



Canada's Immigration at a Crossroads: Policy Shifts and Emerging Trends

ÉRIQA Issue Briefs : No. 2
March 2025



INTRODUCTION

Canada's immigration policy is evolving rapidly. Changes in public opinion, reduced immigration targets, and tighter control over temporary migrants are reshaping the landscape. On December 12, 2024, ÉRIQA (*Équipe de recherche sur l'immigration au Québec et ailleurs*) organized a panel at the Metropolis Americas conference, Migration Governance in The Americas: A Shared Vision, to explore Canada's shifting immigration dynamics, politics and policies in the face of rising politicization of migration, electoral debates ahead, and variations in subnational policies.

Together, Professor Adèle Garnier from Université Laval, Professor Phil Triadafilopoulos from the University of Toronto, Dr. Valerie Lacarte, from the Migration Policy Institute, and Professor Catherine Xhardez from Université de Montréal addressed two main questions: Does Canadian exceptionalism in immigration still exist? And what lies ahead for Canadian immigration policy?

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With federal elections looming in Canada, the discussion offered a multidisciplinary analysis, highlighting the impact of global trends and internal dynamics, such as the role of provinces in immigration¹. Panelists explored the demise of the Canadian immigration model, traditionally characterized by expansive immigration policy, high public support, and very selective programs—although oscillating between strong centralization and more recent decentralization². Although Canada has been known for its exceptionalism³, because there are no far-right parties against immigration, strong public support for immigration, and expansive immigration policies, the tides appear to be changing.

The panel explored recent changes that will likely impact Canada's immigration landscape and reputation. The changes include decreasing targets for permanent residents, temporary foreign workers, international students, and asylum-seekers by 2027. Supportive public opinion regarding immigration has decreased for the second year in a row, with more people now believing there are too many migrants, influenced by narratives that migrants contribute to housing crises across the country and worsening economic conditions. Provinces have played a key role in shaping immigration selection programs, which have been the largest economic immigration initiative but are now set to be reduced by half. They have also been involved in managing the redistribution of asylum seekers, sparking new challenges in intergovernmental relations and potential conflicts across different levels of government. Quebec, in particular, was an early stage for the politicization of these issues⁴, offering a preview of current federal dynamics. Additionally, the management of the Canadian-United States (U.S.) border has become a major concern due to changes in the U.S. administration.

These are troubled and transformative times for immigration policy, making research and dialogue more important than ever. This report summarizes the insights of the panel experts to make them more widely accessible, amplify their reach, and serve as a gateway for deeper exploration of Canada's changing immigration landscape.

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In this ÉRIQA Issue Brief :

The Demise of the Canadian Model 4

Phil Triadafilopoulos

Temporary Migration and Quebec: A precursor for federal transformations 6

Adèle Garnier

Canada's Opportunities Amid Changing U.S. Policies on Migration 8

Valerie Lacarte



Photo : Metropolis Americas, December 12, 2024.
From left to right: V. Lacarte, P. Triadafilopoulos, A.
Garnier et C. Xhardez.

Resources :

(1) Xhardez, Catherine et Danoé Tanguay. 2024. "[The hidden power of provincial and territorial immigration programs in shaping Canada's immigration landscape](#)", *Comparative Migration Studies*, 12(59).

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(2) To find out more: Triadafilopoulos, Triadafilos et Zack Taylor. 2023. "[The domestic politics of selective permeability: disaggregating the Canadian migration state](#)", *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 50(3): 702-725.

(3) Triadafilopoulos, Triadafilos. 2021. "[The Foundations, Limits, and Consequences of Immigration Exceptionalism in Canada](#)", *American Review of Canadian Studies*, 51(1):3-17.

(4) Xhardez, Catherine et Mireille Paquet. 2020. "[Beyond the Usual Suspects and Towards Politicisation: Immigration in Quebec's Party Manifestos, 1991-2018](#)", *Journal of International Migration and Integration*, 22:673-690.

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Part One

THE DEMISE OF THE CANADIAN MODEL

Phil Triadafilopoulos

The most significant recent change in Canada's immigration policy is the erosion of the Canadian immigration model. This centralized system once prioritized the recruitment of highly skilled, well-educated immigrants. From the mid-1990s to the mid-2000s, this system was based on a "one-step" process: immigrants applied while abroad, underwent credential assessment, and arrived as permanent residents. Temporary migration and provincial involvement were minimal, and the narrative of economic benefit helped maintain public support for immigration.

