

## **Acknowledging migrant families in New Zealand**

### **Sponsored parent/grandparent immigration program lesson-drawing from Canada**

#### **Introduction**

The lack of overall planning on immigration is facing criticism in New Zealand.

Migrant communities and industry stakeholders are demanding the policymakers improve the country's immigration policy. Parent category is chosen in the article as a program to make a cross-national comparison of the immigration policy problem.

The article first discusses the dissatisfaction with the immigration policy and the parent category as the particular program. It then works on the environment scan and the comparison logic for choosing the Canadian parent and grandparents immigration policy as the anchor program in policy comparison. Finally, the Most Similar System (MSS) design is adopted to analyse why the Canadian parent/grandparent immigration policy was deemed ideal and how could the model be transferred to New Zealand to solve the current problem and address social dissatisfaction. Perspectives are focused on institutional influences, socio-economic status, and governance and responsive to external challenges. It was concluded that adopting the Canadian program requires policymakers to work on specific technical modification and broader social and institutional changes in New Zealand.

#### **The status quo and dissatisfaction**

New Zealand government (2008) shifted from its earlier immigration focus on nationality and ethnic origin to the basis of personal merits, such as educational,

business, professional, age or assets criteria after the 1986 Immigration Policy Review and the adoption of the Immigration Act 1987. The Immigration Act 1987 set up a basic framework of New Zealand's contemporary immigration policy with three streams of immigration: the skills and business stream, the family stream and the humanitarian stream. Migrants who did not have immediate relatives elsewhere in the world were allowed to join family members living in New Zealand (Beaglehole, 2005).

Laws and regulations on immigration have subsequently changed several times to accommodate the country's skill and labour shortage and balance the growing public concern about levels of immigration from non-British backgrounds, such as Asia and the Pacific (Beaglehole, 2005). The points-based selection system, quotas and English language requirement were introduced. Immigration Act 2009 replaced the previous outdated legislation intending to enhance border security and improve the country's immigration services (Coleman, 2009). Immigration Act 2009 (n.d.) states its purpose is "to manage immigration in a way that balances the national interest, as determined by the Crown, and the rights of individuals". Parent category was set up to support family connections to attract and retain skilled and productive migrants (Parmar et al., 2019). Aimed at better costs control, the New Zealand government (2019) made changes to the parent category in 2012, including higher income requirements for sponsors under Tier One of the Parent Category and tightening migrants' access to benefits.

According to OECD report (2018), New Zealand recorded its highest level of a net annual permanent/long-term migration gain of 72,300 people in 2016/17, an

increase of 4.7 per cent from the 69,100 in 2015/16. By 2016, 24 per cent of the New Zealand population was foreign-born. The record-high number of immigration sparked extensive public debates and became a crucial issue in the 2017 general election (Spoonley, 2017). As a result, the National government made several changes to immigration during late 2016 and early 2017, including raising the points required for the skilled migration category, tightening English language requirements, and suspending the parent's category. The reason given for the suspension was to clear a backlog of applications and to review the policy setting on this category. However, the suspension drew strong public dissatisfaction from the migrant community. Online petitions saw thousands of signatures. The petition by David Barker (2019) urging the government to lift the moratorium gathered 8,420 signatures.

The 2017 general election saw the New Zealand First party (NZ First), which has long campaigned for immigration reduction, become part of the Coalition government. As a result, "very little progress was made as NZ First tried to show it was bringing down migrant numbers and residency numbers. And every single immigration issue was absolute torture." (Trevett, 2020) NZ First argued that many sponsors left their parents in New Zealand, adding burden to the New Zealand social welfare costs (Moir, 2019). However, the policy review report made to the Immigration Minister by the Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment (MBIE) (2019) identified the social, cultural and economic benefits that the parent category brings to New Zealand. The policy review found no evidence to indicate a common occurrence of sponsoring children are leaving the country.

