



REMARKS BY

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‘International Credentials: Asset or Liability?’

I am delighted to be here today to lead this seminar as part of the Harney Lecture Series.

I want to commend the Munk School of Global Affairs, and the Robert F. Harney Program in Ethnic, Immigration and Pluralism Studies for arranging these types of events.

These are important issues and I appreciate the opportunity to lend my voice to the discussions.

Let me say off the top: I am an immigrant. Looking around this room, I suspect I am not the only one in this room who was a newcomer to Canada at one time.

In my case, that was more than 50 years ago. But I still remember vividly the challenges and hurdles I faced when I first got here. I must say, it was quite a journey from Happy Hill, Grenada to Parliament Hill, Canada.

Along the way, I encountered some hurdles that may sound familiar to many of you.

Frankly, it's hard being an immigrant. It takes a long time to get yourself settled. Everything seems alien ... from the transit system ... to informal protocols about behaviour on the job ... to your children's schools. It's an adjustment for everyone in the family.

I raise my own experience for a couple of reasons:

One, I want you to know that I am sympathetic and empathetic toward new Canadians.

Secondly, I think it is important to make this personal to emphasize that what we are talking about is people.

I will reference many statistics, economic data and other facts and figures in my presentation today. But we must always remember the human context. Our policy decisions, rules, regulations and processes all impact on real people.

People who have skills and talents and ideas and connections. People who make an enormous contribution to our economy and our society. If we let them.

And that is the crux of what I am going to talk about today.

From an economic perspective, our diversity gives our province, and indeed our entire nation, a huge advantage.

It enables us to make crucial business connections. It enables us to learn new ideas and best practices from other countries. It enables us to understand other cultures, opening doors and opening markets.

But there is an “if” to all these advantages. They are only economic strengths “if” we can harness them.

In Canada, and specifically here in Ontario, we talk like we welcome the world with open arms. But do we act like it?

To be more specific, today we are addressing the question of whether international credentials are an asset or a liability. Again, there is a disconnect between the way we talk and the way we act.

OFC BACKGROUND

I have now been Ontario’s Fairness Commissioner for five years, which I believe gives me a unique perspective on issues around immigration policies and realities, particularly when it comes to internationally educated professionals.

For those of you who are not familiar with my office, let me give you a brief overview:

- In 2006, Ontario passed the Fair Access to Regulated Professions Act requiring regulated professions to have licensing that is transparent, objective, impartial and fair.
- My office works with 40 regulatory bodies. They include professions in health care such as nursing and medicine and in non-health fields such as accounting and engineering. They also include smaller, newer professions such as midwifery and kinesiology.
- Anyone who wants to practise a profession deserves fair treatment, no matter where he or she was educated: in Ontario, in another province or elsewhere in the world. Faster, fairer access to the professions is good for individuals so that more highly-skilled professionals can work at their full potential. It’s also good for the economy.
- My role is defined. It is to assess the registration practices of the regulators and to help them improve.
- I am working on long-term and institutional change.
- We are making progress. It is incremental and evolutionary, but it is progress.

Now, five years into the job, we are broadening our horizons. We recently completed the first-ever assessments of all of Ontario’s regulatory bodies.

We have compiled a comprehensive report, reflecting what we have seen and learned in our first five years, what we have gleaned from the assessments, and our recommendations for the future.

We will be releasing this report in January. As such, I am restricted in what I say about it today. If I tell you too much, then I will have to quarantine you – and I wouldn't want to keep you here over the holidays!

But I can give you a preview, and offer you some thoughts on how we would like to frame the discussions.

RESEARCH

In our research, one of the key points that is indisputable is that Ontario and Canada's future is tied to immigrant success.

