

Interview with the Honourable Ahmed D. Hussen, Minister of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship, Canada

Ahmed Hussen is the Member of Parliament for the riding of York South-Weston. A lawyer and social activist, he has a proven track record of leadership and community empowerment.

Born and raised in Somalia, Ahmed immigrated to Canada in 1993 where he settled in Regent Park and quickly gravitated towards public service. In 2002, he co-founded the Regent Park Community Council and was able to secure a \$500 million revitalization project for Regent Park, all while ensuring the interests of the area's nearly 15,000 residents were protected. Ahmed also served as the National President of the Canadian Somali Congress – a Somali community organization that works with national and regional authorities to advocate on issues of importance to Canadians of Somali heritage and strengthen civic engagement and integration. His results-driven reputation led to an invitation to join the task force for modernizing income security for adults in the Toronto City Summit Alliance.

Ahmed is fluent in English, Somali, and Swahili, and earned his Bachelor of Arts (History) from York University and his Law Degree from the University of Ottawa.

International Migration

Why does Canada want to attract immigrants when so many other developed countries don't and when many, in fact, try to avoid migrants from entering their countries? Is it demographics, economics, nation-building, or some other factor that drives Canada's immigration ambitions?

Minister Ahmed Hussen

Canadians broadly support Canadian immigration policy because they understand that our immigration is well-planned, planned ahead of time, and is executed in an orderly manner. We do have asylum seekers whose numbers fluctuate and this we cannot predict; but, overall, Canadians understand that their governments have traditionally been consultative regarding levels of immigration that Canadians are willing to accept. Canadians also understand the contributions that immigrants make to our economy, to our social and cultural fabric, to our demographic challenges, our labour market needs, and skills shortages. Governments also understand this.

Geographically we are very lucky. We have the luxury of three coasts and a friendly border with the United States to our South. We have the ability to plan, to choose who enters our country. If you look at the numbers, we have a much smaller experience of undocumented arrivals than our American neighbours. By contrast, Germany had 950,000 migrants walk into their country in 2015. We don't have that situation. Canada has, partly because of its geography, the ability to have a more planned and more orderly immigration system. Canadians support this because they have an understanding and appreciation of what immigration does for us economically. If you look at our immigration levels, the majority of those who come are skilled immigrants. Yes, we have our international protection obligations to fulfill through the refugee resettlement program and our system for those seeking asylum, but for the most part our immigrants are welcomed as economic contributors.

IM

Some criticize Canada for cherry-picking its immigrants at the expense of countries of origin who lose much-needed human capital from their economies and governance infrastructures. What is the truth here?

AH

Canada's Express Entry selection system targets the best and brightest of the world to come as permanent residents. Those who use this program and become permanent residents tend to be from China and India, developed countries which do not suffer a brain drain from international migration. Those from less-developed countries that cannot afford to lose talent are a minority of those who come to Canada, and the few that we receive are not a major problem for those countries. The charge is fair in principle, but is mismatched against our actual program. The migrants from countries of the Global South would move anyway as part of the global race for talent. We are doing what we can to fulfill the needs of Canadian employers who need workers at all skill levels, intermediate, low, and high. Canada's population cannot provide all of the talent that employers need.

Recently, a Member of Parliament reported to me the case of a large bakery that cannot find enough bakers to work in his shop. And I was not long ago in the city of Kitchener-Waterloo, at a round table of the high technology community, and learned of a shortage of 3,600 highly-skilled people in that corridor alone, people who they need there right now. If you multiply that by 5 years and include the shortage of people for manufacturing jobs in highly developed factories in the Kitchener-Waterloo region, they will need 216,000 people. Without immigration, they will not be able to expand or may even need to shut down. Having immigrants come to Canada to lend us their talents and skills actually creates jobs for Canadians and contributes to our prosperity. This is something that you see every day across this country.

I can mention a gentleman in Moncton from Lebanon who now employs 75 people in a factory and who is now thinking of expanding abroad. These are common success stories that help explain the broad public support that we have for our immigration program.

IM

Regarding the global competition for talent, how does Canada compare itself to its nearest competitor, the US? In the search for talent, the US uses the employer-driven H1-B visa program whereas the Canadian government selects skilled workers itself. Why have Canadian government officials selecting while the US relies up those who employ them?

AH

The competition for talent is real and we cannot afford to be complacent. Regarding selecting for skills, both government and employers do this in Canada, in fact. Our Start-up Visa Program aims to bring promising start-up entrepreneurs to Canada and to scale up here. We do the marketing and outreach, but the designation of those promising start-ups is done by venture capitalists and their associations. We provide the permanent resident visas, but the selecting of the immigrants is led by the private sector while we provide the immigration support.

Another example of how employers are increasingly involved in the selection of immigrants is a new immigration pilot program that offers the four Atlantic Provinces 2000 applications in total plus their families. Selection is done by the employers who also provide a settlement package for the newcomers. This program involves a lot of liaison between the provincial governments and the federal government.

On June 12, we will roll out a Global Skills Strategy which will include a program led by private sector and academic institutions. Our aim is to get high skilled labour here fast and in some cases to get high skilled individuals and academic researchers here temporarily and to exempt them from the requirement of having a formal work permit. Our goal is a 2 week processing time, which will make this program extremely competitive. Again, the selection of the individual immigrants will be left to the provinces, the private sector, and academic institutions.

