The changing face of Canada

Henry Michaels
29 January 2003

Data from Canada's 2001 census, released last week, show that the Canadian population is rapidly diversifying and becoming increasingly urbanized, as well as socially polarized. These trends have immense implications.

Over the past decade, Canada has become one of the most polyglot countries in the world, with the census listing 18.4 percent of its population, or 5.4 million people, as foreign-born, a full percentage point higher than the 1996 census. Only Australia has a higher proportion of foreign-born residents—22 percent, while the United States has 11 percent.

Canada's foreign-born figure is the highest since the 22 percent recorded in 1931, but there has been a dramatic change in the origins of its new residents. For the first 60 years of the twentieth century, the vast majority of immigrants came from European backgrounds, partly due to racist official policies designed to keep Canada "white".

Of the arrivals during the 1990s, 58 percent came from Asia, and only 20 percent from Europe, followed by 11 percent from the Caribbean and Latin America, 8 percent from Africa and 3 percent from the US. As a result, 4 million of Canada's 30 million people are classified by Statistics Canada (StatsCan) as "visible minorities". They make up 13.4 percent of the total population, compared with 1.1 million or 4.7 percent in 1981.

These "minorities" include more than one million people of Chinese descent, or 3.5 percent of the population. Those from South Asia contribute three percent; blacks, 2.2 percent; Filipinos, one percent; and "Arab-West Asian Canadians", one percent. Seventy three percent of the immigrants who arrived during the 1990s were defined as visible minorities, a jump from the 52 percent of those who arrived in the 1970s.

They are part of a complex and rich mosaic—asked to nominate their ethnic origins, Canadian residents listed more than 200 in total.

The overwhelming majority of recent immigrants—94 percent—have moved to metropolitan areas. Most—three-quarters of the total—live in Canada's three largest cities: Toronto (43 percent), Vancouver (18 percent) and Montreal (12 percent). This also marks a contrast with two decades earlier, when 41 percent of the immigrants settled outside these three metropolises.

According to StatsCan, the Greater Toronto Area, which is home to 4.6 million people, has become the most ethnically diverse metropolitan region in the world. Nearly 37 percent of residents are visible minorities, up from a quarter in 1991, and almost 44 percent are foreign-born, which is more than twice the national average. Vancouver, the largest West Coast urban center, is close behind with 37.5 percent foreign-born, of whom nearly half came from China or Hong Kong.

By comparison with other major North American cities, Miami has 40.2 percent foreign-born, Los Angeles 30.9 percent and New York 24.4 percent. In the Southern Hemisphere, Sydney also has 30.9 percent.

While Asian immigrants to Canada are now the majority, the influx is extraordinarily varied. Since 1991, Toronto's largest contingents have come from the People's Republic of China, India, the Philippines, Hong Kong, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Jamaica and Iran, followed by Poland, the former Yugoslavia, Guyana, Russia, South Korea, Trinidad and Tobago, Vietnam, Ukraine, Romania, the US and Britain..

Various media reports have suggested that many recent arrivals are aspiring professional people. But in Toronto, there has been a significant shift in the immigrant population from around the downtown neighborhoods, which have for two decades enjoyed a reputation for diversity, into the outlying suburbs, which are more working class and where social facilities are generally poorer. In several municipalities, immigrants who arrived during the 1990s constitute more than 40 percent of the total population. They include Markham, Mississauga, Richmond Hill, Brampton and Vaughan, as well as Toronto.

Contrary to the myth of the disappearing working class, the population is becoming more proletarian, with a distinctly international character.

Immigrants have contributed to Canada's continuing urbanization. In 2001, 79.4 percent of Canadians lived in cities or towns with a population of 10,000 people or more, compared with 78.5 percent in 1996. Canada's population has concentrated further in four broad urban regions: Greater Toronto; Montreal and its adjacent region; Vancouver and its surrounds; and the Calgary-Edmonton corridor in the resource-rich province of Alberta. Between 1996 and 2001, these four regions combined grew 7.6 percent in population compared with virtually no growth (+0.5 percent) in the rest of the country.

The decline of small rural producers has accelerated this urbanization. Swathes of Canada—across the Prairies—have for a century or more been identified with family farming, but giant agribusinesses have increasingly taken over. Between 1996 and 2001, the total number of farms fell by 10 percent to 246,923, while the proportion of big farms, with receipts exceeding $250,000 per year, rose from 12 percent to 16 percent.

The number of farm operators also declined by about 10 percent, with a staggering 35 percent drop among those aged under 35. Less than 12 percent of farmers are now younger than 35, whereas the figure was 50 percent just a decade ago. The aging population means that small farms will keep disappearing

A *Toronto Star* commentator suggested that the concentration of people in big cities had created "two very different Canadas". On the one hand, there were Midwest provinces such as Saskatchewan "where residents are largely descended from the first wave of settlers—the Europeans—and the aboriginals who preceded them." On the other, were places such as Richmond, a Vancouver suburb, "where visible minorities, primarily Chinese and South Asians, account for nearly 60 percent of the population."

In the media generally, this city/rural and cultural gap has begun to replace the English/French divide as the most discussed source of social tensions. What is not discussed is how the growth and increasing predominance of the diverse urban population relates to the deepening class and social polarization, both within Canada and internationally.

