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# The Syrian Refugee Crisis, Multiculturalism Issues, and Integration in Canada

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### **The Syrian Refugee Crisis, Multiculturalism Issues, and Integration in Canada**

Laurence Cros

The Oxford Handbook of Migration Crises

*Edited by Cecilia Menjívar, Marie Ruiz, and Immanuel Ness*

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### **Abstract and Keywords**

Between 2015 and 2017, Canada welcomed 49, 810 Syrian refugees, thus meeting the electoral promise made by Liberal candidate Justin Trudeau in the wake of the emotional shock provoked by the photo of drowned toddler Alan Kurdi. Media the world over presented the Canadian initiative as an example that should guide and inspire other countries. This chapter examines Canada's Syrian refugee resettlement plan to determine whether or not it can serve as an effective blueprint to improve global refugee crises. It combined a rigorous screening process, private sponsoring to build support and defray state costs, and citizen participation on immigration processes.

Keywords: refugee, Syrians, resettlement plan, Canada, immigration, public opinion

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There were many ways of defining what migration crises mean. This chapter will look into one particular category of migration, that of refugees. Since 1951, when the United Nations adopted the “Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees,” the term ‘refugees’ has had a precise legal meaning. The convention was “grounded in Article 14 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948, which recognizes the right of persons to seek asylum from persecution in other countries,” and defines a refugee as “someone who is unable or unwilling to return to their country of origin owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion” (UNHCR 1951). While persecution can occur under regular circumstances and force individual refugees to leave, extraordinary circumstances in certain areas of world, especially linked to war, create such horrific conditions that large numbers of civilians have no choice but to flee in the hope to survive. Hence the first meaning of “crises” in relation to refugees refers to the contextual factors that trigger large movements of displaced persons. This meaning is found over and over in reports of the United Nations Refugee Agency (hereafter, UNHCR). For example, the subtitle of the UNHCR’s *Global Trends for 2011* is: “A Year of Crises.” But as some passages for reports indicate, while they are born from the context of crises, exceptionally large numbers of displaced persons constitute crises in themselves: “During this year of spiralling crises, with millions of people already forced to flee from their homes ( ... ) the global humanitarian system has been severely stretched” (UNHCR 2014, 5). As UN High Commissioner for Refugees Antonio Guterres warned in June 2015: “The world is facing a staggering crisis as the number of forcibly displaced people rises to record numbers—59.5 million at the end of 2014.” (Murray 2015) This was reiterated the following year by United Nations Secretary General Ban Ki Moon, who stated: “We are facing the biggest refugee and displacement crisis of our time. Above all, this is not just a crisis of numbers; it is also a crisis of solidarity.” (UNHCR 2015, 5)

It is this second meaning of the term “crises” (i.e., the humanitarian challenges and issues of solidarity posed by exceptional mass movements of refugees) that this chapter will examine. More precisely it will focus on a particular case study, that of the Canadian plan to resettle Syrian refugees from 2015 to 2017. The Canadian plan will be analyzed to assess its effectiveness both in welcoming Syrian refugees (i.e., in bringing some relief to a global humanitarian crisis) and in doing so without creating a “crisis of solidarity” at home (i.e., by winning over the Canadian people’s support for the project). The factors that allowed Canada to represent the resettlement of Syrian refugees as a “non-crisis” will be examined to reflect whether the Canadian method can be transposed to other potential host countries to help remedy global refugee crises without causing political crises at home.

## **The Context of Canada's Syrian Refugee Resettlement Plan**

The Canadian plan to resettle Syrian refugees took place in a particularly critical global context. The first two decades of the 21st century have seen a major increase in refugees. The UNHCR indicates that “the global population of forcibly displaced people has grown substantially from 33.9 million in 1997 to 65.6 million in 2016” (UNHCR 2016, 5). It states that the present number of displaced persons is “the highest since the aftermath of World War II” (UNHCR 2015, 5) and that “most of this increase was concentrated between 2012 and 2015, driven mainly by the Syrian conflict” (UNHCR 2016, 5). This massive and brutal increase of refugees in turn created “crises of solidarity” in many countries. Syria’s immediate neighbors (mostly Turkey but also Lebanon and Jordan) host the bulk of the almost 5 million Syrians forced to flee their homes. This represents an enormous burden and has strong implications for the stability of the entire region. But hundreds of thousands of Syrians have also tried to reach Europe, embarking on the dangerous journey across the Mediterranean Sea, where many died (UNHCR 2015, 7)

Reactions in Europe to the flood of asylum-seekers ranged from generosity and open-door policy to fear and the temptation to close down borders.<sup>1</sup> In November 2013, Bulgaria began to build a 30km fence on its border with Turkey to stop asylum seekers. In July 2015, it was Hungary’s turn to start building a fence along its border with Serbia, which was completely closed in September, thus blocking the main land route of migrants into Western Europe and ending two decades of open borders in the EU. On the other hand, in August 2015, Germany declared it would accept asylum seekers no matter what European countries they arrived in, and called for other EU countries to do the same. In September 2015, the European Commission presented a plan to relocate 160,000 asylum seekers from the most affected ports of entry in Italy and Greece to other EU member states. However, Hungary and other EU states refused to implement the Commission’s relocation measures. And as the flood of refugees continued, even countries which had originally adopted a generous policy began restricting access. In January 2016, Sweden, which had previously received the highest number of asylum seekers in Europe in proportion to its population, established border checks to block their arrival. Likewise, in February 2016, Austria, which like Germany and Sweden had been taking in large numbers of refugees since 2014, introduced limits on the number of refugees allowed into the country. In August 2016, a poll in Germany showed that two-thirds of respondents did not approve of Angela Merkel’s “open door” policy ( BBC News 2016; Dempsey 2016; Migration Policy Centre 2016).

