



CANADA'S PERIODICAL ON REFUGEES

REFUGEE

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Refugees and the Elections

Will refugees be an issue in the forthcoming election on November 21st?

There is no factious debate in Canada over the treatment of humanitarian refugees – those refugees, largely in refugee camps, that our immigration officials select abroad as designated class immigrants for admission under reduced criteria. They make up the bulk of our refugee admissions.

There are those who believe the government should sponsor more humanitarian refugees. Others on the political spectrum oppose the admission of these refugees (as in the Nielsen Report). Nevertheless, there is a general consensus of support for the present policy among the parties and among refugee support groups.

This does not mean that valid arguments are not made for an increase in the total intake. Further, some would prefer a slightly different distribution of the intake. But the option to increase the total numbers and to target specific refugees through private sponsorship defuses any opposition.

The only serious flaw in the whole system of aid to humanitarian refugees, the lack of government personnel in the field, results in long delays before privately sponsored refugees arrive. A serious but relatively minor problem, but not an election issue.

The Mulroney government is to be congratulated for continuing and enhancing the Canadian tradition of offering resettlement opportunities to refugees selected abroad. This is particularly commendable

given some of the attitudes within its own party as evidenced by the Nielsen Report prepared shortly after the Mulroney Tories took power.

But what about those who arrive in Canada and claim to be *Convention* refugees? Has the current government been responsive to their needs?

First, the problem did not begin with the Tories; they inherited a large backlog of refugee claimants. Second, the previous government set up one study after another and failed to come up with a solution. The last commission set up by the Liberals, that of Rabbi Plaut, reported shortly after the new government took power. The new government took half of its period in office to decide to ignore the spirit of the Plaut Report (which focused on a faster and fairer system for processing claims) and to introduce new legislation largely focused on deterring claims and reducing the numbers entering the claims system.

That legislation took the balance of the government's term to pass and set up the implementing agencies. It will only become operational when the new govern-

ment takes power.

On the one hand, the refugee claims backlog has tripled. On the other hand, the government did decide to do something about it. They did introduce enabling legislation and set up the appropriate machinery.

Critics fault these actions and other inactions, on five grounds. First, the new legislation is allegedly motivated by anti-refugee sentiment. Second, critics claim the legislation is unfair; genuine refugees may be denied access to the claims process. Third, nothing has been done about the huge backlog of claimants; nor will the new machinery affect those claimants. Fourth, delays in refugees obtaining work permits have grown much longer with consequent further disruptions in their lives and tremendous cost to the welfare system in Canada. Finally, in addition to criticizing the government for its bad motives, the potential unjust consequences of the new legislation, the ineffectiveness in dealing with past backlogs, and effectiveness in adding to the welfare rolls, the Tories are

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