Immigrants come to Canada in search of jobs and economic security, often fleeing dire poverty, political and economic oppression and civil wars triggered by deteriorating social conditions. Significantly, mainland China, where the Beijing regime is imposing low-wage capitalist conditions through dictatorial methods, has become Canada's prime immigrant source, with 136,135 Mandarin-speaking people in the Greater Toronto Area reporting it as their birthplace.

Big business and employers, however, only welcome immigrants to the

extent that they provide a source of cheap labor, easily exploitable skills and, to some extent, an expanded consumer market. Many migrant workers, including those with higher qualifications that authorities refuse to recognize, are in low-wage jobs.

In Ontario, where Toronto is the capital, the provincial Tory government has frozen the legal minimum wage at $6.85 an hour since taking office in 1995. By one estimate, at least 300,000 workers, mostly from the visible minority communities, subsist on this wage. Being paid $15,600 a year, they are $3,000 below the poverty line.

Over the past decade, the federal and provincial governments have cut social services to all working people, including immigrant programs. In Ontario, where funding for schools, health care and welfare benefits has been slashed, the Conservative government cut the budget for immigrant settlement services by 50 percent in 1995, and has made no increases since.

Nearly one in five children in Greater Toronto immigrated in the past 10 years, and half of them speak a language other than English or French at home, according to the census. Yet, English or French as second language classes have been cut back as local school boards have been forced to reduce their budgets.

For its part, the federal Liberal government has imposed ever more draconian immigration restrictions, seeking to ensure that only able-bodied, job-ready applicants gain entry. Last year, the Chretien government radically altered the selection criteria, setting far higher language, work-experience and education requirements.

Citizenship and Immigration Minister Denis Coderre also unveiled a plan to allow skilled workers into Canada for three- to five-year terms to take jobs, but only if they agreed to live outside Toronto, Vancouver or Montreal. If they accepted restricted mobility rights, they would be granted permanent status in Canada at the end of the contract.

Coderre has already seized upon the census data to declare that federal, provincial and municipal governments must do more to "encourage immigrants to settle in other regions of Canada to allow all parts of the country to benefit from immigration." His plan tramples over basic democratic rights, including freedom of movement and employment, as well as internationally recognized civil and political rights.

Despite the deteriorating social conditions and attacks on democratic rights, the mass media has largely presented the census findings as vindicating Canada's official policy of "multiculturalism," introduced in the 1970s. By stressing the distinctness of ethnic identities and cultures, the argument goes, governments have made Canada a draw card for economically valuable migrants, while minimizing domestic social tensions.

Amid this discussion, there is a distinct tinge of anti-Americanism, with unfavorable comparisons drawn to the so-called "melting pot" policy in the United States. There, according to the Canadian media, immigrants are under far more pressure to assimilate into a homogeneous culture.

Whatever their divergences, however, both policies aim to instill forms of nationalism and identity politics that serve to divide working people along national, racial and ethnic lines. In Canada, "multiculturalism" was adopted to try to forge a new sense of national identity to replace the traditional "white" Canada that was no longer viable after the decline of the British Empire.

While the census data points to the objective emergence of a more mobile and cosmopolitan population, substantially made up of working people who have exercised their right to cross national borders in search of better lives, governments on both sides of the US-Canada border are intent on strengthening their national interests, fueling enmities.

One expression of this fact is the promotion, as part of the census itself, of "Canadian" as a new ethnic category. Some 6.7 million people—almost a quarter of the population—gave "Canadian" as their sole ethnic ancestry, StatsCan reported. Another 5 million reported Canadian ethnicity along with one or more other ethnic origins—a sum total of 11.7 million.

In all, 39.4 percent of residents now consider themselves "ethnic Canadian"—up from 31 percent in 1996, just 4 percent in 1991 and only 0.5 percent in 1986. These levels are comparable with the United States, where between 20 and 30 percent of people list their ethnicity as American.

The "Canadian" census question arises from a government and corporate campaign to fuel nationalist sentiment. Its genesis can be directly traced to a "Count Me Canadian" campaign by the right-wing Sun Media chain prior to the 1991 census, when the Canadian response rate jumped from a statistical anomaly to 4 percent. Market and public opinion surveys have increasingly oriented to a "sense of pride and national attachment," according to Jack Bensimon, president of Bensimon Byrne, the Toronto ad agency that created a series of "Joe Canadian" beer ads in 2000.

Academics have declared the notion of Canadian ethnicity to be scientifically meaningless and StatsCan officials have referred to it as a "difficult" and "fluid" concept. The ethnicity question is so open to interpretation and manipulation that StatsCan considered dropping it for the 2001 census.

However, Heritage Canada, the chief federal client for the data, pushed for the question to remain on the survey. Jean Chretien, then a minister in the Trudeau government, sponsored the formation of Heritage Canada in 1973, with the purpose of defining and promoting a mythical Canadian identity.

Such nationalism is increasingly required by Canadian ruling circles to divert attention away from the social polarization and disaffection produced by two decades of attacks on working class living standards, with immigrants among the first targets. Another Canadian myth is that of a relatively egalitarian society.

A report on wealth inequality released last month revealed that the richest 10 percent of family units hold 53 percent of the wealth, whereas the poorest half of society has only 5.6 percent, with the gap widening dramatically since 1970.

Reversing this decline in the social position of working people requires a common struggle, based on the objective unity of the international working class, regardless of skin color, for a truly egalitarian, that is socialist, society.