In Canada, 2015 was an election year. Canadians, like everyone else in the world, could not ignore the ongoing tragedy of Syria and the terrible stories of fleeing refugees dying as they tried to cross the Mediterranean to Europe. The shocking event that made the Syrian refugee crisis a central issue in the Canadian election was the drowning of 3-year-old Alan Kurdi during his family’s failed attempt to reach Greece in early September

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2015. As images of the drowned toddler went viral, Canadians discovered that his aunt Tima Kurdi, a recent immigrant to Canada, had been trying to help the Kurdi family to resettle in Canada. It turned out that Citizenship and Immigration Canada had rejected the application of Alan's uncle, Mohammad Kurdi, as incomplete because it lacked the proper documentation to certify refugee status.

The Alan Kurdi tragedy made the Syrian refugee crisis a key issue in the Canadian election, although there had already been some debates on this issue. In mid-2013, Canada had announced that by the end of the following year, it would resettle 1,300 Syrian refugees identified by the UNHCR as being in need of immediate assistance. However, by the end of 2014, only 457 Syrian refugees had been resettled in relation to the 2013 plan, although some 1,150 more had arrived in Canada on their own and claimed asylum (Nuttall 2015). Critics denounced the Conservative answer as slow and ineffective, and there were accusations that administrative reorganization was deliberately slowing down the application process of Syrian refugees (Goodspeed 2014). In January 2015, the Conservatives promised that another 10,000 Syrian refugees would be resettled in Canada by the end of 2018, with a focus on religious minorities (Canadian Press 2015).

Immediately after the death of Alan Kurdi, Conservative PM Stephen Harper promised to speed up the resettlement of the Syrian refugees, but added that taking in more people was not the only solution; it was also necessary to continue to "fight the root cause of the problem and that is the violent campaign being waged against these people by ISIS" (CBC News 2015). This did not prevent the opposition parties, particularly the Liberal leader Justin Trudeau, from attacking the Conservatives for their lack of compassion and betrayal of Canada's tradition of welcoming refugees (CBC News 2015). By contrast, the Liberals reiterated their promise to bring in 25,000 refugees and pledged to do it before the end of 2015.

## **Implementation of the Syrian Refugee Resettlement Plan**

The Liberal government of Justin Trudeau took power on November 4, 2015 after winning the election. Originally the government announced it would keep its promise not only of a target of 25,000 Syrian refugees, but also of the deadline of the end of 2015. Things did not go exactly as planned, since the original target of 25,000 people by the end of 2015 could not be met. However, by the end of February 2016, the newly renamed department of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (hereafter, IRCC) had indeed resettled 26,172 Syrian refugees (IRCC 2017c). Moreover, the Liberal government continued its commitment beyond its original promise, since Canada resettled 53,620 Syrian refugees between November 4, 2015 and 2017 April 30, 2018 (IRCC 2017d).<sup>2</sup>

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Several important changes to the original plan were made to ensure that the resettlement would be acceptable to Canadians. First, within a week of the Paris attacks by Islamic terrorists on November 13, 2015, Justin Trudeau pushed back the deadline to the end of February 2016. He gave as a reason the need to complete thorough security screening of the applicants “to reassure Canadians that absolutely everything is being done to keep Canadians safe, and therefore ensure that these refugees are welcomed as new Canadians and not a cause for anxiety or division within the population” (Levitz 2016). Another change was the decision to select candidates abroad and bring to Canada only refugees whose applications had been reviewed and accepted. Originally the idea had been to bring candidates on temporary residence permits, and to proceed with the security checks after applicants arrived in Canada (Proctor 2015).

These early changes in the resettlement plan are crucial because they demonstrate how the Canadian program reconciled generosity in welcoming refugees, thus relieving the global humanitarian crisis caused by the Syrian war, and pragmatism in ensuring that the process would not cause a national crisis in Canada by scaring people and dividing public opinion. This was achieved by proving to Canadians that the plan was safe and kept under control, thus reassuring people and making the resettlement acceptable to them.

Security was promoted in two main ways, through the method of selection and through the criteria of selection, both of which were presented on the website of IRCC. The method was to choose candidates among people already registered with the United Nations in Jordan and Lebanon and review their applications on location, by sending a large delegation of several hundreds of “experienced visa officers” (IRCC 2017a). This method ensured that the government was firmly in control of selecting those who came to the country. Contrary to European countries which received thousands of asylum-seekers and then had to determine who to keep, Canada selected candidates abroad and only “safe” refugees were allowed in the country. There was no risk of being overrun by unwanted candidates, no additional cost of housing them while the lengthy process of reviewing their applications went on, and no difficult and potentially divisive decisions to be made regarding the fate of those whose applications were eventually rejected.

The selection criteria also were a crucial contribution to making the plan safe and acceptable. The plan targeted people who were particularly vulnerable, but also considered a low security risk: “We focused on identifying vulnerable refugees who are a lower security risk such as women, complete families, and persons identified as vulnerable due to membership in the LGBTI community” (IRCC 2017a).

As a result, single men were mostly excluded from the process. This exclusion of men (especially young single men) from the Canadian resettlement plan conforms to popular stereotypes that this category of population is more likely to be a source of trouble, either as terrorists or as disruptive social elements. By eliminating this category of population from the pool of potential refugees, the government of Canada thus addressed public fears, conscious or unconscious, that refugees could cause crises. The refugees targeted

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by the Canadian resettlement plan were deliberately chosen to be nonthreatening and easy to empathize with, with the purpose of reassuring Canadians and making the initiative acceptable to them.

Indeed, polls showed that reassuring Canadians that the plan was safe was a crucial element to gain support for it. A November 2015 poll showed that only 42 percent of Canadians supported the refugee resettlement plan while 54 percent of Canadians opposed it, and that for 53 percent of those, the reason was that the timelines were too short to ensure necessary security checks (Angus Reid Institute 2015). However, results were reversed after the government pushed back the deadline to the end of February 2016. In February 2016 support reached 52 percent while opposition decreased to 44 percent (Angus Reid Institute 2016a).