In 2019, the coalition government announced new criteria for the parent category with an income requirement for the sponsoring children and an annual cap of 1,000. A single person's income must be above NZ\$106,080, twice the national medium income, to sponsor one parent and above NZ\$159,120 for two parents (Tan, 2020). The new income requirement was deemed impossible for most professions in New Zealand and could deter skilled migrants to other countries such as Canada (Pointon, 2019).

In the meantime, an unsmooth restructure has left Immigration New Zealand (INZ), the government department responsible for managing immigration and visas, unable to keep pace with all the visa applications. Applicants face a longer waiting time for their visas since late 2018 (Bonnett, 2019). COVID-19 has exacerbated the backlog. New Zealand border was closed from March 2020 to non-residents. Offshore applications were no longer processed when the INZ workload shifted to assess applications for border exceptions and variations to visa conditions (Nash & Faafoi, 2021). In 2018, the average waiting time for the skilled migrant category was seven to ten months and partner category four to seven months; it is currently 21-25 months and seven to 12 months, respectively.

The parent category was again suspended as part of the government's COVID-19 response before the new criteria could be adopted. It means the category has been effectively closed for more than four years. The long-time delay and uncertainty around the parent category have affected thousands (Bonnett, 2021). As a result of the suspension before COVID-19, some parents came to New Zealand to join their family on temporary visas. An extraordinary scenario saw several hundred Chinese

parents stranded in Fiji to renew their visas but were caught by the sudden border closure at the early stage of the pandemic. It is argued that the policy on the parent category did not consider the cultural factors nor the practice of family connection and support (Chen, 2020). Parents who remained in the country waiting for the reopening of the visa were fearing deportation (Bonnett, 2021). Dissatisfaction also rose from those currently in New Zealand and qualified for the category with an online petition (2021) requesting the government to open the category.

When dissatisfaction arises, there were increasing pressures to act (Rose, 1991). The Labour party (2020) published its election manifesto, which saw the party commitment to “reduce barriers to access the parent category visa, including reconsidering the current provisions once the international flow of people across the border settles, and reducing the income thresholds”.

Nevertheless, widespread dissatisfaction with the country’s current immigration operation has sparked multiple public protests since 2021. Migrant groups and industrial stakeholders (2021) are urging the government to resolve the current crisis facing migrants. One of their demands is to unite the separated family and reset immigration policy and overhaul INZ. In May 2021, Economic and Regional Development Minister Stuart Nash made an Immigration Reset announcement (Nash & Faafoi, 2021), a sign that the government tried to dispel the dissatisfaction (Rose, 1991) with the country’s immigration policy and procedures. However, the announcement was criticised for its lack of details and disservice to the migrant workers (Ensor, 2021). The announcement did not mention any change to the parent

category, nor did it mention the migrant families' vital contribution to New Zealand society.

### **Environmental scan and methodology**

The first step of lesson drawing is to seek information about programs elsewhere that addressed a similar problem (Rose, 1991). The environmental scan of immigration policy on parent category began with “big-N” qualitative analysis (Lim, 2010). The big-N analysis focuses mainly on the accessibility of data and reports on immigration policy outputs and outcomes. This analysis narrows down the comparison to OECD countries. The OECD annual International Migrant Outlook provides insights and data for the big-N analysis.

Countries and states implement immigration policies according to their own political, social, economic and cultural environment. A Binary study using the MSS design will allow the researcher to have a range of social and political phenomenon as dependent variables controlled and focus on finding the significant dissimilarity between the two systems as key independent variables (Lim, 2010).

Before comparing the immigration policy output, the proportion of the migrant population, socio-economic performances, political environment, legal system, and history and culture are considered dependent variables. According to the International Migrant Outlook (OECD, 2020), in 2019, New Zealand has 26.8% of the population as migrants. Countries with a similar proportion of the migrant population included Australia (29.7%), Switzerland (29.7%), Israel (21.2%) and Canada (21%). Taking the per capita GDP, which could partly explain the output of a

migrant economy, into consideration, Israel (US\$44,486), Canada (US\$43,242) and Australia (US\$53,203) are similar to New Zealand (US\$41,127). When political systems are compared, New Zealand's constitutional monarchy and multi-party parliamentary democratic system (Keith, 2017) is most similar to Canada and Australia. These three countries are also commonly regarded as the classic western settlers' states (Schmid, 2020). New Zealand's immigration policy setting on the parent category also appears most similar to Australia and Canada, where the sponsoring children are responsible for their parents' living costs and health insurance/costs before parents being granted residency.