Let me give you just a bit of supporting data:

- Ontario's Ministry of Finance has projected that by 2016, 100% of the province's net labour market growth will come from immigration. One hundred percent. All of it – within the next four years.
- Ontario will thus need more immigrants if the labour force is to grow and remain vibrant. Retirement among the baby boom cohort is just getting under way. Employers appear to be well aware of the fundamental forces that are eroding the supply of employees.
- These shortages will also be apparent in highly skilled occupations such as health care, information technology and certain specialties in engineering. There is also high demand for workers in the skilled trades, especially those related to construction and tourism.
- However, as World Education Services-Canada pointed out in a recent report, despite stringent selection criteria for immigrants, there is a 'disconnect' between immigration policy and labour market realities. Many immigrants are underemployed and unemployed, while high-skill jobs stay vacant. For example, less than one-quarter of employed and university educated immigrants are working in their field of study.
- There are some positive developments. The Conference Board of Canada recently released a study that found newcomers are having a major impact on innovation and performance on every level, in areas such as research, culture, business and global commerce.
- The study found that at least 35 per cent of an estimated 1,800 Canada research chairs are foreign born, even though immigrants are just 20 per cent of the Canadian population.
- These are encouraging signs.

- Nonetheless, the Conference Board has estimated that the economic cost of not recognizing the qualifications of highly-skilled immigrants is between 4 billion and 6 billion dollars annually.

Our research has also uncovered some worrisome trends when it comes to whether immigrant professionals are treated fairly.

- Census data shows that in 2006, recent immigrants to Canada earned 30 to 40 per cent less than their Canadian-born counterparts. There has always been a gap there, as in the late 1970s, it was 10 to 15 per cent.
- In other words, recent immigrants see little if any financial reward for their international work experience. This is symptomatic of a pattern we see too often.
- One area this manifests itself in, is in licensing – a subject my office is obviously very familiar with. Far too many professional immigrants cannot get licensed and find work in their field.
- A very recent study called *Making Ontario Home* was conducted by the Ontario Council of Agencies Serving Immigrants. This province-wide study of more than 2,500 immigrants arriving in Ontario between 2000 and 2010, found that those with a degree in a regulated profession showed the highest levels of unemployment.
- The global recession certainly has not made things any better. In fact, it has had a disproportionate impact on immigrants. Between 2008 and 2009, immigrants accounted for 33 per cent of all job losses in Ontario, despite making up only 28.9 per cent of the workforce.
- The recession has also hindered access to the professions. Applicants had more difficulty covering exam fees and other registration costs. It became much harder to provide for a family while taking bridging programs and other training. And the loss of jobs created fewer opportunities to get Canadian work experience as required.
- Perhaps most alarming, the recession created conditions for immigration policy changes, some of which are already in effect and some still in development.

On that last point, I want to take a few moments to talk about some proposed changes that we believe fly in the face of fair access.

FEDERAL IMMIGRATION POLICY

Citizenship and Immigration Canada has put forward proposed regulations to amend Immigration and Refugee Protection Regulations.

My office has reviewed these proposals, and drew three specific concerns to CIC's attention.

- First is a provision to increase immigration points for Canadian work experience and reduce points for foreign work experience.
 - If this regulation proceeds, the CIC would, in essence, promote the continued marginalization and exclusion of internationally educated professionals from the marketplace.
 - It would effectively validate the discriminatory practice of devaluing work experience obtained outside Canada.
 - Our office recommended instead that individuals receive an equal number of points for work experience in their declared occupation, regardless of where that experience was obtained.
- Our second area of concern is a requirement for mandatory assessment of foreign education credentials.
 - Assessment of an individual's credentials is one of the most important steps in determining whether he or she may be licensed in a profession. Sometimes these assessments are done in-house by a regulatory body, sometimes by an outside agency, sometimes by both.
 - Our concern about the federal proposal is that many immigrants intending to work in regulated professions would be subjected to duplicate assessments and costs.
 - Also, there are limits on what academic credential assessments can reveal about an individual's capabilities. Without a more comprehensive assessment, we fear that applicants who could be successful in their professions might be excluded.
 - And most importantly, we expressed concerns about CIC's criteria to determine "equivalency" to Canadian education credentials. Frankly, we were not confident about the transparency of these criteria, given that methodologies for assessment of academic credentials differ from organization to organization. There is great potential for inconsistent assessment outcomes unless clear criteria are established and made publicly available.
- Our third major concern is around the proposed requirement for a minimum level of language proficiency.