"The most significant recent change in Canada's immigration policy is the erosion of the Canadian immigration model"

However, the Canadian model faced challenges. Immigrants concentrated in a few areas, particularly Ontario, leaving other provinces underserved. Employers sought lower-skilled workers, and postsecondary institutions struggled to compete globally under restrictive rules for international students. Additionally, highly skilled immigrants often faced barriers to employment due to credential recognition issues.

In response, Canada introduced significant changes, including expanding Temporary Foreign Worker programs, creating Provincial Nominee Programs (PNPs), and allowing international students to work and transition to permanent residency through the Canadian Experience Class.

These reforms decentralized the system, giving employers and provinces more control, but disrupted the centralized logic of the original model. International student programs also became major revenue sources for colleges and universities, leading to unregulated expansion and system abuse.

"Once overwhelmingly pro-immigration, public opinion has begun to shift, with many viewing the current approach as chaotic and incoherent"

Mismanagement by both federal and provincial governments has compounded these issues, resulting in a fragmented, confusing, and poorly regulated system. Once overwhelmingly pro-immigration, public opinion has begun to shift, with many viewing the current approach as chaotic and incoherent. The Canadian model, once a global standard, has effectively collapsed, signaling the need for a more cohesive and sustainable immigration strategy.

As the Canadian immigration model has crumbled, so has Canadian "exceptionalism" in migration. Once characterized by public support for immigration, effective policy management, and a bipartisan pro-immigration consensus, it has eroded in two key areas.

First, public opinion has shifted. While Canadians once supported robust immigration levels and official multiculturalism, recent surveys show many

now believe there is too much immigration. Xenophobic rhetoric and actions are also rising, challenging Canada's reputation for inclusivity.

Second, Canada's once-celebrated model of managed migration has fractured. The system, which prioritized skilled immigrants and was carefully administered, has given way to a complex, mismanaged amalgam of policies emphasizing temporary migration.



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However, the third aspect of Canadian exceptionalism—the political consensus on immigration—remains intact. Major political parties avoid anti-immigration rhetoric driven by electoral strategy. Canada's citizenship policy and electoral system encourage political engagement from immigrants, who tend to settle in populous swing ridings like the Greater Toronto Area. Winning these competitive districts is crucial to winning elections and forming governments. Thus, dissuading parties from adopting harsh anti-immigration positions.

It is worth noting that the Conservative Party of Canada and its leader, Pierre Poilievre, remained conspicuously silent as the government of Prime Minister Justin Trudeau increased annual immigration levels and weakened controls on temporary foreign worker recruitment.

Poilievre and his party steered well clear of the corrosive, anti-immigrant rhetoric that has become so common in the United States and Western Europe.

Despite growing public unease about immigration, this political consensus will likely persist, including during the next federal election. Major parties remain strategically focused on maintaining immigrant support in key electoral regions, reinforcing this enduring aspect of Canadian exceptionalism.

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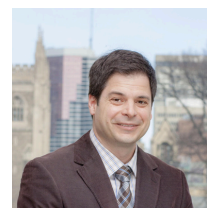


Photo : U.S. Capitol, Washington, Metropolis Americas 2024.

*Part Two***TEMPORARY MIGRATION AND QUEBEC: A PRECURSOR FOR FEDERAL TRANSFORMATIONS**

Adèle Garnier

One of the most important shifting dynamics of the last few years is Canada's focus on reducing temporary migration. Public opinion support for Canada's immigration levels has sharply declined in the last two years. More recently, unemployment has increased, especially among young Canadians and newcomers.

“One of the most important shifting dynamics of the last few years is Canada's focus on reducing temporary migration”

In this context, a suite of restrictions was announced by the federal Department of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC) and Employment and Social Development Canada to reduce the admission of international students (with provincial caps on student permits) and of temporary foreign workers. These measures include freezing the issuance of Labour Market Impact Assessments (LMIA) for the so-called low-wage stream in census metropolitan areas with unemployment rates higher than 6 percent. The duration of work permits in the low-wage streams has also been reduced from 2 years to 1 year⁵. When immigration levels for 2025, for the first time, a target for temporary immigration, not just permanent immigration levels, was published.

