbo, or allows systemic barriers to prevent them from advancing into leadership positions in proportion to their abilities, the word will travel. Global talent is mobile, and Canada's reputation as a destination for ambitious people depends on that reputation being earned continuously, not merely declared.

Strategies for Sustainable Brain Gain

The policy toolkit for reversing and sustaining brain gain is reasonably well understood, even if its implementation is uneven. Credential recognition reform must be treated as a national priority rather than a matter for individual provincial regulatory bodies to address at their leisure. Bridging programs that allow internationally trained professionals to qualify quickly for licensure — while their skills remain current — should be generously funded and rigorously evaluated.

Transparent and consistent immigration pathways matter enormously. When processing timelines extend unpredictably over months or years, skilled immigrants choose other countries. The signal sent by administrative chaos is not merely inefficiency — it communicates that Canada does not actually want the people it claims to be selecting. Speed and clarity are not bureaucratic conveniences; they are competitive advantages.

Regional settlement strategies deserve more attention than they currently receive. The concentration of immigrant settlement in the Toronto-Vancouver corridor means that smaller cities and rural communities miss the demographic and economic benefits of immigration, while the major urban

centres absorb pressure that their housing and services struggle to manage. Programs like the Atlantic Immigration Program and the Rural and Northern Immigration Pilot are promising models, but they require sustained investment and design refinement to retain newcomers in the communities they are placed in.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the private sector must be brought into the brain gain conversation as an active partner rather than a passive beneficiary. Canadian companies that need global talent should be actively supporting immigration pathway reform, offering co-investment in bridging programs, and demonstrating — through their own hiring and promotion practices — that talent is recognized regardless of where it was credentialed.

Part Three: The Mosaic and the Melting Pot — A Philosophy of Belonging

Two Metaphors, One Continent

In 1938, a Scottish-born Canadian writer named John Murray Gibbon published a book with a title that would quietly become the defining metaphor for Canadian cultural identity: *Canadian Mosaic*. Gibbon was reacting against what he saw as the American model — a melting pot in which immigrants were expected to dissolve their identities of origin and re-emerge as something homogeneously American. He preferred a different image: distinct cultural tiles, each retaining its own colour and texture, arranged together to create a coherent and beautiful whole.

The metaphor took decades to become policy. In the 1960s, as the Trudeau government grappled with French-Canadian nationalism and the demands of an increasingly multiethnic population, the federal government began formalizing the idea of linguistic and cultural pluralism. Pierre Trudeau, who wrote before entering politics that Canadian pluralism was better than the American melting pot and could offer an example to Asian and African nations, announced Official Multiculturalism in 1971 — and the Canadian Multiculturalism Act was unanimously passed by Parliament in 1988.

That act committed Canada to recognizing the multicultural heritage of its people and pledged that the government would actively support communities in upholding their traditional practices,

languages, and identities. It was, in its way, a radical document: a nation legislating against its own pressure toward conformity.

The Mosaic in Practice

The mosaic is not, as its critics sometimes caricature it, a policy of mere coexistence — a mutual agreement to remain strangers while sharing postal codes. The aspiration is something more demanding: genuine intercultural encounter, in which distinct identities remain visible while engaging in common civic life. The tile does not dissolve; but it takes its place in a larger pattern that could not exist without it.

In practical terms, this has meant the maintenance of heritage languages in schools and community centres, the celebration of cultural festivals as expressions of mainstream Canadian life rather than ethnic exotica, the recognition of minority religious practices in public institutions, and a deliberate effort to ensure that Canadian public life — its civil service, its arts funding, its broadcast media — reflects the diversity of the population it serves.

For three or four generations, Canadians have been educated within this framework. The mosaic is not just a policy — it is a disposition, a way of orienting toward difference that has been, to a remarkable degree, internalized across demographic lines. It shapes how Canadians introduce themselves, how they navigate neighbourhoods, how they understand what it means to be Canadian.

The Honest Limitations

But the mosaic has its critics, and they make points that deserve honest engagement rather than defensive dismissal.

