

Increasing immigration a mistake

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By Sarah O'Donnell

About 800 people rallied in front of the Alberta Legislature last April to protest the government's plans to attract more immigrant workers to the trades.

EDMONTON - Governments trying to solve Canada's labour shortage are making a mistake to push for a significant increase in immigration right now, the country's foremost demographer said Friday.

The immediate solution, said David Foot, co-author of the best-selling book *Boom, Bust & Echo*, is on the cusp of entering the job market. They are the children of the baby boomers, a group he calls the echo generation. And there are many of them graduating from school in provinces such as Ontario, Saskatchewan and Manitoba.

"If you raise immigration levels now, you're asking the new immigrants to come in and compete with the children of the boomers," Foot said after presenting to a conference of continuing care workers put on by The Capital Care Group.

"That's not fair to the new immigrants and that's not fair to the children of the boomers. I think we should have a policy of creating jobs for the young Canadians who are here."

Based on demographics, Foot said he would maintain the existing level of immigration to Canada until 2015, a time when fewer people will be in their 20s. That opinion runs contrary to new policies announced last fall by both the federal and provincial governments.

First, the Liberal government of Paul Martin announced that it wanted to increase the number of immigrants coming to Canada by 40 per cent within five years. That would bring a total of about 328,000 new permanent residents into the country every year.

Then, two provincial ministers unveiled Alberta's new immigration strategy and said the government wants to increase the number of new immigrants who locate in this province to at least 24,000 by 2010. That is a 47-per-cent increase over approximately 16,450 immigrants who arrived in 2004.

Provincial politicians say they must pursue the strategy to help fill an estimated 400,000 new jobs to be created within the decade.

Foot, a British-born immigrant who was raised in Australia, said there are plenty of young Canadians to meet those demands.

"Alberta should be out there trying to recruit young people from Manitoba, Saskatchewan and Ontario," he said. "But you can't just expect people to come out on a whim. People have watched the Alberta economy boom and bust over the last 20, 30 years and people aren't going to relocate out here to suddenly be fired if the bust arrives."

That means that companies need to learn lessons from professional sports and take steps such as offering five-year contracts with agreed severance packages and signing bonuses.

In a decade, once a slimmer pool of young people returns, Foot said he will expect to give different advice.

"If you're asking me 10 years from now, I'd probably be all for increased immigration," Foot said. "But we need to employ these children of the boomers, this echo generation over the next 10 years. That should be our priority."

In his presentation, Foot, a University of Toronto economics professor, also addressed other far-reaching implications that demographics can have on Canadians lives and government policy. For example, Eastern Canada has a significantly older

population than Western Canada. That means that the demands for health care and the needs of an aging population will impact eastern Canada first.

"That's why it's going to be very difficult for a prime minister from Alberta to understand how important health care is in Nova Scotia," Foot said. "If we understand a little bit more that the needs in different parts of the country are quite different, that might lead to more understanding within the Canadian family."

David K. Foot is a professor of economics at the University of Toronto, and co-author of the Boom, Bust & Echo books.