

Economy put Quebec low on immigrants' wish list

But things are much better now, researcher says, and jobs are being created

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THE GAZETTE

The land is vast, the birthrate is low, so Premier Bernard Landry is adamant: Quebec needs immigrants to maintain its economy and forge ahead.

Yet it was the economy that worked against Quebec during the last decade as immigrants flooded into Canada, experts say, because high unemployment rates made moving here unattractive. That's the bad news.

The good news, said Pierre Desrochers, director of research at the Montreal Economic Institute, is that the Quebec economy is now much stronger and the province has just gone through a year of above-average job creation. That should bode well for the future.

The past was not stellar. Although census figures made public last week by Statistics Canada show that metropolitan Montreal welcomed 215,120 immigrants between 1991 and 2001, the city's ability to draw newcomers paled in comparison with Toronto and Vancouver, which drew 792,035 and 324,815 respectively.

The city slipped to third in the list of most popular destinations, from second in the 1980s, when it was surpassed only by Toronto.

And those are the absolute numbers. When StatsCan compared the proportion of visible minorities with total population, Montreal came seventh in Canada in 2001, with 13.6 per cent. The proportion of Montreal's population that is foreign-born was 18.4 per cent in 2001, the 10th-best showing in Canada.

Asked why this was so, Desrochers and Martin Papillon, a research associate with the Canadian Policy Research Network, came up with the same one-word answer: "Jobs."

"When you immigrate, you are looking for opportunities to rebuild your life and care for your family, and the most basic thing you need is a job," Papillon said.

Quebec might be humming along now, Desrochers said, but during the 10 years the census refers to, the province had one of the highest unemployment rates in Canada and its economy lagged behind the rest of the country - particularly in the latter half of the 1990s.

PROPORTION OF VISIBLE MINORITIES

census metropolitan areas

Place	Per cent		
	2001	1996	1991
CANADA	13.4	11.2	9.4
Vancouver	36.9	31.1	24.0
Toronto	36.8	31.6	25.8
Abbotsford, B.C.	17.8	12.9	10.6
Calgary	17.5	15.6	13.7
Edmonton	14.6	13.5	12.7
Ottawa-Hull*	14.1	11.7	10.2
Montreal	13.6	12.2	11.0
Windsor, Ont.	12.9	9.8	8.9
Winnipeg	12.5	11.1	10.5
Kitchener, Ont.	10.7	8.9	8.4
Hamilton, Ont.	9.8	7.9	7.1

* Now known as Ottawa-Gatineau

SOURCE: STATISTICS CANADA

PROPORTION OF FOREIGN-BORN*

census metropolitan areas

Place	Per cent		
	2001	1996	1991
CANADA	18.4	17.4	16.1
Toronto	43.7	41.9	38.0
Vancouver	37.5	34.9	30.1
Hamilton, Ont.	23.6	23.6	23.5
Windsor, Ont.	22.3	20.4	20.6
Kitchener, Ont.	22.1	21.8	21.5
Abbotsford, B.C.	21.8	20.3	19.8
Calgary	20.9	20.9	20.3
London, Ont.	18.8	19.2	18.8
Victoria	18.8	19.3	19.5
Montreal	18.4	17.8	16.4
Edmonton	17.8	18.5	18.3

* Foreign-born: the population who are, or have ever been, landed immigrants to Canada.

SOURCE: STATISTICS CANADA

All other economic issues that were at play during that period were secondary, he said. Quebec had the country's highest taxes, which resulted in less investment, which produced fewer jobs. Economic conditions for lower-income immigrants were not bad, he said, because their taxes would have been comparable with the rest of Canada and their housing costs lower than in other major cities. But those things don't matter when you can't get a job.

"French is a problem," he said, suggesting many immigrants probably felt their career prospects were better in a place where they were more at ease with the language.

But immigrants are a determined and entrepreneurial lot, he said, and if the economic conditions are good, they will adjust to language requirements.

Papillon said he, too, is looking forward to the next 10 years. Besides the improving economy, Quebec is also doing better at integrating immigrants since the adoption of Bill 101, which required immigrants to attend French schools, he said. Prior to that, immigrants migrated toward the anglophone minority.

"But Quebec still has a lot of catching up to do," he said, and "(former premier Jacques) Parizeau's comments on referendum night (when he blamed money and ethnic votes for the separatists' loss in 1995) weren't helpful."

Jack Jedwab, executive director of the Montreal-based Association for Canadian Studies, agreed that the economy is a major player in attracting immigrants, and Quebec, which has its own immigration rules, has more stringent language and economic requirements for would-be immigrants.

But Quebec is beefing up recruitment efforts in French-speaking countries, he said, and other areas - like the Vancouver region - aren't doing as well economically, so this province should be able to draw more people.

However, it will also have to improve its ability to keep them here, Jedwab said. He estimates that 20 per cent of the people who come here eventually leave.

Immigrants are often drawn to cities where there are already significant immigrant populations - where infrastructure like community organizations and ethnic newspapers abound.

So Quebec is, to some extent, behind the eight ball, because Toronto and Vancouver have much bigger communities and more to offer.

And there is also the question of making immigrants feel part of the system. Quebec has to improve the presence of immigrants in public life - from politics to the civil service to high-profile jobs, Jedwab said.

A community needs role models, he added.