Australia has been heavily criticised for its harsh immigration policy, especially on refugees and boat asylums. It is the only country that mandates immigration detention for all illegal arrivals (Loughnan, 2019). Regarding parent migration, the waiting queue for the parent visa is currently 27 years. On the other hand, Canada's immigration policy is considered ideal for New Zealand to compare and emulate, given the country's multiculturalism and pro-immigration consensus (Keller, 2018). According to a 2008 cross-national survey on attitudes towards immigration, Canada is the only Western country in which people believe that immigration positively impacts their country (Ambrose & Mudde, 2015). New Zealand models much of the systems in Australia and Canada and shares more with Canada these days (Spoonley, 2020b). By comparing the Canadian immigration model to the New Zealand approach, it could be most effective for the policymakers to improve conditions here in New Zealand.

Three main approaches toward accounts for public policy: Habitat, Responsive and government, and Institution (Lodge, 2006) will be adopted using qualitative analysis to discuss how socio-economic factors, external challenges, and institutional frames have shaped Canada's immigration policy on the sponsored parent program, and how could these factors affect the emulation of the Canada model in New Zealand.

### **The Canada approach to the Sponsored parent immigration**

Ambrose and Mudde (2015) argue that Canada's unique multiculturalism policy has failed the Canadian radical right. As a result, Canadian society is very supportive of immigrants and their culture. Opposition to immigration can easily be seen as hate speech (Ambrose & Mudde, 2015). Although accepting a relatively high number of immigrants and recording a higher employment rate (8.8% in 2021 Q1) than Australia (6.4% in 2021 Q1) and New Zealand (4.9% in 2021 Q1), the country has not seen any solid anti-immigration political force emerge in opposition and is one of the very few Western countries where more people believe immigration is positive rather than negative. Although the immigration policy in Canada mainly focuses on human capital and economic outcome, social discussions of the parent and grandparent migration are not limited to the parent/grandparents' economic contributions or burdens but go much broader on non-economic aspects such as cultural and social experiences. Vanderplaat et al.(2013) find that parents of migrants in Canada, especially females, help their adult children with family obligations and house works.

Canada overhauled its immigration and population policies in the late 1960s. The Immigration Act 1967 established the main objectives of Canada's immigration policy. For the first time, the promotion of Canada's demographic, economic, social, and cultural goals and the priorities of family reunion, diversity, and non-discrimination were established in the law (Dirks, 2006). As a result, family and Assisted Relatives, along with Independent, Humanitarian and Economic, became five migration streams to enter Canada from the 1980s.

The Immigration and Refugee Protection Act replaced the Immigration Act 1967. The Act, implemented in 2002, continued to recognise migrant families. To enrich and strengthen Canadian society's social and cultural fabric; to see that families are reunited in Canada was part of the purpose written in the Act (2015). It is stipulated in the law that family members of Canadian permanent resident and citizens may be sponsored to become Canadian permanent residents. Spouse, common-law partner, child, the parent or other prescribed family member are recognised as a family member. The Act also requires annual reports on immigration to the Canadian parliament. Immigration plans, data and migrants' contribution to Canadian society can be intuitively observed from the reports.

The current regulation (2016), called the Parent and Grandparent Sponsorship Program (PGSP), allows adult Canadian citizens or permanent residents who live in Canada to sponsor parents and grandparents. The sponsoring person should meet the income requirement for three years before application. According to the income requirement, a couple with one dependent child will need CA\$85,835 in 2018, CA\$87,172 in 2019 and CA\$68,598 in 2020 to be eligible to sponsor four parents. For

comparison, the median after-tax income of Canadian families and unattached individuals was CA\$62,900 in 2019. The sponsoring person must sign the undertaking as a promise to provide financial support for the sponsoring parents. In addition, the sponsoring person is legally required to repay any social assistance provided by public funding. The length of undertaking for sponsorship of parents, grandparents and their accompanying dependants is ten years in Quebec and 20 years elsewhere in the country. After the period, parent and grandparent may access social welfare and pension if they meet the general requirement.

