

From: William B.P. Robson and Parisa Mahboubi
To: Canada's Ministers of Finance, Employment and Immigration
Date: April 6, 2018
Re: **MORE IMMIGRATION IS GOOD, BUT WHAT ABOUT THE PEOPLE WHO ARE LEAVING?**

Immigration has been a key driver of Canada's economic and cultural development. As natural population growth has slowed, immigration's contribution to growth in the workforce and the tax base looms larger. This is one reason the government has raised its admission target to 310,000 in 2018, with further increases in the years ahead.

Emigration from Canada gets less political profile. But it, too, has been historically important – as a drag on Canada's development. United Nations' [estimates for 2017](#) put the number of people born in Canada but living abroad at about 1.4 million – which, compared to some 28.8 million people born in Canada and still living here, indicates that almost 1 in 20 people who were born in Canada have left. And it continues: last year, about 67,000 people left Canada.

We know less about emigrants than we do about immigrants, because we don't screen and monitor people leaving in the same way we screen and monitor people coming in. Some former emigrants return each year, so the net outflow is smaller than the gross outflow. But one fact is obvious: emigration offsets the benefits of immigration. The 1.4 million Canadian-born people living abroad are a significant minus against the 7.9 million foreign-born living in Canada. And the offset also continues: for every four immigrants admitted in 2017, one emigrant left.

As retailers, employers, politicians and charities all know, retaining a customer, employee, voter or donor you already have is easier and usually more rewarding than recruiting someone new. Many of the benefits we seek from higher immigration are more readily available from lower emigration.

Our [recent study](#) comparing immigration with later retirement as tools to address the economic and fiscal challenges of aging showed that immigration's power to keep Canada young is much weaker than people often suppose. That matters because to the extent we count on immigration alone to solve our problems, and neglect measures to boost the number of people working and contributing to the economy – and government revenues – the less attractive Canada will be to everyone, potential immigrants and potential emigrants alike.

From this perspective, recent numbers on emigration are disappointing. The ups and downs of the Canadian economy relative to the United States – the likeliest destination for Canadian emigrants – matter, but the trend is up: 2015-17 registered the highest rate of emigration over any three-year period in the past three decades. [Past work at Statistics Canada](#) showed that young adults with relatively advanced education and high earnings are disproportionately likely to leave. If emigration continues to rise, and if the emigrants are people at least as likely to thrive in Canada's labour market and contribute to Canada's economy as immigrants are, we will be running all the harder just to get to where we could have been anyway.

Immigration can and should continue to be a driver of Canadian prosperity. It will be if Canada is a relatively attractive place to live. And a key bellwether of whether Canada is a relatively attractive place to live is how many Canadians are leaving. Addressing the economic reasons Canadians are leaving is as important as selling the nation to those coming in.

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