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Line of Sight: Canada Needs Transparent and Predictable Immigration Targets

C.D. Howe Institute Immigration Targets Council

The C.D. Howe Institute Immigration Targets Council met on August 24, 2026, bringing together leading academics and policy experts to provide recommendations on Canada's immigration levels for 2027–2029 and system design.

Council members emphasized the need for a transparent and predictable immigration system and expressed concern that rapid changes in immigration levels and the growth of the non-permanent resident (NPR) population have weakened public confidence in Canada's immigration system. Members also emphasized that immigration policy should consider composition alongside overall levels, with greater priority for high-human-capital candidates within economic immigration.

For permanent immigration, the Council recommends annual admissions of 380,000 in 2027, 350,000 in 2028, and 340,000 in 2029, reflecting the median of members' recommendations. Additional, time-limited permanent-resident admissions announced by the federal government last year outside the headline levels plan complicated the Council's determination of an appropriate target for 2027. Members differed on how to reflect those previously announced admissions in the appropriate level for 2027.

The Council strongly recommends that the government not repeat this approach. All permanent-resident admissions, regardless of program or pathway, should be included in the government's published permanent immigration target. The government should clearly disclose the expected admissions through each component of the plan and should not introduce additional permanent-resident streams outside the announced total. A comprehensive target is essential for transparency and for giving Canadians a clear picture of the actual scale of permanent immigration.

For temporary immigration, the Council recommends that the government reduce the NPR share to 5 percent by next year. Beyond that, 5 percent should be treated as a strict ceiling for NPRs, never to be exceeded, rather than as the target itself. In the medium to longer term, the target for the NPR population should move towards 3 percent of the population. Members emphasized that achieving this objective requires attention to more than new permit issuances. In particular, the government should strengthen requirements for permit renewals, improve its understanding of inflows and outflows from the NPR population, and reform the asylum system to improve its efficiency and integrity.

Better data are essential to this task. Published statistics should clearly distinguish new permits from renewals, while Statistics Canada and the federal government should make better use of entry-exit data to measure departures and improve estimates of the number of people remaining in Canada after their status expires. Current data gaps make it unnecessarily difficult to understand and manage the NPR population.

Members supported substantially reducing low-skilled, non-agricultural temporary foreign worker entries over time, while recognizing the distinct labour-market role of seasonal agricultural workers. On international students, members emphasized improving program quality and integrity through stronger academic and language requirements, higher standards for institutions and programs, and limits on off-campus work. Members differed on whether numerical caps on study permits are the best mechanism for controlling inflows.

Finally, the Council recommends simplifying the pathway from temporary to permanent residence. Selection for economic permanent residence should be transparent, evidence-based, and predictable, using a strengthened Comprehensive Ranking System rather than discretionary or highly targeted selection. Prospective temporary residents should have a clearer understanding of their likelihood of qualifying for permanent residence.

Together, these recommendations would bring greater transparency, predictability, and control to Canada's immigration system – steps the Council views as essential to maintaining public confidence in immigration policy.

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