Therefore, communication with the Canadian public was a crucial element. The perception of security was just as important as the reality of security in making sure that the Canadian citizens would support the resettlement program. The government of Canada made remarkable efforts to promote perceptions both of safe refugees and of a transparent and controlled process. The IRCC website provided the public with extremely clear and detailed explanations of how the program was carried out. Great emphasis was placed on the “safety, security and health” elements of the program and each step in the security screening was presented in detail, insisting on the fact that they all would be completed before refugees arrived in Canada (IRCC 2017a).

The selection criteria that targeted women, children, and families are reflected in the stories, videos, and photos presented on the website (IRCC 2017b). Indeed, the same tendency is visible in recent UNHCR reports, which portray women and children to the almost complete exclusion of men. This exclusion of men from the visual representation of refugees helps to construct an image of the ideal refugee, one that is not likely to create crises, one that people can empathize with rather than fear.

Another element that encouraged Canadians to support the Syrian resettlement plan was the resort to private sponsorship, another change made to the original project. During the campaign, the Liberals had criticized the Conservatives for relying mostly on private sponsorship, and had promised to bring government-assisted refugees. However, when it came to implementing their electoral promise, and doing it fast, the newly elected Liberal government realized that it would need private sponsors. By then, private sponsors had already started selecting refugees to meet the quota of 10,000 Syrian refugees authorized by the Conservatives in January 2015. In fact, before the Liberals took power on November 4, about 1,263 Syrians had arrived in Canada under the Conservatives’ commitment. In the end, rather than 25,000 government-assisted Syrian refugees to arrive by December 31, the Liberal plan called for 10,000 privately sponsored refugees by early 2016 and a further 15,000 government-assisted ones by spring 2016. Between November 4, 2015 and January 1, 2016, 6,064 privately-sponsored refugees arrived, most

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of them cases opened under the Conservatives, with another 4,000 scheduled to arrive in early January 2016 (Levitz 2016).

Private sponsorship played a great part in making the Syrian resettlement plan successful. First, it placed the Syrian plan within the tradition of Canadian hospitality and civic engagement. The Canadian Private Sponsorship of Refugees Program began in 1979 and allows nongovernmental groups to bring individuals and families to Canada, on condition that they provide resettlement support for at least one year (Epp 2017, 17). It played a key role in resettling about 77,000 “boat people” from Southeast Asia from 1979 to 1981. The share of refugees among immigrants rose to 25 percent during this period, a record never equaled since. The key role of private sponsors continued in the 1980s as more refugees arrived from Latin America. In 1986, the contribution of Canada’s private sponsors was honored when the Nansen Refugee Award of the UNHCR was awarded to “the people of Canada” (Epp 2017, 18–20). The important role of private sponsorship appears on the IRCC website, which presents a clear and detailed description of how Canadians can sponsor refugees, simply by creating a “group of five” persons working together (IRCC 2018).

From a practical point of view, private sponsorship was a great help to resettle Syrian refugees. It allowed refugee assistance agencies extra time to find and process the large number of government-assisted refugees called for by the Liberal initiative. Private sponsorship also helped to reduce the major cost of the resettlement plan; while the electoral promise had announced a cost of \$250 million, the first budget of the Liberal government gave an estimate of \$678 million over six years (Levitz 2016). Private sponsorship spread part of the financial burden not only to private citizens, but also to the business community, which was targeted by special fund-raising appeals. Moreover, studies point out that privately sponsored refugees tend to do better economically in the first years after arrival (Friesen 2017). This is not only because they often came through family networks and had a higher level of education, but also because the sponsorship program “provides so much support, emotional, social and financial” (Kantor and Einhorn 2017).

Most importantly, private sponsorship was a very efficient way to implicating the Canadian people in the Syrian resettlement plan. As happened in 1979–1981 with the welcoming of “boat people,” Canadian citizens were very generous in answering the call for sponsors for Syrian refugees. There were so many applications that they could not be processed quickly enough to be among the government’s initial target of 25,000. As a result, in March 2016, Immigration Minister John McCallum announced that Canada would take in an additional 10,000 privately-sponsored Syrian refugees (Mas 2016). Private sponsorship was therefore crucial to generate social cohesion and consensus around the plan, by making Canadian citizens feel that they were actors and decision makers in the refugee resettlement process (Taub 2017).



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In summary, the Syrian resettlement plan was very carefully orchestrated not only to ensure the successful arrival of refugees, but to win Canadian support for the initiative. Pushing back the deadlines to ensure full security checks, targeting nonthreatening categories of people, processing the applications from abroad, maintaining complete transparency of the process through careful communication, and enlisting popular support through private sponsorship, were all elements that contributed to a positive perception of the event. The Syrian refugee resettlement plan could thus be presented as an opportunity to demonstrate national solidarity and promote national self-interest, rather than a potentially disruptive crisis.

## **Multiculturalism and Integration in Canada: Building Migration as a Non-Crisis**

The positive construct around the Syrian refugee crisis was greatly facilitated by the Canadian model of multiculturalism and integration, a model in which migration benefits from a very positive image. History and geography are crucial elements that contribute to this view; however, it is important to recognize that it is built on very pragmatic considerations, and that there can be, as a result, serious limits to Canada's generous policy towards immigrants or refugees.

### **Canadian History and the Acceptance of Diversity**

Canada was the first country in the world to adopt an official policy of multiculturalism, when in 1971, Pierre Elliot Trudeau's government promulgated the "Announcement of Implementation of Policy of Multiculturalism within Bilingual Framework."

Multiculturalism aims at accommodating and promoting diversity, by meeting the claims of ethnocultural minorities within the context of liberalism. It became part of the Canadian Constitution in 1982 through the Charter of Rights and Freedoms, which enshrines group-specific rights, such as language rights or self-government rights.

Section 27 states that "This Charter shall be interpreted in a manner consistent with the preservation and enhancement of the multicultural heritage of Canadians."