In 2018, Canada set out its most ambitious multi-year immigration level plan to increase the number of permanent residents, with admission targets of 330,800 in 2019, 341,000 in 2020, and 350,000 in 2021, according to an OECD report (2019). The annual cap for the PGSP is 20,000 in 2019, 10,000 in 2020 and 30,000 in 2021. In 2019, 80 per cent of PGSP applications were processed within 19 months, down from 72 months in 2017, progress achieved by reducing the inventory of applications and managing the intake of new applications, according to the official immigration report (2019). In 2019, the intake model of the PGSP changed from randomised selection to enhanced first-in. Random selection was again adopted in 2020 after criticism for disadvantaging certain people (Harris, 2021).

Remarkably, the income requirement for the 2020 tax year has been reduced, and the government allowed for more flexible timelines due to the financial impacts caused by COVID-19. The Canadian Immigration Minister Marco Mendicino called the PGSP “progressive and compassionate that is wholly unique to Canada.” (Harris, 2021) Suppose the PGSP applicants are not successful in their application, they may

alternatively apply for the parent and grandparent super visa, which is a multi-entry visa for the applicants to visit their children or grandchildren for two years at a time for ten years, medical insurance from a Canadian insurance company is required for the applicants.

### **Adopting the Canada model in New Zealand**

Confronted with a common problem, policymakers can learn from how their counterparts elsewhere have responded (Rose, 1991). New Zealand and Canada share a similar social background as a multicultural society, similar per capita GDP and very similar institutional settings for their multi-party parliamentary Westminster systems. These social, economic and institutional contexts mean adoption of the Canadian model of PGSP in New Zealand is transferable and desirable. In addition, the New Zealand sponsored parent category resembles the Canada PGSP model in many ways, including income requirement, annual quota and sponsorship obligation.

However, lesson-drawing could not be simply copying from one another, as every country has unique public policy circumstances. In the MSS design, the differences between the two are more important to the similarities (Lim, 2010). These differences need to be understood and adequately addressed before the PGSP could be effectively adapted as an integral program of the overall immigration policy in New Zealand.

New Zealand differs from Canada for both the operational and legal context of the immigration policy. Practically, under the COVID-19 border restriction, an adult

Canadian resident or citizen's parent is deemed an immediate family member, and a grandparent is deemed an extended family member who is allowed to enter Canada. However, according to New Zealand's border restrictions, a non-resident parent of an adult resident or citizen is not allowed to enter even if accompanied by the child unless in exceptional family circumstances. It could be argued that the differences are due to the different COVID-19 response strategies adopted by countries.

However, if we explore the differences in legal contexts, one could understand these practical differences. While the family reunion is part of the purpose identified in the immigration law in Canada, it is not in New Zealand law, which means the country does not have a legal obligation to the migrant families. Nevertheless, when the policy purpose of the parent immigration itself is to attract and retain skilled migrants, legal acknowledgement needs to consider parents as part of the family ties, which are part of the migration decision-making factor for some migrants (Liu, 2018), of the migrant population.

New Zealand has slightly different regulations on social welfare access for parent migrants from Canada. Besides the 10-20 years' undertaking period, a migrant parent who becomes permanent residents in Canada must have lived there for ten years to be eligible for the Old Age Security pension, which is calculated pro-rata based on the length of residency. Full pension entitlement is paid if a person has 40 years' residency. On the contrary, New Zealand gives universal access to the state pension for its residents once they have lived in New Zealand for ten years. A legal process is currently underway for the eligibility to increase to 20 years. Commercial health insurance availability for parents is another problem in New Zealand. The

MBIE report (2019) showed that parents' older age and likely health conditions would preclude them from accessing comprehensive health insurance in New Zealand. Therefore, a well-received argument is that the parent migrants bring a high social burden regarding the universal pension payment and health expenditure.

