

Editorial: The Trust of the People of Canada

Three scant months after the Government accepted the Nansen Medal on behalf of the People of Canada, it has negated the

CANADA'S PERIODICAL ON REFUGEES **REFUGE**

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very spirit of its entitlement. The recent series of measures restricting refugee-claimant inflow tells us more about the government's hyper-sensitivity to criticism than its attempt to govern with compassion through informed self-conscious policy.

There is little doubt that Canada has experienced a sudden influx in asylum claimants in recent months, especially since January. Instead of devising ways to assist provincial governments and non-governmental organizations who have taken the lion's share of the tasks of accommodation and support, it has opted to satisfy the carping criticism of those sectors having least contact with refugees and to restrict future entry.

While the stress on persecuted peoples throughout the world is increasing, Canada has scrapped the list of "protected" country origins facilitating rapid and safe entry, and instead twisted visa, transit visa and summary return regulations into a tangle of bureaucratic red tape which leads asylum-seekers back to the very countries which had imperiled their protection!

None of the problems of demand for asylum in Canada is solved, and more are made. With the backlog of claimants already approaching 20,000 people for the refugee determination process, the government has decided to add more to the queue by requiring those formerly admissible on Minister's permits now to join the file. On paper this appears as a streamlining into a single process. In practice it has inundated a system already overflowing with cases. Chaos in the name of efficiency!

Even more potentially dangerous for would-be claimants (mainly Salvadoreans and Guatemalans) seeking asylum by crossing the border from the U.S., claimants must return to the U.S. to await a hearing. Nothing more than a verbal undertaking from the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) assures protection of these would-be claimants in

the U.S. until a Canadian hearing is scheduled. The INS is notorious for failing to protect people whom it classifies as "economic migrants" — codeword for Salvadoreans and Guatemalans. This is one area of foreign relations which requires independence from intervention by, or compliance with U.S. immigration authority.

Recall that the distinguishing feature of refugee policy from immigration policy in general is the focus on humanitarian concerns — which by their very nature transcend national interest. In such light, reaction to waves of public concern over alleged abuses of administrative and operational policies for refugee intake should represent only a surface manifestation to alert government as to whether its humanitarian policy is being correctly understood or implemented. Careful reflection is required on issues which become political because of unmet needs. No better example can be found than the contents of this copy of *Refuge*, devoted to refugee women. As editors Lee and Van Esterik demonstrate in these pages, gender issues are often ignored and easily bypassed. It is the caring government that seeks to be responsive to its less privileged members — no less true in the global community than within our borders.

The federal government has compounded problems in its already formidable agenda of inland refugee determination. It has instead devised ad-hoc ways and means to keep as many asylum seekers as possible away from Canadian borders. Canada distances itself while people fleeing persecution wait in uncertain if not unprotected circumstances. Canada has opted to protect its borders rather than refugees. We urge the government to turn back to compassion. In so doing, it will return to its true role of policy-making.

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