Since the 1970s, many countries in the world have adopted policy instruments comparable to those of Canada to promote diversity. But academics and politicians alike stress that "Canada's policy of accommodating diversity" has been incorporated into the Canadian "sense of national identity" (Kymlicka 2003, 1). In a symbolic way, the 2015 electoral victory of Justin Trudeau, son of Pierre Elliot Trudeau, has reaffirmed the centrality of multiculturalism for Canada. During a campaign interview, he described Canada as "the first postnational state" and explained that in Canada, there is "no core identity," but only "shared values" (Trudeau 2015).

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Thus, after fifty years of not only pursuing multiculturalism policies, but of increasingly defining itself through multiculturalism, Canada has created a political culture that minimizes fear and rejection of the migrant/refugee. To use Edward Shils' terms (1961), in the Canadian multicultural society, the migrant/refugee is no longer relegated to the periphery but has become an important symbol of the center and its values. As Justin Trudeau said, in Canada no one can claim to be "a typical citizen" (2015); all forms of ethnicity are equally acceptable; and therefore acceptance of different groups, and particularly of immigrant groups, is facilitated. Not only has multiculturalism become a central element of the national identity, it has encouraged the development of structural forces that influence the perception of migrants and their contribution to the host society. Comparing the incorporation of immigrants in Canada and the US, Irene Bloemraad (2006, 2-3) pointed out that 72 percent of foreign-born residents of Canada acquire the Canadian citizenship, double the proportion in the United States. She explains this difference by the existence in Canada of the official policy of multiculturalism which promotes an interventionist stance toward the incorporation of immigrants by public bureaucracies at the federal, provincial, and municipal levels. Polls confirm the centrality of multiculturalism for Canadians. In 2015, 54 percent considered it a very important symbol of Canadian identity. The number was up five points since a previous poll in 2012 (Environics Institute 2015, 2).

For the past fifty years, multiculturalism and the acceptance of immigration as a crucial agent of national development have been at the heart of the Canadian identity. But long before this, Canadian history paved the way for the success of multiculturalism, thanks to Canada's long tradition of defining itself in terms of its capacity to accommodate diversity. In this country born from two competing imperial powers and based on two "founding peoples," the federal project of 1867 emerged from the need of accommodating regional diversity and the cultural demands of the French Canadian minority. Most Canadian thinkers rejected John Stuart Mill's definition of a "Nation-State" based on an identity of race and a community of language and religion. They preferred Lord Acton's definition of the ideal nationality as heterogeneous and ethnically diverse, because such a state is, by necessity, forced to compromise and therefore is less likely to become intolerant.<sup>3</sup>

This trend accelerated in the 1960s, as the country moved toward multiculturalism. Canadian thinkers came up with the notion of "limited identities" (Careless 1971; Cook 1966)—the possibility that Canadian citizens should define themselves through diverse experiences of region, class and ethnicity. There is an obvious convergence between the concept of "limited identities" and the Actonian model, which work together to transform the multiplicity of identities available to the Canadian citizens from a weakness into an asset. In a world that is more and more transnational and global, it turns Canada into a model, as one Canadian historian expressed in 1969: "We are a highly pluralistic society in a bi-national union. That is our problem, our weakness, our distinction, and reason to exist" (Careless 1969, 26).

## Canadian Geography and the Sense of Control over Immigration

The specific geographical conditions enjoyed by Canada have also contributed to the construct of immigration as a positive force. Immigration is comparatively easy to control because Canada is a country isolated on three sides by thousands of miles of open ocean (the Atlantic, the Pacific, and the Arctic). Its only land border is with the United States, a more prosperous country which does not produce mass immigration to Canada. On the contrary, the thousands of miles of the US landmass act as a barrier that stops immigrants from the less developed southern parts of the continent from reaching Canada. As a result, Canada has relatively little illegal immigration. The great majority of immigrants are accepted into the country after undergoing selection under Canada's program of economic immigration, family reunification, or refugees. This obviously creates a very reassuring feeling that immigration is under control. The importance of this factor in the Canadian perception of immigration has been underlined by academic thinkers and political actors. As Will Kymlicka (2004, 847) wrote, "it's impossible to exaggerate the importance of this fact [geography] for the success of 'the Canadian model' of immigrant multiculturalism." Recently Canada's Liberal immigration minister, Ahmed Hussen (himself of immigrant origin), recognized that "the luck of geography" helps Canada to control immigrants who enter the country (Taub 2017). Conservatives of course share this view, which Howard Anglin, previously chief of staff to former Conservative immigration minister Jason Kenney, recently summed up:

Bounded by three oceans and a large absorbent southern neighbour, we could afford to be selective about who we invited to become Canadians. This allowed us to maintain among the highest levels of immigration with little of the controversy that immigration policy generates in other countries.

(Anglin 2017).

But when this geographical protection is breached, the Canadian sense of control which generates a usually serene support of immigration quickly evaporates to be replaced by a feeling of crisis. This is clearly demonstrated by the different attitudes of Canadians toward asylum seekers who enter Canada illegally (either arriving by ships or crossing the US-Canada border), as compared to refugees who apply from abroad.

The link between the fear of losing control and a negative opinion of immigration has been the topic of several recent studies in social psychology. They show that low perceived control in the sociopolitical domain may lead to prejudice against outgroups and global ethnocentrism (Fritzsche et al. 2011, 109). The rise of ethnocentrism as compensation after experiences of control deprivation has been used to explain, for example, the recent rise of far-right anti-immigrant parties in Austria (Agroskin and Jonas 2010, 79). In the case of Canada, geographical conditions tend to work toward providing Canadians with a sense of control over who or how many enter the country, which may

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have prevented the growth of anti-immigrant sentiment in Canada. This explains, in part, why immigration in general and the Syrian resettlement plan in particular did not result in political crises.