- Ontario's regulated professions receive internationally trained applicants from a number of source countries. English or French may not be the official language of instruction in these countries.
- The unintended impact of the CIC's proposed language tests may be to exclude a large number of individuals who would otherwise be successful in their professions.
- We strongly object to the imposition of a language test that would require applicants to meet a benchmark that is different from what is required by their own profession's regulatory body.
- Rather, we recommend that CIC align the language tests and benchmarks required for immigration with those used by regulatory bodies for immigrants declaring the intention to work in a regulated profession.

I am hopeful that our concerns are being heeded by the policy-makers and decision-makers in Ottawa.

A few weeks ago, the Honourable Jason Kenney, federal Minister of Citizenship and Immigration, indicated that he understands the importance of getting this right. Speaking to a conference of regulators on November 8, Minister Kenney said:

“Attracting and retaining the best international talent to fill skills shortages in key occupations is critical to Canada's economic success ... We will continue working with regulators to improve the process for assessing and recognizing newcomers' qualifications for licensure in their professions soon after they arrive in Canada. Working together, we can speed up the integration of newcomers into the Canadian labour market.”

Needless to say, I concur with that sentiment. But we will be keeping a very close eye on how this plays out.

And it really does illustrate how global economic forces are impacting on policies that affect access to the professions.

ONGOING VIGILANCE

Now, in the above instance, we were dealing with specific policy proposals. In other cases, we have encountered inherent unfairness in the licensing process that is less tangible – but no less real. They demonstrate the need for ongoing vigilance.

Let me give you two examples.

- In our research, we examined Mutual Recognition Agreements, or MRAs. This involves regulatory bodies in different countries accepting the qualifications of programs and professionals as equivalent.

International MRAs can reduce the burden of the registration process for internationally trained applicants by exempting them from some requirements, such as examinations or work experience.

Everyone agrees this is a good idea, and a number of professions have been pursuing MRAs. However, when we dig a bit deeper, we discover that in most cases, MRAs tend to focus on English-speaking and Commonwealth countries, especially those with similar approaches to education and licensing.

While these negotiations are obviously simpler for the regulatory bodies, they do not reflect the diversity of applicants to Ontario professions.

We have seen some progress, such as Engineers Canada, which has been negotiating MRAs with regulators in Chinese Taipei, Japan and South Korea. This is a practical approach – acknowledging the importance of East Asia as a source region for the engineering profession. Unfortunately, this attitude is the exception more than the rule. Too often, there is still an inherent bias, with applicants from countries that have English-speaking education systems having a clear – and unfair – advantage over professionals from other parts of the world.

- The other example I use to illustrate the need for continued vigilance involves the use of third-parties to assess credentials.

Many Ontario regulators use external organizations to assess knowledge, skills, academic credentials, competency and prior learning.

Fair access legislation expressly states that regulators must take measures to ensure that the assessments – like the rest of the licensing process – are transparent, objective, impartial and fair.

In recent years, we have seen some progress in this regard – thanks in no small part to recommendations from my office.

But there is still a long way to go. These outside agencies are not as accountable as they should be. Recent analysis shows that 35 of 38 professions in Ontario require some form of credentials assessment, with 26 of those professions using third parties.

Of those that conduct in-house assessments, 44 per cent do not have clear criteria for deciding how credentials are assessed. A similar number do not provide in-depth training on how to conduct assessments.

If we truly believe that international credentials are an asset, not a liability, we need to do a better, more throughout job of creating a clear, equitable path for internationally educated professionals to practise here.

COMMUNITY BUILDING

I want to point out, this is far more than an economic issue. It is very much tied into questions around what kind of community we want to build.

According to the November issue of *Toronto Life*, skilled professionals are supposed to be very much in demand. The cover story is headlined, “The New Elite: They’re affluent. They’re hyper-educated. And they’re coming to Toronto from all over the world.”

Here are a few snippets of what editor Sarah Fulford had to say about this phenomenon.

“Compared with many troubled spots on the globe, Canada is paradise. Our middle class is relatively stable, and people from all over the world are desperate to move here. This country, of course, has always attracted immigrants in search of a better life. But Canada wasn’t necessarily a first-choice destination. Now, as Europe experiences extreme economic volatility and the U.S. becomes a place where people are working three minimum-wage jobs to make ends meet, Canada’s status abroad has greatly improved.”

