

Who will people the prairie?



Who will cut lips and ears from steers in the slaughterhouse?
 Who will drive the trucks in the tar sands?
 Who will nanny the children?
 Who will pull the sugar beets?
 Who will dig the coal?
 Who will launder the clothes?
 Who will bust the sod?
 Who will dynamite the mountain?
 Who will lay the track for the railway?
 Who will carry the beaver pelts to Montreal?
 Who will guide the newcomers through the unknown land?
 Who will people the prairie?

Diane Francis, in a recent article in the *Calgary Herald* (Jan 21, 2002), calls for a total revamping of the immigration system, specifically the refugee procedures. “Besides terrorists, the refugee system has allowed deadbeats, petty criminals, disturbed persons and thousands of other undesirables to enter and live here off our entitlements,” she says. After Sept. 11, thinking like this has become more widespread, and seems to be regarded with greater acceptance. (See *Eye on Alberta*, p. 21).

Any group has its good and its bad. To condemn a whole group for the actions of a few of its members is unjust. The Canadian-born also include a small proportion of “deadbeats, criminals and disturbed persons.” To spread fear and mistrust of all newcomers is wrong.

How soon we forget. Except for the aboriginal people, we were all immigrants. Some of us were considered undesirable by those who were here earlier. Some groups were admitted to do difficult, dangerous or unsavoury work, but were not accepted as residents. Early immigration policy favoured the British and was explicitly racist in its exclusion of blacks and Chinese. It wasn’t until 1967 that new immigration regulations were applied to all immigrants regardless of ethnic or racial origins.

History has brought people of astonishingly varied backgrounds to

Alberta—more than 80 different ethnic groups: French fur traders, English Hudson’s Bay company officials, American cowboys; Mormon, Mennonite, Doukhobor, Hutterite. Some Chinese workers who built the railway in B.C. came to Alberta. Clifford Sifton advertised in Europe for hardy farmers to fill the prairies—Ukrainian, Scandinavian, German. Wars and revolutions brought the Dutch, Pole, Hungarian, Czech, Filipino, Latin American, African. Many Southeast Asians arrived in the aftermath of the Vietnam War.

In *Peoples of Alberta*, Howard Palmer says, “the history of Alberta’s diverse ethnic groups is not merely an interesting but peripheral dimension of the province’s history; rather it is at its centre.” This diversity has made Alberta “a vibrant and multitextured society in which one can experience and be enriched by the cultures and religions of peoples from every part of the world.”

In this issue we look at how today’s immigrants fare here. Newcomers are sometimes welcomed, but sometimes resented by those who have been here a bit longer. We Albertans—of all people—should understand the suffering of newcomers and be able to reach out in friendship.

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