## **Limits to the Canadian Model of Multiculturalism and Integration**

While Canada has developed a model of multiculturalism and integration that promotes a positive view of immigration as a “non-crisis,” it is important not to fall into an overly romantic view of the system. There is nothing particularly idealistic about Canadian multiculturalism; to borrow the terms of a recent *New York Times* article, it is “ruthlessly rational” (Tepperman 2017) and based on national self-interest. One could apply to Canadian multiculturalism the words that David Haglund (2009, 350) used to qualify Canadian foreign policy: “Canada, it transpired, would do well by doing good.” As a government initiative rooted within the official framework of immigration policy, the Syrian resettlement plan sheds light on the underlying principles of the Canadian model: the insistence on integration, and the priorities given to national self-interest and economic prosperity. By contrast, it highlights the fact that immigration patterns that fall outside of the official framework, such as the arrival of irregular asylum seekers, do not enjoy the same popular acceptance and are ruthlessly discouraged.

## **The Integrative Nature of Canadian Multiculturalism**

One key element of the Canadian model is the integrative nature of Canadian multiculturalism. As Will Kymlicka explained, Canada’s form of multiculturalism is grounded on the theories of liberal egalitarian justice developed by John Rawls in particular, with the idea that liberal justice can defend the group-specific rights that minorities need. Canadian multiculturalism, however, has stopped short of communitarianism, whose supporters, like Charles Taylor, consider that the liberal-democratic approach is too individualistic to protect minorities from assimilation (Kymlicka and Peonidis 2008). Canadian multiculturalism works within a liberal framework to protect minority rights while reaffirming core values of individual freedom and democracy. This is illustrated by the way the Canadian Charter mixes individual rights and group rights within the same document. This means that there are limits to how far Canadians are willing to go to accommodate minority groups and immigrant groups. Accommodation must be reasonable, so that the core values of Canadian political culture should be protected. In other words, if Canadian multiculturalism protects immigrants from assimilation, it nonetheless encourages them to integrate. This approach

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is reflected in the findings of a 2016 poll, which indicated that 68 percent of respondents thought that minorities should do more to fit in better with mainstream Canadian society. Only 32 percent thought that Canada should encourage cultural diversity with different groups keeping their own customs and languages (Angus Reid Institute 2016b, 16). This poll is one of a regular series that investigates Canada's values and a similar poll in 1993 had found that 57 percent of respondents thought minority groups should be encouraged to try to change to be more like most Canadians. So with time insistence on the need for integration into the Canadian political culture has in fact increased. It shows very clearly that Canadian multiculturalism enjoys popular support only as long as it is successful in incorporating immigrants into the national fabric.

## **Canada's Pragmatic Approach to Immigration: The Priorities of National Self-Interest and Economic Prosperity**

The same hardheaded pragmatism lies at the core of the Canadian system of immigration. Canada's multicultural model and its immigration system are closely linked and support each other. Immigration is a success because multiculturalism helps immigrants to adjust smoothly to life in Canada, but multiculturalism enjoys popular support because immigration is felt to contribute positively to Canada. The two systems were elaborated around the same time. While the foundations of multiculturalism date back to 1971, the main principle that governs immigration to Canada was adopted in 1967, when a points system was introduced to rank potential immigrants for eligibility. This system no longer took into account race, color, or nationality; it rather focused on work skills, education levels, and language ability. Thus Canada was adopting an approach to immigration that was both progressive (by refusing all types of discrimination) and pragmatic (in promoting immigrants likely to boost the economy of the country). In 1976, a new Immigration Act made refugees a distinct group of immigrants, while defining the priorities of Canada's immigration policy to be the promotion of Canada's demographic and economic interests as well as family reunion. Since then, immigration to Canada has been distributed between the three categories of economy class, family class, and refugees. The economic class is by far the largest, making up around 60 percent of the total of immigrants since the mid-1990s. This supports the claim that "immigration under Canada's skilled worker point system ( ... ) is a cold calculation based on domestic economic requirements with little consideration for humanitarianism" (Khan 2017).

Canada is often represented in the media as an exception to the current mistrust toward immigration in the developed world. And indeed, there is an overall strong support for immigration in Canada, with only 35 percent agreeing that immigration levels are too high, and 62 percent disagreeing. Moreover, 82 percent of respondents believe that the economic impact of immigration is positive (EnviroNics Institute 2017, 2-3). However,

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support for immigration is conditional on priority being given to economic immigrants: 79 percent of Canadians think that Canada's immigration and refugees policies should give priority to Canada's own economic and workforce needs, while only 21 percent think it should give priority to people "in crisis" abroad (Angus Reid Institute 2016b, 18).

A good illustration of this is the reaction to the Liberal government's decision to increase the annual target of immigrants to 300,000 for 2017, from an average of 250,000 since the mid-1990s. This was approved by 62 percent of Canadians (Environics Institute 2017, 2). However, it is important to note that the increase of the share of refugees and family class immigrants, announced by the Liberals during the campaign, turned out to be minimal: the economy class still makes up 58 percent of the total, as compared to a maximum of 62 percent under the Conservatives from 2011 to 2015 (Canadian Council for Refugees 2017). It seems clear that most Canadians do not want to see a major increase of refugees: while 47 percent approve of the target of 40,000 set by the government for 2017, 41 percent think it's too high, and only 11 percent think it's too low (Angus Reid Institute 2017a, 1). The government recently announced that Canada would admit nearly 1 million immigrants over next 3 years.<sup>4</sup> However, the economic class will make up about 60 percent of the newcomers; the Canadian Council of Refugees has deplored the fact that the share for refugees was only increased slightly from 13 percent in 2017 to 14 percent in each of the next three years (Harris et al. 2017)

