

## IMMIGRATION- ANOTHER MISSED OPPORTUNITY FOR SASKATCHEWAN?

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OCTOBER, 2004

Twenty-five years ago, when I was first elected to Saskatoon City council, people were debating how big our city should be. This was a time of rapid urban development, when picturesque family homes in the core neighbourhoods were being bull-dozed to make way for box-like apartment buildings. Saskatoon had an annual growth rate nearly double the national average for Canadian cities. People were afraid it would lose its charm, its sense of community, and its reputation as a friendly place of volunteers. Some people actually advocated that Saskatoon shouldn't be allowed to get any bigger than a population of 200,000.

Today, that notion seems rather quaint. We've surpassed that drop-dead figure. We haven't lost all the wonderful things - the sense of community and participation and volunteerism - that make this such a great city. Instead, the debate today is all about how to get the province, and the city, growing faster again.

Last fall, we had a provincial election, and one of the issues was "How to grow the economy". The Opposition put forward a proposal to increase the population by 10,000 a year. Now, I happen to agree with them that Saskatchewan should be home to many more than a million people. I agree with the goal of growing the population by 10,000 a year. Where I part company is how I believe we can reach this goal. I feel the best solution is by increased immigration. And I believe it is absolutely imperative that we get going on this task, sooner, rather than later.

I want to talk today about why it is so important that we make sure immigration isn't another missed opportunity in Saskatchewan.

I care very passionately about this place. I feel that we have missed an awful lot of opportunities that should have been ours. I am tired of Saskatchewan being dissed as the poor cousin across Canada. I'm tired of them laughing at us about our anti-spitting by-law, or muttering about the state of policing here. We have a tremendous province. We have fantastic potential wealth- not just in the next-year country economy of agriculture, but also in our oil, gas and minerals, and the fabled work ethic of our

citizens. But we've missed a lot of opportunities along the way.

If you have a right-wing outlook, you're probably thinking right now about things like no uranium refinery, or oil companies headquartered in Alberta. If you have a left-wing perspective, you might be thinking about the missed opportunity for children when the dental plan was cancelled, or you might be thinking about how we became beholden to the bankers when the Devine debt and deficit ballooned in the eighties. Regardless, it's hard to escape the notion that Saskatchewan has missed a lot of chances along the way. And right now, with the demographics of Canada being the way they are, we could miss out on another major opportunity if we don't move quickly.

Saskatchewan, like every other province, is riding along on the coat-tails of the Baby Boom generation. But we're getting older. As any business person who has ever considered the succession issue will tell you, there's a bubble in the economy today. Whether we're talking about labour market replacement, or investment of new capital and new entrepreneurs, Saskatchewan, like the rest of Canada, is facing a crunch.

Just look around you, and mentally add another twenty years age onto the people you're sitting with. It doesn't take a rocket scientist to realize that a whole lot of us might not be in top fighting form in a couple of decades.

The most urgent task we face in Saskatchewan these days is to convince people that we need to

- ✓ Embrace change
- ✓ Embrace growth
- ✓ And embrace immigration.

The reason for that is very simple. You probably figured it out when you checked out the waistline and the hairline of most of us in this room. In very short order, we won't be able to look after ourselves, either in terms of our health care, or in terms of our labour supply. This grim fact is a far more compelling issue than whether the corporate income tax rate should be cut by ½ or 1 or 2 or more percentage points. If there's

nobody here to pay the taxes, it will hardly matter what the rate is.

Oh but wait a minute, I can hear some people saying. What about Saskatchewan's secret advantage? What about the growing young Aboriginal population? Isn't Saskatchewan unique in Canada, even in North America? After all, we have a Baby Boom Echo, and we actually have the potential for population growth just around the corner in Indian and Métis country.

And that is true. I know, because I used to be the Minister of Aboriginal Affairs. I used to go around the province making speeches about the opportunity the young Aboriginal population gives us. I still believe that. And I still feel we need to make Aboriginal education and skills development, and Aboriginal employment and economic development a top priority in Saskatchewan.

But it is also true that even with this Aboriginal advantage, we still face a labour and entrepreneurial crunch. We have to face facts.

