

Building on the reversal of our fortunes

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COMMENTARY

Across western Europe and North America, distrust for immigration is threatening to disrupt decades of population growth and economic prosperity.

I like to think that here in New Brunswick, we have a more mature perspective. We understand that it is far better to manage the challenges brought by growth than wrestle with the challenges imposed by decline.

Our province learned this lesson the hard way, through decades of outmigration, decline in the province's population and tax base, and cuts to essential public services such as health care and education.

Thanks to several years of record-breaking immigration, New Brunswick's demographic decline has started to reverse. We just need to keep up the momentum.

It wasn't that long ago that neighbourhoods in our region were engaged in angry debates over which schools the provincial government should close. Today, the debate hinges on where new schools should be built and how quickly they can be constructed. The provincial government has gone from posting annual budget deficits to projecting yearly budget surpluses.

It isn't a miracle or an accident that New Brunswick's fortunes have reversed so suddenly; it is the result of rapid and sustained immigration.

If we want to hang onto our region's positive outlook, we need to support increased immigration and start managing proactively to meet the demands of growth.

For a start, we could do a lot more to ensure that everyone in New Brunswick can participate fully in the economy, to the level of their talent and abilities.

Many federal, provincial and occupational restrictions on who can work at what job were drawn up in a different economic era. So were the eligibility requirements for social programs, such as Employment Insurance. It's time to rethink their utility in today's day and age.

Does it help our region to have doctors working as taxi drivers, experienced nurses working in retail, trained teachers working only a few hours a week as tutors, or knowledgeable tradespeople idle because they were born outside of Canada?

Does paying people to stay home help individuals develop their skills, support their families, or build more prosperous communities?

Economic opportunity draws immigration. So let's make our society a place where upward mobility is rewarded, by giving people a chance to work.

Let's tear away the red tape that is holding people back from otherwise contributing fully to society. It will give immigrants the opportunity to build productive and fulfilling lives here, and it will give our own children a reason to stay.

Recent demographic trends in our region look good, provided we can maintain the momentum.

We continue to see an increase in the number of Immigrants arriving in our community, with new arrivals bringing investment and entrepreneurship, filling professional vacancies or taking on jobs that would otherwise go unfilled.

We have a distinct regional advantage in the federally managed Atlantic immigration program, which gives employers the opportunity to invite skilled workers to make Atlantic Canada their home.

We are also consistently seeing improvement in retention rates for new immigrants year over year. This indicates that our region has become a favoured destination, with enough economic opportunity to attract and keep working families.

We're not going to build on these successes by capping the number of international students, or by erecting professional barriers that keep skilled immigrants from working. We need to open more doors to economic immigration while investing in language and skills development services that help connect all New Brunswick residents to the job market.

If we can manage proactively for population growth fuelled by immigration, the ensuing increase in economic activity and the taxes generated will support new investments in core public services such as health care, education and housing.

New Brunswick is on the cusp of becoming a "have" province after more than a century as a "have not," thanks to immigration.

We all benefit from that turnaround. We all benefit from the prosperity and enhanced quality of life that brings.

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