While there is a major difference between Canadians' strong support of economic immigration and their much less enthusiastic support of refugees, even this group benefits for the general idea that immigration is good for the Canadian economy. Canada's choice to primarily target Syrian families not only answered humanitarian needs (by protecting the most vulnerable people), and security needs (by weeding out higher-risk individuals), it was also a "generational investment" (Kantor and Einhorn 2017). Almost 50 percent of the Syrian refugees resettled in Canada are children under the age of 18, from large, uneducated families, primarily farmers. It seems clear that the integration of the first generation of Syrian refugees will be difficult for them and costly for Canada. However, while the parents may find it hard to adapt to Canadian society, the children will benefit from the Canadian school system, a system geared toward the integration of immigrant children, where language acquisition and social integration are emphasized (Friesen 2017). The fact that previous groups of refugees, like the Vietnamese, have done so well in Canada encourages Canadians to welcome refugees "as an investment in the future" (Harper 2015). The Senate Standing Committee on Human Rights recently published a report that recommends that more resources be allocated to help the Syrian refugees to integrate, especially through the funding of language training classes (2016, 9). This investment in future generations is particularly justified in a huge country with a small, aging population with a low birth rate, where some regions, like the Atlantic Provinces, are actually losing population. This argument is at the core of the Liberal decision to increase immigrant targets in the next years (Harris 2017). This shows that Canada's generous policy towards immigrants and refugees is primarily based on

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national self-interest and the desire to ensure the present and future economic prosperity of the country.

## **Official Refugees versus Irregular Asylum Seekers: The Double Standards of Canadian Generosity**

The Syrian Resettlement Plan is a good example of Canada's generous, if pragmatic, immigration policy. By contrast, irregular asylum seekers, who apply for protection in Canada after arriving on Canadian soil, most of the time illegally, receive a much colder welcome.

In 2010 and 2012, the Conservative government of Stephen Harper passed the Balanced Refugee Reform Act (Bill C-11) and the Protecting Canada's Immigration System Act (Bill C-31), which amended the determination of refugee status. Rick Dykstra, then parliamentary secretary to the Minister of Citizenship and Immigration, summed up the double purpose of Bill C-31: to "make Canada's refugee determination process faster and fairer" and to "ensure faster removal of those whose claims ( ... ) are bogus" or "have been rejected" (Dykstra 2012, 1025). Dykstra made clear that the bill was a reaction to the irregular arrival of 76 Tamil asylum seekers aboard the *MV Ocean Lady* in 2009, followed by 492 more aboard the *MV Sun Sea* in 2010. He condemned the human smugglers and described the migrants themselves as potential terrorists and criminals (Dykstra 2012, 1030). He also insisted that the bill was an answer to the Canadians' desire for "a stop ( ... ) to the abuse which exists within our immigration system" (Dykstra 2012, 1020). Indeed, according to a 2010 poll, 63 percent of Canadians believed that the ship carrying the Tamil migrants should have been turned back and not allowed to reach Canada. Even in the case their claims were proved to be legitimate, almost half of Canadians (48 percent ) said that passengers and crew should be deported to their country of origin, while only one third (35 percent) would allow them to stay in Canada as refugees (Angus Reid Institute 2010).

Many advocates of refugees criticized the Conservatives' amendments of 2010 and 2012. We can mention in particular a working paper of the Canadian Association for Refugees and Forced Migration Studies (CARFMS), based on a five-year research project funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (Atak et al. 2017). The CARFMS working paper argues that the new legislation violates the human rights of refugee claimants by reducing the time limit to submit a claim, instituting different categories of applicants with different procedures, mandating the detention of people who arrive with the help of a smuggler, and finally denying the deliverance of a work permit while the claim is pending (Atak *et al.* 2017, 3-10). Moreover, the paper argues that the bills started a process of "criminalization of asylum seekers" by integrating criminal law processes into immigration control. The governmental rhetoric, originating from the United States and adopted by the Conservatives, tends to increasingly associate



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immigration to threats to national security and community safety, thus encouraging a negative opinion of asylum seekers (Atak *et al.* 2017, 26).

The Syrian resettlement plan stands as a clear contrast to the negative view of asylum seekers promoted by the recent Conservative legislation. One key reason is that the plan, as a governmental initiative, obviously conforms to the principles of immigration as established by the government of Canada. Refugees who respect the rules benefit from a positive image while irregular asylum seekers are viewed with suspicion, even though their plight might be just as desperate as that of “legitimate” refugees. The CARFMS working paper points out that the Conservative government of Stephen Harper disparaged the 2010 Tamil asylum-seekers as “queue jumpers,” as opposed to refugees who apply overseas (Atak *et al.* 2017, 12). In the same way, the 2010 poll revealed that 83 percent of respondents thought the Tamil migrants were “jumping the immigration queue and should apply like any other foreigner who wants to relocate to Canada” (Angus Reid Institute 2010). At work here is a mistrust born from the feeling that irregular asylum seekers, even if their claims are legitimate, abuse the system by bending the rules and unfairly taking the place of more disciplined applicants. Therefore a clear difference is made between “deserving” refugees and asylum seekers, who are seen as somehow “underserving,” not because their claims are illegitimate, but because they did not respect the rules. A striking illustration of this is the difference made between refugees and asylum seekers, even after they are granted protection: the CARFMS working paper points out even after they obtain refugee status, asylum seekers who entered the country irregularly are “required to wait five years before applying for permanent residence and before they can sponsor their family members,” while people who obtain the status of refugees from abroad can do this after 180 days (Atak *et al.* 2017, 10). It is almost as if, even after winning their claim for protection, irregular asylum seekers are still regarded with suspicion and punished for abusing the system.

This difference in perception and treatment of regular refugees and irregular asylum seekers comes in part from the fear that Canada could lose control of the immigration process if the protection provided by the geographical situation of the country in the past was breached. A study of the 2009 Tamil crisis pointed out that the arrival of irregular asylum seekers by boat has happened only once around a decade in recent Canadian history, making them rare and striking events that inevitably trigger heated debate and an overwhelming negative representation of asylum seekers (Bradimore and Bauder 2011, 639). Public Safety Minister Vic Toews said at the time that the arrival of the ships should be not seen as isolated, independent acts, but as a test of Canada’s determination to turn back irregular asylum-seekers (Chase 2010). In the 2010 poll, 72 percent of respondents agreed that the ship was a “test boat” and that more ships carrying migrants could be expected to attempt to reach Canadian waters in the future (Angus Reid Institute 2010).