When I prepared my report on immigration last fall, I commissioned Doug Elliot from SaskTrends Monitor to look at the demographics of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal population growth. He concluded that even with the boost offered by the growing Aboriginal population, we will be behind in labour replacement by as many as 100,000 people over the next ten to fifteen years if nothing changes.

In terms of demographics, Saskatchewan is unique in Canada. Our age structure is noticeably different than in other provinces. That is why the situation is even more urgent for us.

We have the distinction of being the province with both the highest proportion of our population over the age of 65, and the highest proportion of our population under the age of 15. We've got a huge bubble in the middle.

That bubble represents our work force, our business community, and our investors in tomorrow. We have a small and aging workforce with a bulge of retiring baby boomers. This affects us in the private sector, the public one, and the Crown sector. For instance, about one third of the permanent staff at the Crowns will be eligible to retire in three years.

So where does that leave us? Well, at the risk of repeating myself, it means we have to embrace change, embrace growth, and embrace immigration.

Please don't tell me that Saskatchewan people can't or won't embrace change. As Les MacPherson said so eloquently in his column last week, no jurisdiction on the planet has embraced change like Saskatchewan. In less than one lifetime, we've gone from threshing machines to the Synchrotron.

And we certainly have shown in the distant past that we can embrace immigration. After all, most of us don't have a Treaty Card. That means that most of us are the children or grandchildren of immigrants. Our ancestors came from far away, and they put down roots and values that we can draw upon today to embrace immigration.

Finally, I do believe that most of us are willing, now, to embrace growth. I believe that most of us are tired of the headlines like the September 30<sup>th</sup> Star Phoenix- "Sask. Population shows modest increase over 2003".

That article stated, in a nutshell, that Canada's population grew by almost 1% last year, but Saskatchewan only grew by one-tenth of a per cent. To make matters worse, over the past twenty years, our easterly neighbour, Manitoba, has grown by over 9% while we have slid back by 2%.

We need to look very carefully at what Manitoba did differently from Saskatchewan to increase its population. Both provinces have had NDP and Conservative administrations over that time period. Both provinces had to deal with debt-though Manitoba didn't have as much per capita debt as we did. Both provinces have an Aboriginal mini Baby Boom - though Manitoba doesn't have the same advantage we have. So what made Manitoba grow, and Saskatchewan slump? And why is Manitoba on the road to increase its population by 10,000 a year?

The difference is straight-forward. Manitoba has had a very active and aggressive immigration program for almost ten years. It started with a couple of towns called Steinbach and Winkler, who wanted to reach out to their Mexican Mennonite brethren. And it grew like topsy,

when the Manitoba government committed the time and human resources, to attract and keep new immigrants.

Saskatchewan's population has hovered or dipped around one million since the early 1980's. Saskatchewan's population malaise will not correct itself.

Let's not miss the opportunity that immigration gives us.

But let's do it in a way that makes sense, and that will be successful.

You know, compared to other provinces, Saskatchewan does not receive its fair share of immigrants. We have about 3% of Canada's population. But we only receive about 1% of Canada's immigrants. And even when they do come here, they don't stick around. Only about one-half of our immigrants remain.

When I talk to some people about increasing immigration, they counter that we can't do the same as Manitoba. They say we're hobbled by the debt. We can't hire as many civil servants to promote the province abroad, and to do the security screening that is essential in the post 9/11 climate. We don't have the money, they say, to provide the settlement services, and the language training. We don't have the same level of interest in immigration as Manitoba.

To all of those excuses except the last one, I say "hogwash". We can, and we should, imitate Manitoba. We can, and we should, get the province growing through increased immigration attraction and retention efforts.

Sure, Manitoba's program is big compared to ours. And it is true that big gets bigger. But it is also true that smart gets smarter. And there are no smarter, hard-working and innovative people than the ones who live in Saskatchewan.

It is a truism that in Saskatchewan, when you buy a work shirt, it comes with its sleeves already rolled up.

We already have the tool we need. That tool is the program called the Saskatchewan Immigrant Nominee Program. It can be used to help attract immigrants through the lure of faster processing and quicker review of security screenings and credentials and evaluation of net worth.

We should be using this program more often. We don't need to re-invent the wheel. We can adapt and imitate many of the immigration attraction and retention tools that Manitoba has already developed, and we don't need to wait until we have an Immigration bureaucracy the size of theirs.