The first critique is that the mosaic, at its worst, can become a mechanism for keeping certain communities in their assigned tiles — celebrated on their festival days, consulted on their 'community issues,' but never quite integrated into the generative centres of economic and political power. John Porter, in his influential 1965 sociological study *The Vertical Mosaic*, showed that ethnicity in Canada was not a horizontal arrangement of equal pieces but a vertical hierarchy in which Anglo-Saxon Protestant identity occupied the apex. The tiles may be beautiful; the question of who gets to design the pattern is another matter.

The second critique is that multiculturalism, pushed to an extreme, can create parallel solitudes rather than genuine encounter — communities that are tolerated but not engaged, different but not in

conversation. If the mosaic becomes a collection of sealed compartments rather than a dynamic interchange, it fails on its own terms.

A third critique, advanced by scholars across the political spectrum, is that the contrast between the Canadian mosaic and the American melting pot has always been somewhat exaggerated — more ideology than sociology. Both countries have historically practiced assimilationist pressures on visible minorities, linguistic minorities, and indigenous peoples that sit uneasily alongside their official self-descriptions. The melting pot, in its historical application, was often an instruction directed at European immigrants; for African Americans, Indigenous peoples, and Asian immigrants, the pot was never particularly welcoming. The mosaic has had its own versions of this exclusion.

These critiques do not invalidate the mosaic as an aspiration. They refine it — insisting that it be something genuinely achieved rather than merely declared, and that it extend its promise of dignity and visibility to communities that have historically found themselves admired in their cultural contributions but marginalized in their economic and political participation.

Could Other Nations Adopt the Mosaic?

The question of whether the Canadian mosaic model could be transplanted to other national contexts is genuinely interesting, and the honest answer is: partially, with conditions.

Canada's model rests on several foundations that are not universally replicable. The country was, from its legal founding, a negotiation between at least two founding European cultures and a multiplicity of Indigenous nations — there was no single ethnic majority whose identity would be threatened by pluralism in the way that it might be in more ethnically homogeneous societies. The geographic vastness of Canada also meant that cultural communities could maintain themselves with less friction than in more densely populated territories.

Furthermore, Canada's geographic isolation from land-based refugee pressure — unlike European nations with shared borders with conflict zones — has allowed it to manage its immigration flows with a degree of deliberateness that is simply not available to Greece or Poland or Germany.

And yet the underlying philosophical principle — that a nation can choose to define belonging in civic rather than ethnic terms, and that cultural difference need not be a problem to be solved but a resource to be cultivated — is neither uniquely Canadian nor geographically bounded. New Zealand has developed its own version, structured around the Treaty of Waitangi and a bicultural framework that has since expanded to embrace significant Pacific and Asian immigration. Several Scandinavian

countries have experimented with integration models that seek to preserve cultural identity while demanding participation in shared civic institutions.

The key insight is transferable even when the specific institutions are not: that the choice between forced assimilation and tribal isolation is a false choice, and that successful pluralistic societies are built not on the erasure of difference but on the cultivation of shared civic loyalty alongside the freedom to remain different. What Canada offers the world is not a finished template but a proof of concept — evidence that the experiment can be attempted and, on its better days, approached.

Part Four: Diversity as Strength — Building a Vibrant, Tolerant Society

The Case Beyond Economics

The argument for diversity as national strength is sometimes reduced to its economic dimensions — the innovation premium, the trade network advantages of diaspora communities, the cognitive diversity that produces more creative problem-solving. These are real and important. But they are insufficient by themselves, because they instrumentalize people — treating immigrants as human capital rather than as human beings — and they miss the deeper argument.

The deeper argument is this: a society that successfully maintains genuine pluralism — that produces citizens who are comfortable with difference, fluent in navigating cultural contexts, and practiced in the discipline of seeing the world from perspectives other than their own — is a society better equipped for the century it is entering. The 21st century is not going to reward societies that have optimized for homogeneity. It is going to reward societies that can think across disciplines, across cultures, across the perceptual frames that come with different histories and different ways of being in the world.

Canada's classrooms — in its better moments — produce young people who have negotiated their lunchtimes with peers from a dozen different national backgrounds, who understand that there is more than one way to observe a holy day or grieve a loss or celebrate a birth, and who carry that understanding into their professional and civic lives. This is not a minor thing. It is the formation of

a particular kind of human capacity, and it is one of the things Canada does — imperfectly, incompletely, but more systematically than most — that the world genuinely needs more of.