This negative view of “bad” asylum-seekers as opposed to “good” refugees is not limited to a time when Conservatives dominated the political life of Canada. Since January 2017, when United States President Donald Trump signed several executive orders that

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restricted the rights of immigrants and refugees, in particular access to asylum,<sup>5</sup> Canada has had to deal with an increasing number of asylum seekers who fear being turned away by the United States. Statistics show a steady increase in the number of refugee protection claims since 2013 (from 10,465 to 23,350 in 2016), with a sharp spike in 2017 (32,938), especially considering that the temporary figure for that year includes only January to September (IRB 2017). This is very likely a reaction to the new US legislation. The number of asylum-seekers apprehended by the Royal Canadian Mounted Police is particularly high in Quebec, where the small town of Hemmingford is reported as the busiest illegal crossing point of Canada's border with the US.<sup>6</sup> It is difficult to assess how lasting this increase of asylum seekers crossing from the United States will be, but the media speculate that it will continue if the Temporary Protected Status of migrant groups in the United States such as the Salvadorans, Hondurans, and Nicaraguans is lifted (Anglin and House 2017). This is what happened with the Haitians, causing them to arrive in large numbers in 2017: 6,249 Haitians claimed refugee protection in Canada from January to September 2017, as opposed to only 631 for the whole year 2016 (IRB 2017).

At first the Liberal government seemed willing to take in asylum seekers turned away from the United States. Prime Minister Trudeau tweeted that Canada would welcome those "fleeing persecution, terror and war, regardless of your faith" (Trudeau 2017). However, the government decided not to increase its target of 40,000 refugees for 2017, a decision that was approved by 57 percent of Canadians. 25 percent thought that Canada should have adopted a ban similar to the US policy, and only 18 percent thought Canada should take in more refugees in response to the US policy (Angus Reid Institute 2017a, 5). Later in the year 2017, clearly in reaction to the spike in illegal border-crossings, the government increased its efforts to discourage asylum seekers. Through their Twitter account, the IRCC has launched an aggressive campaign under the hashtag #cdnref to dispel the false information about refugee status in Canada. Tweets made striking by eye-catching red or orange signs menacingly warn that "Asylum-seekers who do not meet requirements to be considered a refugee will be removed" (@CitImmCanada. 2017a) or that "Crossing into Canada between designated ports of entry is against the law. You will be arrested and detained if you cross here" (@CitImmCanada. 2017b). They repeat over and over that "Temporary Protected Status in the US does not give you any status or privilege to come claim asylum in Canada" (@CitImmCanada. 2018). In addition, on the IRCC website, a page explains about "Irregular border crossings and asylum in Canada", with a video in Creole which clearly indicates that Haitian asylum-seekers are especially targeted (IRCC 2017g).

Even the Prime Minister was forced to backtrack on his January tweet. In August 2017, he stated that "entering Canada irregularly is not an advantage. There are rigorous immigration and customs rules that will be followed" (Lampert 2017). The government's policy was no doubt in part the consequence of Canadians' negative view of asylum seekers who cross illegally from the United States into Canada. An April 2017 poll revealed that Canadians were more likely to say their country should be "concerned

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about the threat posed by these arrivals” (37 percent) than “focused on the opportunity to help” them (24 percent). To the question: “It’s not fair that people can cross into Canada illegally and apply for refugee status here,” 72 percent agreed and 28 percent disagreed (Angus Reid Institute 2017b).

The current attitude of the Canadian government toward irregular asylum seekers may convey the impression that Trudeau’s Canada is no more welcoming to migrants than Trump’s United States, as one commentator claims (Khan 2017). This critical view has recently been developed by several academic studies that link Canada’s nature as a settler-colonial state responsible for the destruction of Indigenous nations to its treatment of migrants, depicted as exploitative and discriminatory despite an official rhetoric of openness and welcome. For example, Julie Kaye challenges the separation between international and domestic antitrafficking policies, which function similarly in harming the persons they are supposed to protect, particularly migrant and Indigenous women (Kaye 2017). Jennifer Bagelman also emphasizes this parallel discrimination when she writes about “indigenous peoples whose lands were stolen by the very colonial powers that bomb today and then fail to unconditionally welcome the refugees it produces tomorrow” (Bagelman 2015). In her study of British sanctuary cities, she argues that even the sanctuary movement, through which cities choose not to cooperate with state authorities in enforcing immigration laws<sup>7</sup> in fact contributes to reducing asylum seekers to abject supplicant figures (Bagelman 2016).

Militant associations and militant academics are right to point out that Canada’s treatment of refugees is less than perfect. Nonetheless, it is important to remember that the immigration policy of the present government of Canada does conform to the long Liberal tradition that has built a relatively generous immigration and integration system since the 1960s, although admittedly for pragmatic reasons rather than pure humanitarianism. For example, although it will not throw the border with the United States wide open, the present Liberal government is making an effort to reduce popular prejudices against irregular asylum seekers. Instead of leading the charge that they are “queue jumpers” who take the place of more deserving and disciplined refugees, as the Conservatives did, the present government created a page on the IRCC website to dispel this “myth.” It clearly explains that “asylum seekers are ( ... ) a separate category and are neither ahead nor behind applicants for immigration, permanent residence, or citizenship” (IRCC 2017h). And to return to our original topic, the Syrian Resettlement Plan, militant associations like the CARFMS do praise it as a generous and effective policy that illustrates the difference in attitudes toward refugees between the Conservatives and the Liberals (Atak *et al.* 2017, 4).

## **Conclusion: Canada’s Syrian Resettlement Plan: A Global Model for Refugee Crises?**

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Canada's plan to resettle Syrian refugees is still going on, but already over 50,000 Syrians have benefitted from it. While this remains a modest figure compared to the almost 5 million Syrian people languishing in refugee camps in Turkey, Lebanon, and Jordan, the Canadian plan was a success because it will give these chosen few a true chance at making a good life in a stable and prosperous democracy, and because it enjoyed the support of the great majority of Canadian citizens.

