

## Assisted Passage Movements

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Canadian immigration policy in the twentieth century was constantly at odds with itself. The government was simultaneously trying to restrict broad types of immigration and encourage other specific types, especially skilled labour. In the years following the Second World War, Canada cast about for solutions to the lack of skilled worker immigrants, gradually coming upon a more liberal immigration scheme which saw the final end to some of the country's most xenophobic immigration policies.

The sponsorship schemes used by immigrants to bring their families into Canada via chain migration were effective at bringing people over, but the government was dissatisfied with them. The main reason for this was that the chain system tended to bring over large numbers of unskilled, largely rural immigrants into urban areas, which not only tended to result in higher unemployment, but also left needed skilled positions vacant anyway. In addition to these problems, the immigrants tended to cluster in isolated communities, which created additional social and political problems.<sup>1</sup>

Many skilled workers abroad *wanted* to get into Canada, but were unable to due to the lack of a family foothold and concern about the high costs of entry. Even if Canadian immigration policy at the time cared little for the sponsored immigrants, Ottawa did want to find some way to get their more skilled counterparts to come. This became especially critical in the postwar era, with Canada a growing industrial nation with manufacturing as a major employment source.<sup>2</sup> As a result of these combined concerns – the perceived overload of sponsored immigrants, and the roadblocks for the highly-desired skilled immigrants – the Canadian government set about trying to encourage the latter to come to Canada.

Programs of one form or another to assist immigrants to Canada were as old as the country itself. Policies as early as 1867 gave women financial assistance to come to Canada with the goal of providing wives for prairie settlers, but the scheme worked better in theory than in practice and was quickly abolished.<sup>3</sup> Somewhat more successful actions around the same era included the Irish Poor Law in Britain, which permitted Boards of Guardians to spend money to help send workhouse inmates – largely women – to Canada.<sup>4</sup> These programs at times seemed exception rather than rule, programs intended to encourage specific group of people, for a very specific purpose, amidst the general Canadian tendency to make immigration laws more restrictive over time.<sup>5</sup> There were additional programs targeting broader groups – for example, the western colonization

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<sup>1</sup> Hawkins, Freda, Canada and Immigration: Public Policy and Public Concern, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Montreal: McGill-Queens University Press, 1988), 9-10.

<sup>2</sup> Knowles, Valerie, Forging Our Legacy: Canadian Citizenship and Immigration, 1900-1977 (Ottawa: Citizenship and Immigration Canada, 2000), 76.

<sup>3</sup> Knowles, Valerie, Strangers at Our Gates: Canadian Immigration and Immigration Policy, 1540-1997 (Toronto: Dundurn Press, 1997), 126-127.

<sup>4</sup> Barber, Marilyn, Immigrant Domestic Servants In Canada (Ottawa: Canadian Historical Association, 1991), 5.

<sup>5</sup> Knowles, Strangers, 49-51.

plans which essentially offered anyone who could make it out there a plot of land – but these were as much internal movements as anything else. Someone who could not make it into Canada was obviously ineligible for a plot of land.

In the interwar years, a briefly buoyant economy led Ottawa to seek ways to encourage more British immigration to Canada. A number of generous loan schemes to British subjects, “irregardless of [current] occupation,” provided reduced passage fares and some agricultural training to British migrants seeking to work on Canadian farms.<sup>6</sup> The uncertainty of the time – and the fact that farmers in England were doing quite well – made the program a less than stellar success, with only a few thousand taking advantage of the scheme and actually ending up on farms.<sup>7</sup>

By the end of the Second World War, it was becoming more obvious that attempts to pigeonhole immigrants into specific industries were not working. Canada suddenly found itself with a very high rate of immigration compared to the wartime and Depression years, but much of it was unskilled labour in a country that found itself with a large technical industry all of a sudden. In 1950, moves would be taken to do something about this.

In June, the government proceeded to begin overhauling the entirety of Canadian immigration policy. Orders in Council were issued to begin replacing outdated immigration regulations, a federal Department of Citizenship and Immigration was established, streamlining Canada’s immigration infrastructure considerably. At the same time, the old preferred-classes lists were updated, finally placing all Europeans – provided they were healthy, of good character, and had skills needed in Canada – on the admissible list.<sup>8</sup>

The legal ability to move to Canada, of course, was not the same as the practical ability to do so. Costs for crossing the Atlantic and getting settled in Canada were quite high, especially to a Europe that was only just beginning to reach the level of wellbeing they were at before the war broke out. Ottawa understood this, and the year 1951 was rung in with the Assisted Passage Loan Scheme. The APLS was designed to facilitate immigration by granting interest-free loans to immigrants whose services were “urgently required.” The loans would, ideally, be repaid in monthly instalments within two years. The APLS was one of the first forms of assisted passage to meet with largescale success, as more than 32,000 immigrants arrived in Canada by October 1955, receiving over \$5.2 million in assistance funds, and paying back 93.2% of the loans by that time.<sup>9</sup> The appeal of the scheme was not lost on Canadians, whose immigrant communities began to see sizable bodies of highly skilled professionals and their families entering the country. Over subsequent decades, the APLS was gradually expanded, first to Caribbean nations

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid, 109-110.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, 112.

<sup>8</sup> Knowles, *Forging*, 72.

<sup>9</sup> DFAIT, Cabinet Document No. 228-55, “Financial Measures to Assist Immigration,” <http://www.dfait-maeci.gc.ca/department/history/dcer/details-en.asp?intRefId=1578>.

in 1966 and finally worldwide in 1970, at which point interest was being charged on the loans at a rate of about six percent.<sup>10</sup>

With the final extension of the APLS, one of the last spikes was finally driven into the coffin of Canada's most nativist immigration policies. The policy was as much an addition as it was a revision to older schemes; the loan package complemented sponsorship and other immigration schemes without necessarily eliminating them. On top of that, the growing realization that *anybody* could make a talented and effective immigrant had finally taken hold in Canadian society, creating a greater sense of openness towards immigrants than had existed in the past. The Assisted Passage Loan Scheme of course did not exist in a vacuum; it was not the sole herald of a more open immigration policy. However, the APLS, alongside the new points system, increasingly open refugee policies through the 1980s, and Canada's multiculturalism policy, was one of many steps along the road to a more egalitarian immigration policy.

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<sup>10</sup> Canadian Council for Refugees, "A Hundred Years of Immigration to Canada," <http://www.web.net/~ccr/history.html>.