

## WALKOM: Trudeau Liberals tiptoe into temporary foreign workers minefield

Thomas Walkom

Hamilton Spectator | Aug 24, 2016

Justin Trudeau's Liberals are wading back into the temporary foreign workers mess.

That program caused plenty of grief for the former Conservative government, particularly when it was revealed that some employers were using the scheme to replace Canadian workers with cheaper foreign help.

The Liberals are hoping to do better.

If press reports are any guide, the government will use a parliamentary committee report set to be released next month as a template for relaxing the rules around the hiring of temporary foreign workers.

That report is still unpublished. But on a recent trip to China, Immigration Minister John McCallum gave some hint as to the government's thinking, saying Canada still needs temporary foreign workers to solve labour shortages in areas such as fish-processing and meat-packing.

According to a Globe and Mail report, McCallum said he wanted to make it easier for Canadian firms to bring in short-term foreign workers, noting that in some areas, the rules are "silly."

But he also held out the possibility that, in return, the government would make it easier for temporary foreign workers to become permanent residents and ultimately Canadian citizens.

This week, the Calgary Herald reported that during a close-door meeting with Alberta labour leaders, McCallum floated the idea of eliminating, for high-tech firms and some kinds of service-sector companies, the requirement that employers planning to hire foreigners first prove they can't find qualified Canadians.

This so-called labour market impact assessment requirement has been a cornerstone of the temporary foreign workers program. In theory, it is designed to ensure that employers don't use alleged labour shortages as an excuse to bring in foreigners willing to work for less.

In practice, it has had mixed results. Under Stephen Harper's Conservative government these assessments didn't prevent fast food outlets in Alberta and small factories in Ontario from bringing in massive numbers of temporary foreign workers — this at a time when Canadian unemployment was high.

When the Conservatives toughened the requirements in response to complaints that foreigners were displacing Canadian workers, business complained mightily.

The Liberals are looking to find a happy medium.

The problem the Trudeau government faces is that the temporary foreign workers program in any guise is a low-wage strategy.

When businesses say they can't find qualified labour, what they usually mean is that they can't find anyone at the wage they are willing — or able — to pay.

Appearing before the Commons human resources committee this spring, representatives of the meat packing industry said they must bring in foreign workers because native-born Canadians just aren't interested in such tough jobs.

What they didn't dwell on was the fact that native-born Canadians are quite willing to work in other tough manual jobs — such as the oil rigs — that pay more.



Maple Leaf Foods employees handle food products inside the company's meat facility in Toronto in this 2008 file photo. Meat packing is an industry that relies on foreign workers.



A worker makes his way through floating cranberries as the fruit is harvested in Saint-Louis de Blandford, Que.



Migrant workers plant strawberry plants on the farm of Bert Andrews (of Andrew's Scenic Acres) in Milton Ontario.

Christopher Smillie of the Canadian Building Trades Unions put the problem succinctly. "If employers can't entice Canadians to take certain jobs (they should) raise wages," he told the committee.

Former Conservative minister Jason Kenney made the same point when he tightened up the temporary foreign workers program in 2014. And he was right.

This low-wage aspect of the temporary foreign workers program is particularly evident in areas such as the restaurant industry that do not face foreign competition. Canadian tomato farmers competing with Mexico in world markets may feel pressured to pay Mexican-level wages. Toronto eateries do not. No one is going to fly from Toronto to Tijuana just to buy a cheaper taco.

So what will the Liberals do? At one level, their problem is a practical one. Even if they are opposed to using temporary migration as a wage suppressant, they live in a world where this is the norm. That's why, in an attempt to pander to East Coast fish plants, they lifted the ceiling this year on the number of temporary foreign workers seasonal employers may bring in.

At the Commons committee hearings, plenty of criticisms were levelled against the temporary foreign workers program. But not even the trade unionists appearing before the committee suggested that it be eliminated.

Toronto Star