

Racism Reflection October 5, 2020 North Star Mennonite Dan Graber

This is not a political statement from me in favor on a particular political party. I can easily find fault with any party or politician. The point is: politicians and immigration concerns and policies and racism go hand in hand. It can't be avoided. The question is: which politician, party and policy if most Christlike?

And we have to ask: which way is the wind in Canada blowing with it comes to racism and immigration and why?

Plus we have to ask: who or what is feeding the thinking to influence us, and why? Fears? Economics? Jobs? Kindness? Rescuing people from poverty, war and starvation? Or something else – some other priority? Or Jesus?

We have to be aware that we are close enough and influenced enough by the United States that the coronavirus isn't the only infection we should fear.

Why race and immigration are a gathering storm in Canadian politics

Terry Glavin: Fears of a surge in anti-immigrant attitude and bigotry are misplaced. The real problem is that such sentiment has consolidated around one political party—the Tories

By [Terry Glavin](#) April 23, 2019 Macleans magazine

Going by quite a few headlines, commentaries and social media hot-takes making the rounds these days, you'd never know it, but Canadians are not working themselves up into a lather about immigrants or people of colour. We're not suddenly becoming mean to refugees. There is no surge in bloody-minded racial bigotry arising among ordinary Canadians, and there's no evidence for any dramatic spike in the numbers of Canadians who don't like non-whites coming to this country.

That's the good news.

Some politicians continue to blow their vulgar anti-immigrant dog-whistles, and some make partisan mischief by whatever means seem plausible enough to make their adversaries look bad. But when it comes to immigrants and refugees, Canadians in general tend to be a lot less excitable or inclined to racism than is convenient to certain strangely popular narratives at the moment.

It's true that having once exerted themselves to out-compete the Opposition in their efforts to show mercy to Syrian refugees, Justin Trudeau's Liberals are pulling off a complete U-turn on the alleged "asylum-shopping" of refugee claimants. They've tucked away a series of amendments to the Immigration and Refugee Protection Act in an omnibus budget implementation bill that would seriously impair the access of some refugees to a full and fair hearing of their claims. Ontario Premier Doug Ford has moved to eliminate funding for refugee and immigration aid law services.

At the fringes, hate crimes are up, and white-nationalist delirium is becoming fashionable among a creepy subset of far-right and friendless unemployable young men. It would be easy to misread the public mood. But the public mood is not taking any dramatic turns for the worse.

Nonetheless, something new and alarming is definitely happening in Canadian public opinion, says Frank Graves, president of EKOS Research Associates. EKOS has been annually tracking Canadian

attitudes about immigration since the 1990s, and you don't have to drill down very deep into [the latest EKOS data to see it](#). It's right there in the fine tuning of the findings the firm released last week.

The bad news is that for the first time since EKOS began its tracking in the 1990s, dyspepsia about the pace of immigration has coalesced with resentments about the rate of non-white newcomers to Canada. And that bloc of public opinion is consolidating for the first time behind a single political party—Andrew Scheer's Conservatives.

This is happening whether Scheer's Conservatives want it or not. Whether or not voters with unfavourable and in some cases decidedly unseemly views about Canada's current immigration policies are being actively drawn to the Conservatives, or are simply being repelled by the annoying, not-racist-like-you histrionics of the Liberals, something unprecedented is happening.

The EKOS poll finds that roughly 40 per cent of Canadians harbour an unfavourable view of both the pace of immigration and the proportion of "visible minority" people among immigrants. Among the EKOS poll respondents who said there were too many non-whites among Canada's newly-arrived immigrants, 69 per cent identified as Conservatives, while only 15 percent identified as Liberals. As NDP and Green voters, 27 percent and 28 percent, respectively, said the same.

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The reason this is so dangerous is that the conflation of immigration policy with race is threatening to determine the way Canadians vote. It doesn't matter which party benefits from this in the short run. It's bad news all round. It's the marker of what could be a descent into the same debilitating authoritarian-populist abyss into which the United States and much of Europe has fallen, Graves told me. "The inevitable result is a partisan polarization into two irreconcilable camps."

It's bad enough that the Scheer's Conservatives have allowed these tendencies to become normalized among the party's supporters, Graves said. What's just as bad is a tendency among Liberals and the liberal-left generally to conflate genuine concerns people might have about refugees, or about how Canada's demographics are changing, with the crudest xenophobia and the lowest types of racism.

"It doesn't help. The moral critique, calling people out as Nazis or racists, and painting large portions of the population with this kind of inflammatory language, it's really not helping. It makes things worse," Graves said. That's the way things went in the United States, and the result was the last thing either liberals or traditional conservatives wanted—the election of Donald Trump as president of the United States. "The Americans don't have anything to teach us," Graves said.

