

GOVERNMENT POLICY

Immigration overhaul to let employers choose prospects

Kenney wants a more flexible system that emphasizes language skills and youth, with a view to creating a new stream for tradespeople

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The Conservative government is poised to overhaul the immigration system to give employers an important role in the selection of new Canadians.

Citizenship and Immigration Minister Jason Kenney said he plans to build a faster, more flexible, just-in-time immigration regime. He's also going to redesign the points system, on which immigrants are judged, to emphasize language ability and youth. Fresh off a trip to labour-starved Saskatchewan, Mr. Kenney said in an interview Wednesday that he wants to create a new economic stream for tradespeople, who currently don't qualify under Canada's education-focused skilled worker program.

He said employers will soon be able to hand-pick prospective immigrants and send them to the front of the line for assessment.

"Once people have been identified by employers, if they meet our other standards we would fast-track them into the country," Mr. Kenney said. "Frankly, the employer knows better than a big bureaucracy whose skills are needed and will be relevant to the Canadian labour market the minute they arrive."



Immigration Minister Jason Kenney says 'the employer knows better than a big bureaucracy whose skills are needed.' SEAN KILPATRICK/THE CANADIAN PRESS

The first of these changes will be introduced over the next few months. Ability in English or French will become more important under the new system. In future, professionals in language-intensive fields, such as doctors and lawyers, will have to be fluent in an official language, Mr. Kenney said. It's a major shift from the current system, which rewards language ability but

doesn't set such a high benchmark. At the same time, he wants a flexible language grid, so that applicants in fields that don't require a high level of fluency aren't automatically excluded.

He also said he'll be considering a pre-assessment system, as exists in Australia, that evaluates the credentials of skilled professionals before they immigrate to see whether they will qualify to

work in Canada. "There is really no point inviting people who are working as licensed professionals in their countries of origin to come to Canada merely to face perpetual frustration as they try to get their licences. It makes sense for Canada and those professionals to do the credential assessment as part of their immigration application."

Another possibility floated by Mr. Kenney is to create an expression-of-interest system, whereby employers and provinces could assess a pool of applicants. Promising candidates could then be streamed quickly to the head of the skilled worker program or a provincial nominee program.

"The brilliant young graduate of the Indian technical institute in Hyderabad will find it easier to immigrate to Canada under the new system than it was in the past. Because rather than standing at the back of an eight-year-long queue, someone with those marketable skills should be able to find employment in Canada and come in straight away."

Wealthy migrants looking to arrive under a redesigned investor class likely will have to invest significantly more. Mr. Kenney said the current requirement to invest \$800,000 provides little value for Canadians.

Much of the policy thinking for these changes is based on the Australian system. Mikal Skuterud, an economist at the University of Waterloo, has studied the impact of Australia's stricter language testing. He said Australia's immigrant mix changed after testing was introduced, and might be expected to do the same in Canada. He and his colleague Andrew Clarke found that the economic performance of immigrants, when compared to similar groups in Canada, didn't improve after testing was mandated.

"It's quite clear from the Australian evidence that it has the effect of shifting immigration away from non-English speaking countries, China particularly," Prof. Skuterud said. Language testing did help Australia lower the age of its immigrants, something Canada would like to do.

Mr. Kenney said he doesn't anticipate any alteration in the national origin of Canada's immigrants that could be attributed to these changes. He said he intends to keep immigration levels fairly steady, at about 260,000 a year. He also intends to keep roughly the same balance between economic immigrants (roughly 70 per cent of the total), family-class immigrants and refugees.