Until my report last fall, the Immigration Branch was an often forgotten little part of government. They got annual targets for Immigrant Nominees from the Federal Government, and consistently they missed those targets. But this is changing.

Some of you may have heard the long haul truckers talking about immigration on the Gormley show. Their success is a direct result of the changes to the Immigrant Nominee Program last fall. They have shown that Saskatchewan's labour market won't fall apart with a few immigrant truck drivers, and that Saskatchewan can benefit from opening up their Skilled Worker Category under the Immigrant Nominee Program.

Well, I happen to think that this success should lead to other successes. I'd like to see the government liberalize the Business Immigrant part of the program too. And I'd like to see Saskatoon taking better advantage of the program.

It's almost an embarrassment, in a city like this, with such a diverse, vibrant and forward-thinking population, that we've been sitting back depending on the feds, through Citizen and Immigration Canada, to process the few highly skilled and highly motivated immigrants we get to Saskatoon. We haven't been using the Immigrant Nominee Program nearly as much as we could.

Even SREDA, who used to talk about both increased Aboriginal employment and increased immigration as joint issues of mutual importance, seems to have gone silent in the immigration debate.

I mention SREDA and the Provincial Nominee Program because their equivalents in Manitoba were used, and used effectively, to increase the population and diversity and skill levels of that province. Manitoba is within striking distance of increasing its population by 10,000 per year solely through immigration. We can do the same

here, and probably even better, if we grab hold of the public policy guiding immigration and kick start our efforts at both the community and provincial levels.

The question, of course, is how do we do that?

I've already mentioned that I would like to see the Province open up its Business Immigrant category, and encourage significantly more business immigration. To those who say that this would mean competition, I say that this is precisely how entrepreneurship thrives. I've heard too many of you talk to me about the value of competition not to believe you.

I want to see us become much more active in attracting Skilled Workers of all sorts, not just a narrow band of occupations where we've determined there is a shortage. I hope I've convinced you about the urgency of the retirement crunch that's staring us in the face.

From a local perspective, I would like to see Saskatoon become much more engaged in using immigration as an economic development tool. Within a couple of years, if the public pushes the political will, we should have the same target numbers for provincially nominated immigration as Manitoba has now. That means increasing our targets from 400 to 1500 and more each year. Keep in mind that 400 Provincial Nominees actually means a lot more people than 400- they mostly come here with families.

I hope the Saskatoon business community gets on board and starts using the Immigrant Nominee Program much more aggressively. If they do, I'd like to be bold and suggest that Saskatoon should make sure it receives its fair share, or quota, of those immigrants. We have about one quarter of the population in Saskatchewan. We should also welcome at least one quarter of the new immigrants.

You know, under the British North America Act, immigration is a joint responsibility of the Federal and Provincial governments. However, historically, the Federal government has assumed the larger role. This is incredibly important when it comes to matters such as security. However, because each province is different, with different economic needs and priorities, starting in the early '90's, most provinces developed their own programs to process limited

numbers of immigrants. Immigration has been an evolving field.

And now, cities are demanding a bigger say in their own governance. Currently the big cities are demanding a share of the gasoline tax. I think this lacks a certain ambition. They should also be demanding more say in the shaping of their population through immigration. After all, it is at the local level that people best know their community's attitudes, abilities, and needs.

I've reviewed some of the best practices of immigration across Canada, and I've come to the conclusion that the communities that are most successful in attracting and keeping immigrants are those who have strong welcoming committees, where local people have thought through the thorny questions of integration, and settlement.

As the province fine-tunes and hopefully liberalizes its immigration policy, I predict that cities will want to be more than just passive recipients of immigration. Cities want a greater say in what happens in their own backyard.

That's why I would like to see a Mayor's Task Force on Growth and Opportunity right here in Saskatoon. This could be a huge first step for Saskatoon to become more actively involved with a progressive population policy.

Local communities, and local economic development advocates have a very direct interest in wanting to create their own strategies for attracting and assisting new immigrants, and in particular, business immigrants.

Why business immigrants?

