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Green Party pledges to scrap Temporary Foreign Worker Program — is that a good idea?

BY BRIAN HILL - GLOBAL NEWS

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The Temporary Foreign Worker Program (TFWP) has been a mainstay of the Canadian economy for decades.

Each year, tens of thousands of foreign workers enter Canada on a temporary basis to fill employment gaps in the agricultural sector, restaurant and hotel service industries and as caregivers.

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But the program has also had many problems. This includes allegations from employees who say they have been abused by their bosses, reports of unscrupulous recruiters requiring people to pay for jobs and companies that bring in foreign labour rather than hiring Canadians.

For Green Party Leader Elizabeth May, these abuses — and the program itself — have gone on long enough. If elected, she is promising to eliminate the TFWP in favour of increasing the number of permanent economic immigrants Canada takes in each year.

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“Fundamentally, if you’re good enough to work in this country, you’re good enough to live in this country,” May said.

As permanent residents, foreign workers would be allowed to bring their families to Canada and would no longer have the same motivation to send money back home. This, May says, means more money stays in Canada.

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A 2017 survey from Statistics Canada found that temporary workers in

Canada send an average of \$3,195 a year outside the country. This means roughly \$1 billion could have been removed from the Canadian economy by temporary foreign workers since 2015. The same study found that the longer immigrants stay in Canada, the less likely they are to send money abroad.

The World Bank, meanwhile, says \$24 billion was sent from Canada to other countries by migrants in 2017. This includes all immigrants, not only temporary workers.

“We need more engineers, we need more carpenters, we need more electricians,” May said.

“The program hasn’t succeeded in protecting the rights of temporary foreign workers, nor has it been appropriately used to ensure that Canadians are fully employed.”

Plan seems ‘half-baked,’ expert says

Over the past three years, roughly 320,000 work permits have been issued for temporary foreign workers to come to Canada.

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A little more than half of these — 176,000 visas in total — went to agricultural workers, many of whom are employed seasonally during

harvest time.

Other common jobs include in-home caregivers as well as work in meat- and fish-processing plants, the hospitality sector and some more highly skilled areas of the economy, such as in the trades or heavy industry.

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Because of the seasonal nature of many of these jobs, especially in agriculture, some economists say it doesn't make sense for these positions to be filled with full-time immigrants.

Philip Cross, a former chief economic analyst at Statistics Canada and a senior fellow at the Macdonald-Laurier Institute, says the Greens' plan to scrap the TFWP lacks an understanding of the gap the program tries to fill.

"You call it interesting, I call it half-baked," Cross said, referring to May's pledge.

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— Migrant caregivers calling on Ottawa for a better program

In 2014, Cross helped Canada's auditor general complete a review of the TFWP. He says the program was sometimes abused — both by employers and employees — but that it was mostly successful.

“Like any government program, some nefarious people will use it in a way that it wasn't intended, but what we found was that the program generally worked well and satisfied both employers' and workers' needs,” he said.

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“If we say, no, you must come here permanently or you can't come at all, we're going to end up closing the door on a lot of talented people who would have been willing to lend us their skills for a brief period of time,” Cross said.

Canada can have it both ways

Between 2015 and 2018, roughly 25,000 people who came to Canada as temporary foreign workers became permanent residents. That's about

eight per cent of the total number of work permits issued under the TFWP during the same period.

According to Matthew Stewart, director of economic forecasts at the Conference Board of Canada, these workers and those who stay temporarily bring significant value to the Canadian economy.

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But the idea that workers must enter Canada temporarily in order for these economic benefits to be realized isn't necessarily true, advocates say.

Syed Hussan, director of the Toronto-based advocacy group Migrant Workers Alliance for Change, says the same employment shortages described by Cross and Stewart can be filled even if workers who come to Canada temporarily are given permanent-resident status immediately upon their arrival.

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This doesn't mean they would have to — or even want to — stay in Canada forever, he says, it just means they would have access to the same rights and protections as all other workers in Canada

“It’s about fundamental justice.”



Hussan points to a recent fire at Pioneer Flower Farms in St. Catharines, Ont., as an example of why migrant workers should be given the same rights and benefits as other workers in Canada.

The fire, which destroyed the workers' residence and several greenhouses at the farm, forced the farm to close temporarily. But because the migrant workers were in Canada under the TFWP, they could not access employment insurance (EI). Their status in Canada is also tied directly to these specific jobs.

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When the farm closed and with no money coming in, Hussan said many of the workers he talked with feared they could be forced to go back to their home countries.

This incident also prompted calls from labour organizers, such as the United Food and Commercial Workers union, for greater protections for

migrant workers. This includes access to EI benefits, plus the freedom to choose where they work.

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More needs to be done

May knows her pledge to cancel the TFWP lacks detail. She also understands many Canadian businesses rely on temporary foreign workers to survive.

That's why cancelling the program must come with an equivalent increase in the number of foreign workers allowed to enter Canada permanently, she said.

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The Conservatives did not comment on the Greens' pledge to scrap the program, but party leader Andrew Scheer has said he believes Canada must be able to attract the best workers from around the world and that immigration levels need to be consistent with Canada's best interests.

The Liberals, meanwhile, say the TFWP isn't just about low-skilled workers, it's also about making sure Canadian companies have access to the most

it's also about making sure Canadian companies have access to the most talented people from around the world, sometimes on a temporary basis.

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Liberals point to recent changes they have made to the TFWP as proof of how important it is to the Canadian economy and how it can also be made better for workers.

This includes speeding up the application process for certain high-skilled jobs, such as those in the tech industry, plus giving vulnerable low-wage workers a way to escape abusive employers and transfer to other jobs without worrying they will be forced to leave the country.

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The NDP says it has long supported the idea that temporary foreign workers should be allowed to remain in Canada permanently, adding that the party is “unequivocally opposed” to the exploitation of foreign workers.

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But May says her call to cancel the program is about more than just enhancing workers’ rights, it’s also about making sure Canada has the demographic balance it needs to support continued economic growth in the future and to offset an aging population.

“The bottom line here is that we need a population boost in the 20- to 45-year-old category of workers,” May said.

“Why wouldn’t we want to stimulate our economy with people who moved here to stay?”

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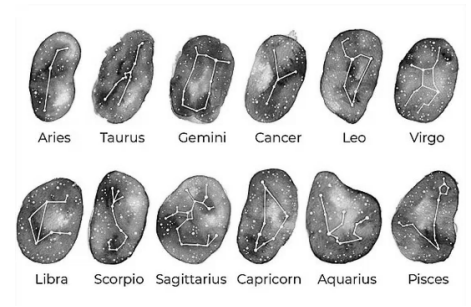
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