The Tolerance Paradox

There is a tension at the heart of pluralism that honest advocates must acknowledge: the paradox of tolerance, first articulated by Karl Popper, holds that a society that tolerates everything, including intolerance, will eventually be consumed by intolerance. The multicultural bargain requires that cultural difference be protected — but it cannot extend that protection to values and practices that themselves deny the dignity of others.

This is not a theoretical puzzle. It manifests concretely in Canadian life: in debates about gender equality and certain traditional practices, in the accommodation of religious expression in public institutions, in the limits of community autonomy over the education of children. The resolution of these tensions does not come from multicultural relativism — the abdication of judgment in the name of cultural respect — but from a robust civic framework that insists on certain non-negotiable rights while remaining genuinely open about everything else.

The Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms is the load-bearing structure of the mosaic. Without it — without a common legal and normative foundation that applies to everyone regardless of cultural origin — the mosaic collapses into either tribal fragmentation or the quiet tyranny of majority norms. With it, cultural difference can be celebrated precisely because the civic rules that make coexistence possible are held in common.

Immigration as Moral Imagination

There is a final argument for the immigration project that transcends both economics and social policy, and it is perhaps the most important one: the moral imagination that immigration demands and develops.

To welcome a stranger is an ancient human act, freighted with meaning in every moral and religious tradition that has ever grappled with what we owe each other. It requires seeing past the foreigner's unfamiliarity to the shared humanity beneath — the person who left home with hope and arrived with uncertainty, who is navigating a new language and a new social code while carrying a world of memory and attachment that the host society cannot see.

Canada, at its best, practices this imagination at national scale. It does so imperfectly — there are stretches of indifference, moments of overt hostility, systemic failures of equity that run deeper than

any government program has yet reached. But the aspiration is genuine and the track record, measured against any comparable benchmark, is remarkable.

A country that has absorbed wave after wave of newcomers — from the United Empire Loyalists to the Ukrainians of the Prairie settlements, from the Chinese labourers who built the railway to the Vietnamese boat people, from the Ismaili community to the Syrian families of the 2015 welcome — and remained, through all of it, recognizably itself, is not a country that has been weakened by diversity. It is a country that has been continuously enlarged by it. The Canada of 2025 is wiser, more creative, more globally connected, and more ethically complex than the Canada of 1925 — and immigration is one of the central reasons why.

Conclusion: The Experiment Continues

The mosaic is not finished. It is never finished. That is, perhaps, its most important quality — the recognition that a society built on genuine pluralism is always in process, always negotiating its terms, always discovering that its understanding of itself must expand to accommodate the new humanity that has arrived at its door.

The challenges are real: housing pressures that test social solidarity, credential recognition failures that betray individual immigrants and waste national capacity, the tension between rapid volume and thoughtful integration, the persistent inequalities that hollow out the mosaic's claim to be something more than a pretty metaphor for a hierarchy dressed in festival colours.

But the alternative — a Canada that retreats from its immigration commitments in response to short-term political pressure, that opts for a smaller and more demographically stable population, that trades its global orientation for a more anxious and bounded nationalism — is not a safer Canada. It is a less capable, less vibrant, and ultimately less prosperous one. The arithmetic of aging populations does not reverse itself through political will. And the moral logic of the mosaic does not become less compelling simply because it is harder to execute than a bumper sticker.

Canada's bet is that a country can be made from the world and remain — in some meaningful sense that defies easy definition — a country. That people can carry their histories, their languages, their faiths, and their memories across an ocean or a border and find a place where those things are not

liabilities to be shed but contributions to be made. That diversity, managed with intelligence and received with genuine curiosity, is not a problem to be solved but an asset to be cultivated.

It is an experiment without a control group. There is no alternative Canada to compare ourselves to — no parallel timeline in which we chose homogeneity and can see how that worked out. We have only the Canada we are building: imperfect, argumentative, generous in its better moments, anxious in its worse ones, and stubbornly committed to the proposition that people from everywhere can become, together, from here.

That experiment is not finished. And the fact that it continues — that it is still being attempted, still being argued about, still being lived — is itself a kind of answer. The mosaic is in motion. And that motion is the point.

— *Gerry Gomm*

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