We are working closely with the private sector. They have the institutional knowledge to identify promising highly skilled individuals and promising start-ups. The Government has a lead role in

the Express Entry program to select federal skilled workers, but the provinces have a lead role in the Provincial Nominee Programs across the country, where the designation of individuals for immigration is done by them.

But even with the Express Entry point system, we hold consultations with industry and other stakeholders to get the selection criteria right, and the program much stronger as a result. Overall with regard to the selection of highly skilled immigrants, the private sector leads in some programs and the government leads in others. We use a mix of both. The aim is that those we bring to Canada fulfil our need for skills as identified by the industry and other institutions of our society.

IM

Another aspect of the global competition for talent is a more fluid flow of migrants with, some argue, multiple migration having become the new norm replacing the historical tradition of permanent one way flows. There are, we understand, now roughly 500,000 Canadian citizens in China. This marks another aspect of the competition for talent and constitutes a brain drain *from* Canada. How does Canada try to retain the skills that immigration program brings in the current context of a global fluidity of migration?

AH

Canada is a very attractive destination for our newcomers. We offer an open society, a democracy that follows the rule of law, and we have a welcoming attitude towards newcomers. Our immigration system would simply not have worked as it has done without the welcoming attitude of Canadians. This is a big piece of the solution to retaining talent. But this is an ongoing challenge and the Government of Canada continuously re-examines our immigration programs to maintain our attractiveness. We are emphasizing faster processing times for immigration, for citizenship, for passports, for family re-unification and other matters important to our newcomers. And we are making it easier for them to bring their families over for visits. These are among the intangibles that matter to retention, things that we need to be cognizant of.

We do understand that people will move around, but we want them ultimately to come back to Canada.

IM

Many of the countries of origin for Canada's immigrants are themselves rapidly developing and now are able to offer good and high-paying jobs in the homeland. This must make it more difficult for Canada to retain its highly-skilled immigrants.

AH

Again, Canada offers a very open society, the rule of law, democracy, and an appreciation of diversity that continues to increase. Our education system is second to none. These societal qualities are priceless. Here, immigrants have due process according to the law, as well as freedom of expression, assembly, and religion. Not all countries of origin can offer these societal values which we believe are critical to attracting and retaining talent. We are lucky in this sense which is why we remain a destination of choice.

IM

Since your government came to power, Canada has received a lot of attention over how it resettled 40,000 refugees from Syrian. This attention has come from other countries, from the United Nations, and has resulted in a partnership with the Open Society Foundation to promote this approach to refugee resettlement. And now the United Nations has launched a process to establish a Global Compact on Refugees. What does Canada want to see in this Compact?

AH

For starters, we want everyone to sign this new Compact to advance the world-wide recognition of the rights of refugees, to facilitate and implement those rights, and to assist in the protection of refugees and others in need of protection. Canada wants countries to understand that there should be more responsibility-sharing for the protection of refugees. We are sharing our best practices with new countries that are resettling refugees. Our Private Sponsorship of Refugees model is indeed attracting attention from a number of countries including Germany who are interested in our model, the United Kingdom, which has a pilot program that is apparently going well, and some new countries are interested in the Private Sponsorship of Refugees model including Brazil, Argentina, Chile. I understand that ten African countries and Honduras are engaging in pilot programs with the United Nations on refugee resettlement. And yes, we are collaborating with the United Nations, the Open Society Foundations, the Radcliffe Foundation, and the University of Ottawa in informing the world of how the Private Sponsorship of Refugees model works.

IM

Are you confident that the Global Compact will lead to tangible improvements in the global refugee system?

AH

Canada is hopeful, which is why we are actively contributing to this effort. Already we have seen that the United Arab Emirates, after visiting Canada, has agreed to resettle 15,000 refugees. Canada is offering technical assistance to the United Kingdom and to the three South American countries that I have mentioned. Canada is doing its part, sharing our best practices, offering our best advice to the international community. What we do here does not necessarily translate to all settings, but there are lessons to be learned from Canada's experiences.

IM

At the same time, the United Nations has launched a parallel process to create a Global Compact on Migration with the broad objective of fostering safe, orderly, and humane migration. How will Canada approach this initiative?

AH

I have spoken with Louise Arbour, now the Special Representative of the Secretary General for International Migration. She is looking for our support in creating more legal pathways for migrants to get work and to have some standards for labour market access for migrants in host countries. We are actively supporting her work and the co-ordinating group. But we maintain that any standards adopted with regard to migration management must be standards set by sovereign countries.

IM

How would Canada regard the suggestion for a World Migration Organization, perhaps along the lines of the World Trade Organization, that is, an organization with normative authority?

AH

Canada already has a program for temporary labour migration in addition to our program for permanent residency, both of which are working very well. We offer legal access to jobs and the option to return year after year. Canada is, we believe, ahead on many of the issues that will drive the Global Compact on Migration and, in addition, we offer the protections of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms. Human rights are protected for everyone in Canada, regardless of their immigration or citizenship status. Whether someone without legal residency in Canada gets to stay is another issue, but their rights are protected so long as they are on Canadian territory. We believe, however, that it is important to have this international conversation on labour market access for migrants.

Louise Arbour is performing great work, and this conversation should continue.

IM

How would Canada react to a proposal for a right to migrate that would go beyond the current human right to leave and return to one's country?

AH

We would need to examine exactly what such a proposal would entail. We would need to see an actual proposal and analyze it with care. But, there are now 244 million people on the move including 65 million internally displaced persons, and this presents a global challenge. The international community and countries such as mine will need to be creative and innovative.