The latest data suggests a slowdown in the growth of the Canadian population as well as in temporary migration. However, there is ongoing debate about whether temporary foreign workers and international students will indeed leave once their permits expire, whether many might seek extensions, and whether some stay in Canada as undocumented migrants.

Regarding this category of particularly vulnerable migrants, the Canadian federal government has also moved away from a large-scale regularization plan (which was part of Immigration Minister Sean Fraser's mandate letter in December 2021 and remained in his successor Marc Miller's portfolio).

“In many ways, the Province of Quebec has led the way in these shifting dynamics”

In many ways, the Province of Quebec has led the way in these shifting dynamics. Quebec's situation is significant in Canadian immigration politics and policy since, historically, it has been the province with the largest autonomy in settling provincial immigration levels, as detailed in the Canada-Quebec Accord of 1991. Immigration has been a significant political issue since the 2018 provincial electoral campaign⁶, Premier Legault and his government have insisted on maintaining permanent immigration levels at 50,000 per year while, in the last two years, blaming temporary migrations for various issues in the province including scarcity of affordable housing and overwhelmed public services. Quebec's focus on numbers has found its way into federal declarations on immigration, notably by Immigration Minister Marc Miller. Quebec has also been swiftly applying restrictions on temporary foreign workers and suspending the processing of some immigration streams – a measure we currently see applied to sponsored refugees at the federal level. In contrast, Quebec implemented this policy several years ago.

Quebec has now stopped accepting applications permanent residency of skilled immigrants from international students applying for the PEQ program, as well as and the largest other category of skilled migrants. Quebec has also been the most vocal province, demanding a reduction in the number of asylum seekers arriving.

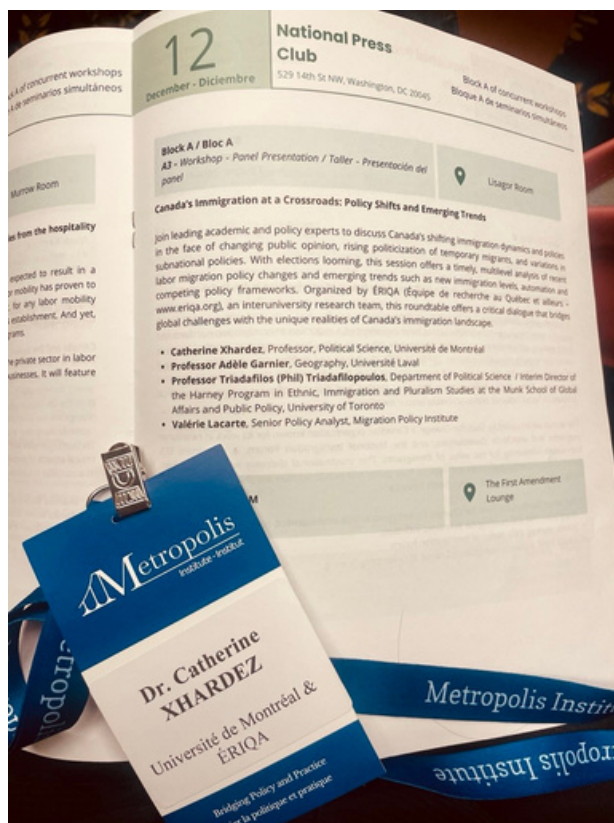


Photo : Metropolis Americas, December 12, 2024.

The impact of this succession of provincial and federal restrictions on temporary migrants has been to foster uncertainty regarding their eligibility to apply for visas and remain in Canada in this ever-changing regulatory environment. It has also impacted employers and the higher education sector - a key sector for migrant workers - given the funding structure of universities in Canada, which is a key source of revenue.

In light of the upcoming Trump presidency in the United States and the already stronger focus on border security⁷ in Canada in response to the president-elect's tariff threats, it is unlikely that Canada and Quebec will change their restrictive approach on reviewing increased immigration levels in the short term.

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Resources :

(5) To find out more: [Government of Canada](#)

(6) Xhardez, Catherine et Mireille Paquet. 2021. [“Beyond the Usual Suspects and Towards Politicisation: Immigration in Quebec’s Party Manifestos, 1991–2018”](#), *Journal of International Migration and Integration*, 22:673-690.

