



SHIFTING ECONOMY LEADS TO A SHIFT IN IMMIGRANTS AWAY FROM LARGE CITIES

Vancouver Sun

Saturday, July 26, 2008

The best place on earth: Manitoba? Canada's three largest metropolitan areas have been a magnet for immigrants, with seven out of 10 choosing to settle in Montreal, Toronto or Vancouver. But new statistics from Citizenship and Immigration Canada suggest this trend may be changing.

Mid-sized cities are beginning to attract an increasing number of immigrants due in large part to shifting economic and employment prospects.

The federal government, naturally, credits its own initiatives, such as the provincial nominee program that allows provinces to select immigrants to fill specific labour needs; and the development of tools that help smaller centres draw and retain immigrants.

Big cities' losses are small cities' gains. The figures show the number of immigrants taking up residence in Toronto dropped to 87,136 last year from 99,293 a year earlier, a decline of roughly 12 per cent, while the number coming to Vancouver slipped to 32,920 from 36,273, a drop of just over nine per cent. Montreal was up slightly to 38,710 from 38,391.

Meanwhile, Charlottetown was up 73 per cent to 801, Moncton 31 per cent to 343, Saskatoon 40 per cent to 1,618, Winnipeg 10 per cent to 8,472 and Red Deer 93 per cent to 567. It was a mixed picture in British Columbia's smaller centres, with gains in Kelowna, Chilliwack, Nanaimo and Victoria and declines in Kamloops, Abbotsford and Prince George.

Still, Canada's major urban agglomerations remain the preferred destination for the vast majority of immigrants, with 67 per cent of newcomers calling them home.

Larger cities tend to offer an established community of family and friends and a greater number of economic opportunities -- either low-skilled jobs that require few language skills or businesses that cater to particular ethnic groups.

In fact, studies have shown that immigrants who settle in larger cities experience labour market advantages over those who settle in smaller cities and they can earn substantially more.

Nevertheless, Toronto's national share of immigrants dropped to 37 per cent last year from 40 per cent last year (and 50 per cent in 2001) while Vancouver's share slipped to 13.9 per cent from 14.4 per cent, as immigrants began to appreciate the advantages of living in a smaller city, away from the congestion, pollution, noise and stress of the big city.

Another reason for the shift is a decline in manufacturing activity in central Canada, which has limited employment growth, while smaller cities riding the commodities boom in the West are prospering.

The influx of immigrants benefits small cities by raising their municipal tax base, increasing the labour pool and bringing greater cultural diversification to their communities.

British Columbians shouldn't feel smug about Ontario losing its share of immigrants over the last decade from a high of 59 per cent to 47 per cent last year. B.C.'s share has declined from 21 per cent to 16.4 per cent in 2007.

Despite B.C. slogans to the contrary, newcomers apparently believe the best place on earth is Manitoba, that province's share of immigrants having climbed to 4.6 per cent from 1.7 per cent.

They must go south for the winter.

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