"We have largely been inoculated from the vicious debates that have torn the United States and a lot of Europe apart. That's why I'm so troubled to see this informing voters' choice in Canada."

It's perfectly reasonable to conclude, for instance, that Trudeau was dead wrong to insist that there was no "crisis" involved his government's handling of the roughly 40,000 irregular refugee claimants who have walked across the border since early 2017. By last August, two-thirds of Canadians in an Angus Reid poll said "crisis" was a perfectly suitable description. More than half the respondents who said so were Liberals.

Team Trudeau found itself in a similar predicament two years ago during the fractious House of Commons debates surrounding M-103, the Liberals' proposed resolution to establish a committee

inquiry into the spectre of “more than one million Canadians who suffer because of Islamophobia, who are victimized on a daily basis.” Awkwardly, [a CBC-Environics poll](#) and a [CBC-Angus Reid Institute poll](#) were in hand that painted quite a different picture. While 68 per cent of Canadians said minorities should work harder to “fit in” to Canadian culture, the same view was offered by 57 per cent of Muslim respondents. Only nine per cent of the Muslims surveyed identified discrimination as a factor that made them uncomfortable living in Canada—a third said the worst thing was all the snow. A follow-up Angus Reid poll found that 33 per cent of respondents who opposed the Islamophobia motion were Liberal supporters.

Neither is there anything *louche* in the proposition that Trudeau was just the tiniest bit hypocritical to dispatch Border Security Minister Bill Blair with instructions to attempt a renegotiation of the Safe Third Country Agreement with the United States in hopes of shutting down the border-crossing upsurge—after making ugly accusations about xenophobia and hysterics among the Conservatives who’d been urging him to do that very thing, all along.

Still, Trudeau is dead right to say, as he has been saying quite a lot at his round of town halls lately, that Canadians remain mostly “positively inclined” towards immigration and towards Canada’s immigration policies. More importantly, Trudeau has pointed out that Canadians must have confidence that they are in control of immigration, that immigration is managed. It’s the loss of control, a sense of a lost sovereignty, that has fuelled far-right populism from Brexit in the United Kingdom to the Make America Great Again hyperventilation in the United States.

The EKOS poll finding that roughly 40 per cent of Canadians think too many immigrants are allowed into the country every year isn’t even especially newsworthy. Last December, an Ipsos poll found nearly half of its respondents agreed, at least somewhat, that immigration is changing Canada in ways they didn’t like, and at least four in ten agreed “too many” immigrants were coming to Canada. In the EKOS poll trend lines over time, the proportion of Canadians who hold that view is not growing. It’s shrinking. More than 60 per cent of the annual EKOS poll respondents held to a “too many immigrants” view in the 1990s. The percentage wobbled on a downward trajectory to 2005, then wavered up towards 50 percent, and dropped down to 40 per cent again this year.

Canadians who say there are “too many visible minorities” among immigrants have always been fewer in number than the “too many immigrants” respondents, and the trajectory of that opinion bloc has similarly tracked downward over the years. But from a low of 30 per cent in 2005, the EKOS poll respondents who say there are “too many visible minorities” among immigrants has climbed back up to meet the “too many immigrants” response, at 39.9 per cent in the latest EKOS poll.

This is dangerous. Opposition to immigration is no longer driven by more easily remediable anxieties, ill-informed or not, that Canada’s high pace of immigration is bad for jobs, or housing costs, or community stability, or stresses on public services. About 300,000 people settle in Canada every year, and Ottawa wants to see the number rise to 350,000 by 2021. That’s a small number compared to Canada’s population of nearly 38 million. But roughly one in five Canadians is foreign-born—the highest proportion of any G7 country—and most immigrants since 2001 have not been “white.” They come mainly from Asia and the Middle East. About one in five Canadian citizens now falls into the Census Canada “visible minority” category.

Still, the EKOS poll does not tell anything like a straightforward story of white people with an attitude problem about non-white newcomers. Non-white Canadians appear even more likely than most Canadians to say there are too many non-white immigrants coming to Canada. While 39.9 percent of

respondents overall said there were too many “visible minorities” among Canada’s newly arriving immigrants, the percentage of “visible minority” respondents who agreed with the statement in the EKOS poll was 42.8 per cent.