(7) To find out more : Public Safety Canada, 2024. [“Government of Canada announces its plan to strengthen border security and our immigration system”](#)

Part Three

CANADA'S OPPORTUNITIES AMID CHANGING U.S. POLICIES ON MIGRATION

Valerie Lacarte

Canada has a unique opportunity to leverage shifts in U.S. immigration policies to attract high-skilled migrants and international students. During the first Trump administration (2017–2021), Canada actively sought to attract a talent pool of skilled workers disillusioned with U.S. policies. This strategy yielded significant results. Between 2017 and 2019, more than 20,000 noncitizen U.S. residents advanced through Canada's Express Entry program, a notable increase compared to other countries. This trend suggests that skilled foreign-born workers increasingly viewed Canada as a viable alternative to the United States⁸. Whether Canada will adopt a similar approach under a second Trump administration remains uncertain. Nonetheless, the evolving immigration landscape in Canada may necessitate new strategies to maintain its competitive edge.

“The evolving immigration landscape in Canada may necessitate new strategies to maintain its competitive edge”

Canada's ability to innovate in managing migration challenges, particularly the recent rise in asylum seekers, underscores its potential to lead in immigration policy. Although the increase in asylum seekers presents logistical and political challenges, the numbers are not yet unmanageable. This provides an opportunity for Canada to draw inspiration from nations in Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC), which often address migration with far fewer resources and less robust integration systems. Moreover, as the United States likely distances itself from initiatives like the Los Angeles Declaration on Migration and Protection, Canada could seize

this moment to strengthen partnerships with LAC countries. Such alliances would reinforce Canada's reputation as a welcoming and innovative leader in global migration policy.

However, this reputation could be at risk if Canada overreacts or overcorrects in response to migration challenges. A heavy-handed approach might undermine Canada's identity as a multicultural society and its status as a global beacon for immigrants. Rebuilding this trust, once eroded, would prove arduous.

“In addition to immigration, broader trends in U.S.-Canada relations under a new U.S. administration could influence migration policies”

In addition to immigration, broader trends in U.S.-Canada relations under a new U.S. administration could influence migration policies. The resurgence of protectionist “America First” policies may fuel trade disputes under the Canada-U.S.-Mexico Agreement and complicate migration talks. These challenges also reflect broader dissatisfaction with worker conditions in the U.S., which could drive skilled labour to consider Canada's relatively robust social safety net and family assistance programs as attractive alternatives. Canada's historical commitment to fostering social cohesion between native-born citizens and immigrants positions it to not only manage migrant flows but also to integrate newcomers more effectively into society.

Canada stands at a crossroads where it can either rise as a global leader in immigration and integration or risk faltering under pressure. By innovating solutions to migration challenges, strengthening regional alliances, and capitalizing on discontent with U.S. policies, Canada has the potential to solidify its position as a premier destination for migrants and a model for inclusive societies—thereby re-establishing Canadian exceptionalism when it comes to migration.

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Beyond the U.S., a global retreat from protection systems is underway, thereby challenging territorial asylum and shifting towards the first safe country principle⁹, often disregarding standards in transit countries. This raises critical questions about Canada's response to long-term displacement crises such as Haiti, Palestine, Syria, Ukraine and Venezuela. Canada can lead efforts to redefine responsibility-sharing, leveraging established diasporas to strengthen support for migrants and build integration systems in host societies.

While especially challenging at this moment, embracing Canadian values of multiculturalism as a benefit to host communities is also pivotal to foster inclusive societies that embrace long-term migrants.

As global protection systems decline, Canada must adapt its immigration policies to address emerging trends while aligning domestic policies with its global leadership role. Moreover, given its historical contributions to global systems like the United Nations, Canada is well-positioned to influence international debates and discussions on protection and

displacement. To do so effectively, it must synchronize its domestic immigration policies with its global commitments, ensuring coherence between its internal practices and its external advocacy.

By doing so, Canada can maintain its leadership in global migration governance while reinforcing its domestic multicultural and humanitarian values.