It is this national consensus around the plan that has caught the attention of media around the world. They drew comparisons with the reluctance of other developed countries to resettle Syrian refugees and presented the Canadian initiative as an example that should guide and inspire them. The *New York Times* argued that "Canada's generosity (. . .) can serve as a beacon for others" (Editorial Board 2015) while *Le Monde* praised the achievement of the "Canadian model" (Kauffmann 2016).

But can the Canadian plan really serve as model for other countries? As we have seen, part of the plan's success in winning support from the Canadian people came from working within the context of a long established social construct where multiculturalism is a structural force for the harmonious integration of immigrants. This construct rests on historical and geographical conditions that are specific to Canada and cannot be reproduced by other countries. It is difficult to assess whether the resettlement plan would have worked so effectively outside of this specific national context.

However, close examination of the way the Syrian resettlement plan was implemented reveal several elements that were developed to reassure Canadians and convince them to support the plan. These elements, contrary to the more global historical and geographical context from which Canada benefits, may be reproduced by other countries. The first element is the pragmatic recognition that a key priority of refugee resettlement programs is to reassure citizens of the host country that everything is done to make them safe and beneficial. In Canada, this was achieved by setting up a selection process that guaranteed that the people accepted as refugees would integrate into the host society without incidents. However, the perception of safety and control is just as important as the reality; hence communication is a key element in this process of winning over the citizens' support. In the case of Canada, this aim was achieved by an exemplary use of participative democracy, especially in the way communication through the IRCC website was kept transparent and open. Finally, and most importantly, the Canadian private sponsorship system is one element that could certainly be adopted by other countries since it has proven effective both to facilitate the resettlement of refugees and to give private citizens the opportunity to appropriate and therefore support the process. Indeed several countries, including the UK, have indicated their interest in the Canadian private sponsorship program (Canadian Press 2016).

These three elements (the pragmatic approach and willingness to address citizens' fears; participative democracy through transparent and open communication; the sponsorship program) are undoubtedly part of the larger Canadian political culture. Nonetheless,

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contrary to Canada's geography and its 50-year-old tradition of multiculturalism, they can be borrowed by other countries to create conditions where the arrival of refugees will be considered as an investment for the future rather than a national crisis.

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### Notes:

<sup>(1)</sup> There is a legal difference between asylum seekers and refugees. Asylum seekers request protection when they arrive on the receiving country's soil; their applications are assessed individually and may be refused. Refugees, on the other hand, belong to a group which an agency has already defined as needing protection; their applications are processed and accepted prior to arrival. The term 'migrants' refers to a much larger category that include people who fear persecution and seek refugee status, and people whose motivations are primarily economic and seek a better life outside of their home country.

<sup>(2)</sup> 25,210 people came as government-assisted refugees, 20,440 as privately sponsored refugees, and 4,720 as blended visa office-referred refugees (a mix of private sponsorship and government assistance).

<sup>(3)</sup> As they worked to propose definitions of the Canadian nation, many historians quoted this passage by Lord Acton: "The co-existence of several nations under the same State is a test, as well as the best security of its freedom. It is also one of the chief instruments of civilization, and, as such, belongs to the natural and providential order, and indicates a state of greater advancement than the natural unity which is the ideal of modern liberalism." See John Emerich Acton, *Essays on Freedom and Power* (Boston: Beacon, 1948), 185.

For several quotes of this passages, see W. P. M. Kennedy, "Nationalism and Self-Determination," *Canadian Historical Review* 2, no. 1 (1921): 17; R. Cook, *Canada and the French-Canadian Question* (New York: Macmillan, 1966), 102-103; W. Morton, "Clio in Canada; The Interpretation of Canadian History," in *Approaches to Canadian History*, ed. C. Berger (Toronto, ON: University of Toronto Press, 1967 [1946]), 48; K. McNaught, "Canada's European Ambiance," *The Round Table* 310 (1989): 148; D. Morton, "History

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(<sup>4</sup>) 310,000 in 2018, up from 300,000 in 2017. That number will rise to 330,000 in 2019 and 340,000 in 2020.

(<sup>5</sup>) Executive Order 13767, "Border Security and Immigration Enforcement Improvements," 25 January 2017, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/executive-order-border-security-immigration-enforcement-improvements/>. Executive Order 13768, "Enhancing Public Safety in the Interior of the United States," 25 January 2017, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/executive-order-enhancing-public-safety-interior-united-states/>. Executive Order 13769, "Protecting the Nation from Foreign Terrorist Entry into the United States," 27 January 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/27/us/politics/refugee-muslim-executive-order-trump.html>. See also (CMS 2017).

(<sup>6</sup>) Between January and November 2017 there were 16,920 RCMP interceptions in Quebec out of a total of 18,615 (IRCC 2017f). In 2002, Canada and the United States signed the Safe Third Country Agreement, which requires asylum seekers to apply for status in the country where they first arrive. However, this applies only to persons who enter Canada at official land border crossings or ports of entry (IRCC 2017e). Persons who enter Canada irregularly, once in custody, are entitled to an oral hearing and fair procedures, regardless of whether they entered through a safe third country. This legal loophole is seen as encouraging asylum seekers who fear their claim will be rejected in the United States under the Trump legislation to cross illegally into Canada to make another claim for asylum (Annett 2017).

(<sup>7</sup>) In the United States, many large cities, such as New York, Los Angeles, and Chicago, as well as smaller cities and communities have declared themselves sanctuary cities and refuse to implement the federal immigration policies introduced by President Trump (CMS 2017). In Canada, Montreal, Vancouver, Toronto and other smaller cities have declared themselves sanctuary cities to ensure that irregular migrants are able to obtain municipal services without fear of being deported. This may imply that municipal law enforcement agencies limit their cooperation with federal immigration officials (Montpetit 2017).

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