Xenophobia, racism and divisive rhetoric about immigration is something that Canada’s political leaders should take extremely seriously. But the Liberal government has occasionally and quite casually attributed those lurid motives to Conservative and popular alarms over the rapid rise since 2017 in the number of “irregular” border-crossing by asylum claimants. About half the claimants have been from Nigeria and Haiti, and the overall number of border-crossers is now declining. Racists shouted as loudly as they ever do about this, but as for widespread public concerns that the border-crossers were not genuine refugees, that wasn’t necessarily a judgment rooted in racism or xenophobia. It turns out that less than half the border-crossers’ claims that have been finalized so far have been accepted; about 40 per cent were rejected and the balance were abandoned or withdrawn.

As is necessary in any deep dive into an opinion poll’s findings, it’s worthwhile to look closely at its margins of error. The EKOS poll random sample of 1,045 Canadians comes with an error margin of plus or minus three per cent, 19 times out of 20. And when you get down into the weeds of respondent subcategories—Conservative voters, Liberal voters, visible-minority respondents and so on—the margin of error can increase quite dramatically.

But when you weigh the data statistically across the board to reflect the composition of Canada’s population, as EKOS does, you get a pretty clear picture of what people think. And because “visible minority” is becoming an increasingly obtuse category as Canada’s population grows more ethnically and racially diverse, EKOS conducted some experimental testing, and it showed that the term “non-white” produces the same results.

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But getting back to some good news that similarly upsets the usual “narrative” apple carts, last month another opinion poll, this one [a global survey by the Pew Research Center](#) in Washington, D.C., found that ordinary Canadians have the most favourable view of immigrants among the world’s 18 highest immigrant-taking countries. Canadian respondents were more likely than anyone else to say immigration is a public good. Canadians were the least likely to identify immigration as a burden, or a source of crime, or a risk of terrorism.

Importantly, Canada turns out to be less polarized on the issue of immigration than any of the other countries surveyed, too, the Pew Center concluded. Canada’s conservatives are more upbeat about immigration than “left-wing” opinion in several of the other countries surveyed. Only 27 per cent of Canadian respondents said immigrants were a liability or that immigrants took away jobs, and on the bright side, 68 per cent of Canadian respondents said immigrants make Canada stronger.

Meanwhile, the federal government’s own annual tracking survey, [carried out last August and September](#), produced results fairly similar to the EKOS poll. The federal survey benefited from a much larger sample size—2,800 respondents, with an error margin of plus or minus 1.9 per cent, 19 times out of 20. And it adds a couple of insights consistent with the EKOS findings.

Canadians who say immigration rates are too high do not appear to hold that disfavoured view solely on account of some mistaken belief that immigration rates are higher than they actually are. When told that the actual number of immigrants coming to Canada every year was 300,000, the proportion of

respondents who said there were “too many” immigrants jumped from 28 per cent to 37 per cent—a figure close to the 39.9 per cent in the EKOS findings.

While the EKOS poll found that visible-minority Canadians are oddly more likely than Canadians in general to say there are “too many” visible-minority immigrants coming to Canada, the federal tracking survey found a similar irony. Forty-one percent of third-generation Canadians said that 300,000 immigrants a year was too many, but 15 per cent of recently-arrived Canadians, even—immigrants who have lived in Canada for less than five years—said they felt the same way. But overall, roughly half of the federal tracking survey respondents said Canada’s immigration levels were just about right.

Andrew Griffith, former director general of the Citizenship and Immigration Canada’s Citizenship and Multiculturalism Branch, and the author of *Multiculturalism in Canada: Evidence and Anecdote*, says that for all the uproars and controversies, Canada is still doing well as an experiment in multiculturalism.

The country maintains a generous immigration policy and a reasonably generous refugee policy, and that should not be expected to change without an enormous upheaval. Canadian public opinion on these matters is a fairly steady-state phenomenon. About a third are enthusiasts, about a third are sufficiently content, and a final third have serious reservations.

But that last third is not a homogeneous constituency of irredeemable bigots. If you want the surprisingly successful Canadian experiment to continue, you can’t corral that constituency into the same roped-off quarantine area where actually-existing racists and alarmists properly belong. They’ll all just stew in their own juices.

“People are far too quick to whip out the racism card when it serves their interests,” Griffith said. “But you can’t write off a third of the population. Those people are the people you have to engage with.”

Dan here: Just to note this article doesn’t share economic and jobs data as well as population growth. My understanding is the Canadian birth rate does not reproduce itself, much less grow the population. So immigration helps with that. Also, our economic system, whether we like it or not, is currently based on the idea of growth – that’s how the economy is measured. But to grow – we need more immigrants with decent paying jobs who can consume –purchase goods, especially since around 60 to 70 percent of our GDP is based on consumerism. These factors were not what this author was addressing, but we need to also be aware of how economics affects jobs, immigration and our financial system.