Ms Fulford further notes:

“It turns out that a big draw for wealthy foreigners who buy property here and young professionals who move here for work is Toronto’s multiculturalism – not as an idea or as a landscape for good restaurants but as something much more significant and valuable. Multiculturalism affords them an environment where they can comfortably be themselves. Our financial stability coupled with an accepting, open-minded social environment appears to be a potent formula.”

Sounds good, right?

But in the story itself, renowned urban studies expert Richard Florida is quoted raising a concern. Here’s what he said:

“New immigrants, according to various studies on the subject, add to the economy by bringing new skills and ways of doing things that complement the skills of domestic workers. It’s time to thoroughly revamp our professional licensing systems so immigrants can use their skills. We need to stop wasting talent in our midst.”

This is where my office comes in.

CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT

As I noted earlier, we have been at this for five years.

When we started out, my staff and I did a lot of research. It did not take long to appreciate that trained professionals were too often being denied the opportunity to practise in their chosen fields ... not because they were not qualified, but because of unnecessary hurdles. This has a tremendous negative effect – on individuals, on families, on our society and on our economy.

We heard many tales of frustration and hardship. But it was their cumulative impact I have found most distressing. There is a cost to all of us when people who are willing and able to contribute are hindered for no good reason. *That's* why my office was established.

Fortunately, the regulators agree.

I want to make a point of not being too critical of the regulatory bodies. By and large, they do a good job. They are genuinely trying to be fair and reasonable. And, for the most part, when our office makes suggestions for improvement, they heed our advice.

We have hundreds of examples of improvements across the regulated professions.

- The College of Teachers, for instance, has removed a requirement for one year of Ontario work experience.
- The Association of Land Surveyors adopted an exemption that will allow for the waiving of articling requirements for a licensed surveyor from another jurisdiction. Just as importantly, the Association also posted clear information about this exemption and how to request it – as recommended by my office – so confusion about the circumstances doesn't discourage some from applying.
- Similarly, again in response to our recommendation, Certified Management Accountants of Ontario post clearer information about in-house assessment of academic qualifications. This information describes how courses for equivalency are assessed, and specifies which courses cannot be exempted due to Canadian-specific content.

As you can see, most of these changes are relatively small. But they are incremental, adding up to the systemic, institutional improvements at the heart of what we do.

I have absolutely no patience for those who will shrug off minor procedural matters as trivial or inconsequential. Every bit of unnecessary red tape causes hardship for the people tangled in it.

But I want to emphasize above all else: these improvements make a difference far beyond the affected individuals. They impact our communities, our economy, our

society. They open doors – for people to bring their skills and talents to Ontario, and for Ontario to connect to markets and ideas around the world.

Today's economy is challenging. Our society is changing rapidly. Ontario is competing for talented immigrants with many other provinces and countries. Immigration policies are in flux. Many people are retiring or planning to retire soon. Some employers can't find the staff they need, even though newcomers and young people are unemployed and underemployed.

In other words, fair licensing practices are more important than ever.

But fair licensing only works when the broader mind-set is one of welcoming international professionals.

Are international credentials an asset or a liability? In my view, they are, and should be treated, as an asset.

Right now, unfortunately it is the word "international" that has the liability attached to it.

We need to get over that.

There is a big difference between protection and protectionism.

We must embrace skilled newcomers as vital contributors, rather than assuming their training is inherently inferior and putting up hurdles to make it more difficult to get in.

In today's fluid workforce, where we are literally competing with the entire world for skills, we simply cannot afford to be insular or parochial.

Let me leave you with a quote from former British Prime Minister Tony Blair:

"A simple way to take measure of a country is to look at how many want in... And how many want out."

In Canada, in Ontario, skilled professionals want in.

We know we need them, in growing numbers. We also have to want them – with policies and procedures that make it easier, not harder, for them to join us. To make their skills, their ideas, and their connections – their assets – an asset for all of us.

Thank you.