There are many advantages to business immigration. Unlike many home-grown entrepreneurs, who unfortunately have a high rate of failure with first-time businesses, new business immigrants have been pre-qualified and pre-screened by immigration officials. They bring with them a wealth of knowledge, talent and proven business experience.

Before I finish today, I want to mention one more exciting opportunity that could really benefit Saskatoon and Saskatchewan.

I want to tell you about a Canadian promotion program aimed at immigrants in California. As

you likely know, the United States has a very stringent immigration and work visa program. They have very strict requirements that scientific, financial and technical people coming to the US can not displace a local worker. The practical result is that a company has to go through a lot of hoops and many hours of paperwork before an application is accepted. And, because work permits are time limited, these companies often have little incentive to go through the process twice for the same worker. Instead, if they can't hire locally, they start the visa process all over again for a new worker.

What this means is that there's a lot of people in the States whose visas are expiring. They've already learned the language. They've been screened through security. They have adapted to the North American lifestyle, and just at the point where they should be getting ready to settle down and start their own businesses, their work permit expires.

There's one curious fact about these skilled people that we can profit from. It seems that because they are already on the continent, they want to travel around a bit while they're in North America. So they often apply for Canadian Visitor Visas. Now the Canadian Consulate in Los Angeles is no slouch. They have been tracking these people. Every year, they send them an invitation to attend a Canadian immigration promotion seminar.

About one-third of the people with expiring scientific and technical American visas who shows up to these seminars decide to apply to come to Canada. What a perfect opportunity for Saskatchewan! If only we could get the word out to them.

We talk all the time about diversifying our economy, but whenever we get down to the nitty-gritty- it seems that Saskatchewan still means farming to us. But what about the mining sector? Or the Synchrotron? The scientific and technological opportunities here at home waiting to be developed?

Right now, when people talk about immigration, it is primarily to fill vacancies in the agricultural sector- new hog farmers from the United Kingdom or Germany, meat processors from China and Korea, co-op farmers from India. These are the sorts of projects I hear mentioned

all the time. But really, with enhanced business immigration, the sky's the limit.

That's why I like the idea of promoting Saskatchewan with these immigrants to the United States who are losing their American work permits. They come ready set with the skills and attitudes to help us diversify into the economy of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. I challenge all of us to promote this great province, and this great city, to them. They are looking for a place to live in Canada. Let's help them call Saskatchewan "home".

You know, earlier on, I asked you all to imagine what you and your neighbours would look like twenty years from now. I wanted you to understand what this place will look like if we don't do something positive to increase immigration. Now, I'd like you to imagine, for a moment, what this place must seem like to a stranger coming here to live.

We joke that even though Saskatchewan is cold, at least it's a dry cold. But frankly, folks, cold is cold. And if you've never heard of booster cables, the winters here can be quite terrifying. Saskatchewan's reputation is that we live in a place that is isolated and really cold. Now maybe global warming will help the cold part. Or maybe we could get the government officials to make sure they only issue immigration papers in the spring time. But what are we going to do about the isolation?

That's why I'd like you to imagine right now what Saskatoon must look like to an immigrant coming here for the first time. We don't have the large and welcoming ethnic communities like Toronto does.

That means it's up to each and every one of the rest of us to put out the welcome mat. Saskatchewan used to do that in spades. But we've become rather aloof the last few years.

I remember talking with a university professor who told me about some Vietnamese friends of his. They liked the opportunities here. But they weren't all that sure that they were really welcome here. They told this professor that even though they had lived in Saskatoon for seven years, they had never, ever, been invited to the home of anyone but other people from Vietnam.

I was embarrassed to hear that. No wonder the few immigrants who come here don't stick around. Newcomers, strangers from far away, need to feel that they're welcome here. They want to know that they are valued for more than just their hard work at a Folk Fest Pavilion.

And I truly believe that they are. But we all need to try just a little harder to walk our talk.

I started out this presentation by talking about the great spirit of community, of volunteerism, of involvement, that we have in Saskatoon. That's the spirit that will help us overcome our undeserved reputation as a place of isolation and bitterly cold weather. That's the spirit that will convince people to come here instead of Toronto or Vancouver. That's the spirit that we have in Saskatoon, and it's time to stand up proud and show that spirit to the rest of the world.