However, very little research has been done to measure the economic outcome of parent migration, let alone calculate the non-economic contribution of the parent migrants to the New Zealand families and society, which is usually underestimated.

OECD (2019) reported that adult migrants in OECD countries whose parents live with them are more likely to find a job and work longer hours, especially when they have young children. In New Zealand's context, the parent immigration category helped to retain migrants and reduce emigration. Data (n.d.) showed that New Zealand has a much higher emigrants stock (21.43% of the population in 2019, compared to 3.53% in Canada). It was outlined in the MBIE report (2019) that migrants who sponsored their parents tend to remain in New Zealand longer when compared with those who did not sponsor their parents.

Cultural diversity and demographic change are also part of how New Zealand should shape its parent immigration policy as part of the population policy framework.

However, unlike Canada, New Zealand has not developed a multicultural policy framework. As a result, the policy balance between biculturalism and multiculturalism is asymmetrical (Spoonley & Chapman, 2010). How can the immigration policy recognise the migrant families and their cultural contribution, how the policy framework applies equally to the different cultural expression of the

family, and balance a structural and numerical ageing New Zealand (Spoonley, 2020a), needs further debates in the New Zealand society.

Furthermore, the two countries reflect divergent responsive and government perspective. While the Canadian government (2020) believes immigration is essential to getting the country through the COVID-19 pandemic and its short-term economic recovery and long-term economic growth, New Zealand believes the COVID-19 is a change point for the country's starkly highlighted reliance on migrant labour. Migrants are also too often blamed for suppressing wages and exacerbating the country's infrastructure and housing crisis (Nadkarni, 2021). Therefore, policymakers need to consider how its immigration policy will define the country's characteristics (Spoonley, 2020a) in the long term.

It is not impossible to adopt the Canadian PGSP model in New Zealand after changes in pension policies and health care accessibility. However, emulating the Canadian model is not limited to the technical modification in specific terms. It also means institutional evolvement and involvement, social and economic strategic vision, and cultural acceptance of migrant parents and grandparents as an integral part of the multicultural New Zealand society.

Unlike Canada's federal system, New Zealand is a highly centralised unitary state (Cheyne, 2008), now is a window opportunity for the Labour government as the only majority in the parliament to reset its immigration policy with ambition and innovation, because it is likely that institutions adapt to their external environment and to the kinds of people who head the office (John, P., 2012). However,

institutional diversity nowadays also means policy design and implementation were separated in different organisations (Bentley, 2016), not necessarily confined within INZ, which needs better transparency, accountability and efficiency. Integrating the immigration policy design and implementation process to reflect better the participation and innovation of public institutions such as migrant and community groups, industry stakeholders, unions and political parties are needed in the immigration reset. To support the policy design on parent immigration program, it also requires more transparent data and better research support for recognising the economic and non-economic contribution of parent migrants. An annual reporting scheme on immigration may be adopted from the Canadian approach.

## **Conclusion**

New Zealand needs a more inclusive and efficient immigration policy. The current uncertainty in its immigration policy is causing the country's productivity and ability to gain and retain skilled migrants. Parent migrants are the most vulnerable group to criticisms of welfare burden thus are particularly likely to cutbacks and suspensions.

The Canadian immigration approach has shed light on the New Zealand policymakers to draw lessons. From the legal acknowledgement to the family migration to the accountability provided by government departments; from the social and institutional intolerance to anti-immigration attitudes to widely discussed benefits of a migrant economy; from pandemic responses to specific visa settings, the nuanced differences from the MSS perspective has set Canada apart from New Zealand's approach for a better policy outcome of PGSP program. However, it does not mean

that New Zealand could not necessarily adopt the Canadian PGSP model. Essentially, the successful adoption depends on how New Zealand could adapt to reach a social consensus on acknowledging parent migrants and migrant families.

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