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Resources :

(8) To find out more: Council on Foreign Relations, [“What Is Canada’s Immigration Policy?”](#)

(9) The first safe country principle refers to the practice of refusing entry to asylum seekers who, before their arrival in the country where they are seeking asylum, have travelled through an alternative country that could have offered them asylum protection.

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The [Équipe de recherche sur l'immigration au Québec et ailleurs](#) (ÉRIQA) is an inter-university research team of 11 researchers funded by the Fonds de recherche du Québec (FRQ). ÉRIQA proposes a structured dialogue between global realities and those of Quebec, through comparative analyses and case studies that focus on the policies and experiences of migrants.

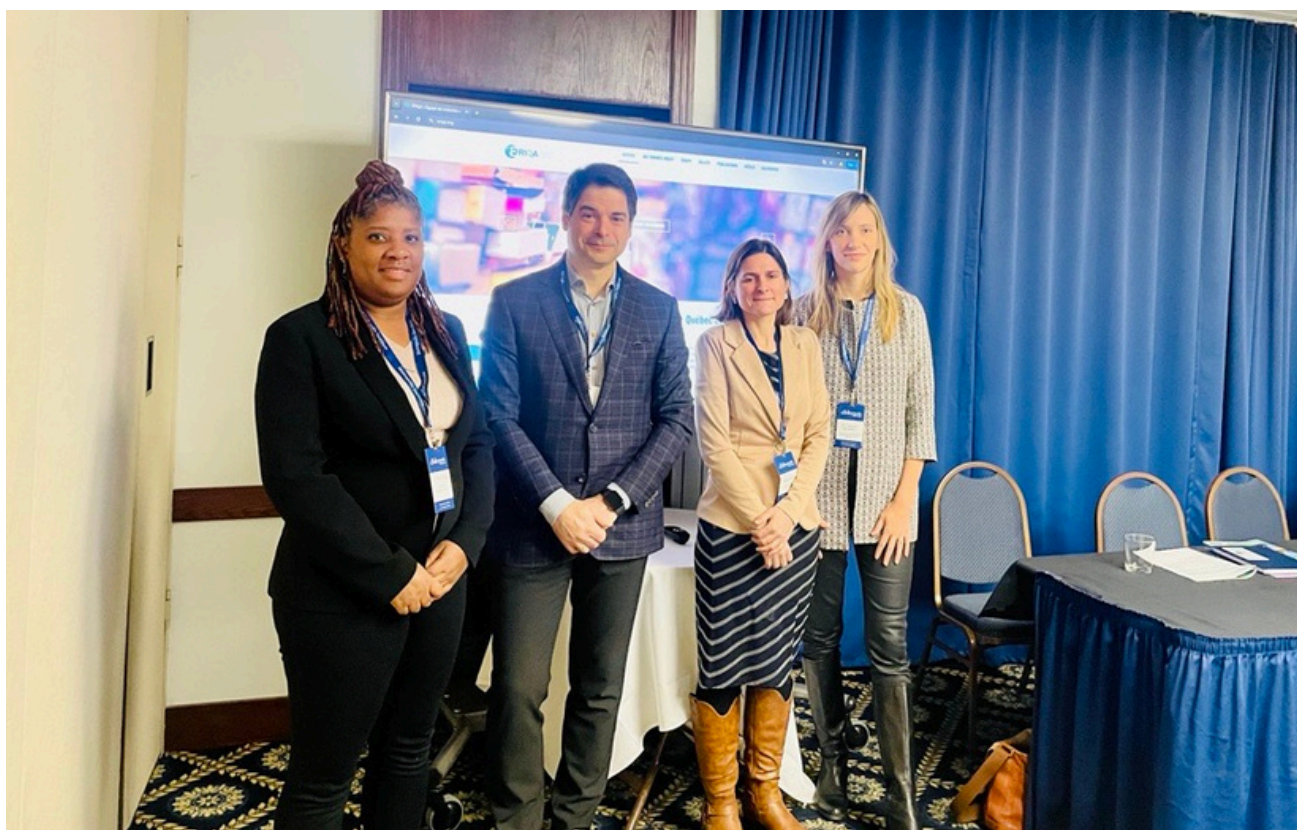


Photo: Metropolis Americas, 2024.

From left to right: V. Lacarte, P. Triadafilopoulos, A. Garnier et C. Xhardez.

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