

About-turn by Canada is a disgrace

INSIDE POLITICS

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THE Canadian Government's decision to freeze immigration visas from Hongkong has been met with a strange silence locally. No public figures have raised their voice in protest and the Hongkong Government has had nothing to say, not even by way of surprise, explanation or encouragement.

Of course, it could simply be that we are deep in the silly season and those people who might care are not here. But an immigration freeze to one of the most sought-after countries of refuge is no silly-season joke.

Those who follow these matters closely smell something sinister in the Canadian move and when the full implications are spelled out, there will be outrage.

For the time being, the Canadians are saying that it is only a two-month holding operation until overseas missions have time to catch their breath from the rush of applications, but few people believe that.

Canada will argue that the 40 per cent cutback on issuing visas is not aimed exclusively at Hongkong, but is part of a change in worldwide policy. But given that Hongkong provides most of the passengers on the Canadian immigration shuttle, the conclusion seems pretty obvious. If the measure isn't aimed at Hongkong, who else could it be meant for?

So the feeling must be that the freeze is merely a stalling tactic until plans are drawn up to introduce a quota system for Hongkong.

It is not known whether it will be a generous or miserly quota, but it does seem fairly certain that Canada will be putting an end to unlimited immigration from Hongkong.

Why? For a start, some 250,000 Hongkong citizens have settled in Canada over the last 30 years. Put differently, one in every seven newcomers to Canada was from these shores.

Perhaps the Canadians are saying that enough is enough and that fair play demands that immigrants from other places be given a chance to settle in the promised land. In this context, Eastern Europeans look the most likely to benefit from any wider casting of the net.

As unpalatable as it may sound, Canadians would perhaps prefer Eastern Europeans for the simple fact that they share the same cultural background, in the broadest possible sense.

Indeed, before the Asian wave of recent years, East Europeans were a dominant part of the body of immigrants who went to Canada after the world wars. Poles, Jews, Czechs and Germans fleeing hardship and communism found sanctuary in the wide open spaces of Canada.

The mix of ethnic nationalities contributed to the multi-cultural diversity that has, in recent years, become the crux of Canadian immigration policy. Today, those immigrants have assimilated to such an extent that it is common to find families who can trace their roots in Canada back by two, three, four, even five generations.

Now that the Iron Curtain offers no obstacle to keeping Eastern European families separated from Canadian relatives, there is a strong incentive for Ottawa to once again look sympathetically at the East European cause.

Contrast this with the Hongkong immigrant, some of whom have shown little ability or desire to integrate with the Canadian way of life.

A common complaint among Canadians is that Hongkong immigrants have brought their alien and, often arrogant, attitudes and simply have no wish to assimilate.

To the average Canadian, a Hongkong immigrant personifies all the worst traits. Invariably, he will be a big spender, own a flashy car, drive up real estate prices and, if he lives in your neighbourhood, will probably cut the trees down and put in a plastic garden.

He will also perpetuate the Chinatown mentality where he will live, work and eat only among his own and make little or no attempt to integrate with the rest of the community. Of course, it may be a generalisation and grossly unfair to those making an effort to contribute to Canadian society.

But it is precisely that arrogance and lack of willingness to assimilate that is leading to a backlash from Canadians. There are increasing reports of Canadians becoming incensed at Hongkong money making it difficult for the average family to afford their own home, of Asian immigrants taking the best jobs, and of Hongkong developers allowing showy attitudes to destroy the environment.

As much as Asians have been portrayed in the past as the Great Success Story, one can't help but feel the undercurrent of racism, fuelled in large part by the recent wave of Hongkong immigration.

As in the past, whenever economies start to falter and hard times lie ahead, immigrants are the first to be made the scapegoat. It happened earlier this century when fears of a Yellow Peril caused the gates to close to all Chinese immigrants for more than 20 years before they were reopened in the 1940s. Few doubt it could happen again.

But this doesn't alter the fact that what the Canadian government is up to is morally indefensible.

Prime Minister Brian Mulroney took great pride last October when he said Canada was the world leader in accepting immigrants from Hongkong. He urged other countries to follow Canada's example and vowed that he would continue to accept more. Barely 10 months later, that tune is changing.

Ottawa does not need to be reminded that Hongkong money has been good to Canada with \$30 billion pumped into the Canadian economy in recent years. Or that Hongkong people have and will continue to contribute much to its labour force and its developing economy.

Hongkong will need all the friends it can get in the next few years. Canada has said it was one of them. If it goes ahead with its plan to cut back on Hongkong immigration, when all is said and done, what Canada will be doing will be an outright disgrace.