

OCASI position on Family Reunification

February 22, 2011

The Ontario Council of Agencies Serving Immigrants (OCASI) is deeply disturbed to learn that Canada plans to cut back on the number of family reunification applications approved for parents and grandparents in 2011.

The Department of Citizenship and Immigration reportedly intends to grant only 11,200 visas for parents and grandparents to join family in Canada in 2011. This represents a 40% reduction from the 16,200 visas issued last year.

OCASI notes with deep concern a growing trend of valuing immigrants only in terms of their economic potential to Canada. While the Immigration and Refugee Protection Act begins its objectives recognizing the social and cultural contributions of immigration to Canada, the current immigration agenda is increasingly driven by short-term economic interests. Parents and grandparents are critical to the social and cultural fabric of immigrant communities. They also make a significant economic contribution to many families by providing unpaid childcare and domestic labour, allowing their children or members of the extended family to pursue job opportunities outside the home. The absence of a national childcare program and increasing scarcity of safe, affordable childcare makes the support provided by parents and grandparents invaluable.

The tendency to characterize these family members as merely an economic burden ignores their contributions and fundamental humanity, and the respect we as a country have for the integrity of families. Canadians recognize the immeasurable importance of parents and grandparents and other extended family members in our lives, in our families and our communities. It is time for the government to also recognize and expand our understanding of family, in a world where extended family networks are essential to personal and community success. For new immigrants, they are part of a support network that is critical to make a successful adjustment to a new country.

Most of Canada's future population growth and all our labour market needs will be filled entirely through immigration in the next few years. The need to reunify with parents and grandparents will therefore be a priority for a growing number of Canadians. The decision by Jason Kenney, Minister of Citizenship and Immigration, to cut back on the already low acceptance rates is needlessly short-sighted, and in some cases, punitive.

In response to growing concerns around lengthening sponsorship timelines from a strong Chinese community voice, the Minister announced an increase in the number of applications to be approved in Beijing. OCASI welcomes this announcement from the Minister to increase the number of applications processed in Beijing each year. At the same time we find it outrageous that the increase is juxtaposed against cuts to the number of applications processed from other areas in the global south, particularly India, and all countries in Africa and the Middle East, seemingly pitting the interests of one community against the other. We urge the Minister to give due consideration to the need to reduce family reunification delays in New Delhi as well as Nairobi and other visa posts in Africa and the Middle East.

Family reunification is a pillar of Canada's immigration program. Yet over the last ten years, Canada has steadily cut back on the number of immigrants accepted for residency in this category, from 29.4% of all immigration in 2003 to 21% in 2010. And while Minister Kenney has announced that the government will accept more family reunification applications in 2011 than in 2010, the maximum that could be accepted still represents a drop in numbers compared to the four years preceding 2010. Within the family reunification class, the number of parents and grandparents admitted went from 8.8% of all immigration in 2003 to 5.4% in 2010, and will drop further in 2011. The total number of economic immigrants increased from 54.7% to 66.5%. During that time, the number of temporary foreign workers in the country more than doubled, from 109,780 in 2003 to 283,096 in 2010, an increase of 158%.

OCASI recognizes the need to achieve a balance between sponsored immigrants in the family class and independent immigrants in the skilled worker class. We also recognize the need to periodically reassess overall numbers as well as the balance between categories. At the same time, we are deeply troubled by the move away from nation-building through permanent migration towards creating disposable workers with few rights, no entitlements and no opportunity to reunify with their family.

Permanent immigration and family reunification have been acknowledged by all sectors of Canadian society as indispensable aspects of a successful immigration program that considers economic factors within the context of nation-building. As immigration becomes the source of population and workforce growth, the objectives and structure of the immigration program will have significant and long-term impacts on the cohesion and strength of Canadian society. As a result of our increasing apprehension around the direction of the family reunification class and the temporary foreign worker programs, OCASI is calling on Citizenship and Immigration Canada to launch a review of the objectives, criteria and structures of both of these immigration classes and other selection mechanisms in order to ensure the successful integration and inclusion of future citizens.

