

IMMIGRATION, REFUGEES AND CITIZENSHIP CANADA (IRCC) MANDATE LETTER ANALYSIS

On December 16, 2021, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau issued his ministerial mandate letters to his Cabinet Ministers. Government mandate letters were first introduced in 2015 in an attempt to increase transparency and accountability by highlighting key goals the government expects each Minister to accomplish during the government's tenure. Overall, the 2021 IRCC mandate letter offers an optimistic view regarding economic migration to revitalize Canada's economy. While the mandate letter does not explicitly address Canada's settlement and integration sector, the policies outlined in the letter will have a direct impact on newcomer-serving agencies given the increasing immigration targets. The objectives outlined in the mandate letter are hopeful for improving the experience of newcomers while also meeting immigration targets. The aim of this brief is to provide an analysis of the priorities outlined for the Minister of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC), Sean Fraser, and their implications for the settlement and integration sector in Alberta in hopes of sparking discussion and further consideration to facilitate opportunities to improve the settlement and integration of refugees, immigrants, and other migrants to Canada.

KEY PRIORITIES IDENTIFIED

INCREASE IMMIGRATION LEVELS FOR ECONOMIC GROWTH

The mandate letter highlights a focus on increasing immigration levels to meet the targets outlined in the CIMM 2021-23 Immigration Levels Plan released in 2020. The Immigration Levels Plan outlines an increasing trajectory of immigration levels, in which 60% of projected admissions are expected to be amongst the economic categories. Minister Sean Fraser has also noted that the government is likely to increase these targets if deemed necessary to fill labour shortages. To fill any gaps and labour shortages, the mandate letter hints at programs that will receive more attention, including the Express Entry System, Federal High Skilled program, provincial economic immigration programs, and other Economic Pilot Programs focused on specific newcomer



populations. The Express Entry System in particular may provide greater opportunities for international students and Temporary Foreign Workers (TFWs) to enter and work in Canada depending on Alberta's labour needs. However, it is not clear whether there will be a total decrease in other pathways available for potential newcomers. For example, a likely impact on the economic programs available is the redesign of the National Occupational Classification (NOC) by Employment and Social Development Canada (ESDC) in conjunction with IRCC to be adopted in Fall 2022. The NOC structure is used by IRCC and provinces/territories for the management of temporary and permanent resident programs. The overhaul of the NOC will potentially impact the recategorization of eligible occupations that may no longer provide eligibility to apply for permanent residency under Express Entry.

To continue economic growth and meet labour shortages in some industries, specifically in the health care sector, the mandate letter commits to building on the Economic Mobility Pathways Pilot program. The pilot program was launched in April 2018 to explore the degree to which refugees can access existing economic immigration pathways and to document the barriers and challenges they face in doing so. Through this program, the government is committed to welcoming 2000 skilled refugees to fill labour shortages under provincial or federal economic programs. Other efforts to build immigration in Canada will be through the expansion of the Rural and Northern Immigration Pilot, the Municipal Nominee Program, and the now permanent Atlantic Immigration Program. While the government has highlighted a commitment to work with the provinces to improve foreign credential recognition, it is unclear what this may entail. However, this commitment may potentially be referring to the Pan-Canadian Framework for the Assessment and Recognition of Foreign Qualifications to address the current gaps to successful immigrant labour market recognition. Through these community-based approaches, the government hopes to provide more flexibility to provinces to adjust immigration to their economic realities.

With a greater focus on increasing immigration levels as a conduit to economic growth and recovery, the settlement and integration sector can expect to see larger numbers of economic immigrants. However, as Canada continues to deal with border and travel restrictions, meeting these targets may pose a challenge. Minister Sean Fraser is expected to table the 2022-2024 Immigration Levels Plan on February 10, 2022, which will provide more clarification on intended targets and which programs will receive more emphasis.

ADDRESS APPLICATION PROCESSING TIME

The mandate letter proposes to reduce application processing times due to the current backlog of 1.8 million immigration applications caused concurrently by the COVID-19 pandemic and the transitioning of resources to assist Afghan resettlement initiatives. The 2021 Economic



and Fiscal Update reveals that the government proposes to invest \$85 million in 2022-23 to process more Permanent Resident (PR) and Temporary Resident (TR) applications in order to reduce the processing times. It is likely that the government will invest in more human resources (i.e., extra workforce to process applications) with a greater focus on processing applications for PRs who are already contributing to Canadian society.

AFGHAN RESETTLEMENT PRIORITIES

Canada has committed to resettling 40 000 refugees and vulnerable Afghans, of which many will be women, children, LGBTQ+ people, religious and ethnic minorities fleeing from the Taliban, journalists, and people who have supported Canada and its allies over the past two decades. This resettlement target is consistent with the 44 620 Syrian refugees welcomed to Canada since 2015. Accordingly, starting in 2021-22, the government proposes to invest \$1.3 billion over six years and \$66.6 million in the following years on resettling Afghans and their families under special immigration, humanitarian, and family reunification programs. The impact of these investments has begun to unfold as investments of \$35 million have been made to enhance access to support services in small towns and rural communities. Of this investment, \$21 million will go toward nine new Resettlement Assistance Program (RAP) service providers, of which two are based in Alberta. In addition, \$14 million is invested to bolster Francophone case management for 14 existing service providers to assist more vulnerable newcomers. As noted above, while the current processing time for applications is slow, the hope is that the amount of dollars invested to support Afghan resettlement will increase government capacity to processing applications in a timelier manner to ultimately bring Afghans to safety.

EXPANSION OF THE NEWLY DEDICATED STREAM FOR HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS

The new refugee stream for human rights defenders under the Government-Assisted Refugees (GARs) Program was developed in response to refugees who are at risk and fleeing from their home country. When the government revealed this new stream, they proposed to resettle up to 250 human rights defenders per year, including their family members. Under the new mandate letter, the government notes an expansion to the program – an indication that more human rights defenders will be resettled into Canada. This new stream places Canada as one of the first countries to offer a dedicated, permanent pathway for human rights defenders. As a result of this investment, 252 Afghan refugees have arrived in Alberta, out of which 170 were admitted through this special human rights defenders' program.

OTHER RELEVANT CHANGES TO EXPECT:

- **Waive citizenship application fee for PRs:** As part of the Government's 2019 election priority, PRs can expect to have their citizenship application fee waived. Currently, the citizenship application fee is \$630 for adults and \$100 for minors.
- **Family Reunification & Electronic Applications:** A new program that will issue temporary residency to spouses and children of individuals awaiting abroad for family members in Canada will be introduced to increase family reunification. Additionally, electronic applications for spousal applications will be introduced to reduce processing times and increase efficiency.
- **Francophone immigration priorities:** IRCC will continue to work with Quebec to implement an "ambitious national strategy" to support Francophone immigration across the country with a goal of achieving a target of 4.4% of French-speaking immigrants outside of Quebec by 2023. This may mean that more immigration for individuals with French language skills across a range of occupation and skill levels.
- **Regularize status for undocumented workers:** While the details for this pathway are unclear, previous initiatives, such as the TR to PR initiative in 2021, indicate that the government may set up a similar pathway that would allow undocumented workers in Canada to obtain temporary or permanent residency. The government's plan is to "build on existing pilot programs," such as the Undocumented Construction worker pilot which suggest there are up to 500 000 undocumented workers in Canada, with half living in the Greater Toronto Area. Although this pathway would be beneficial for undocumented workers already in Canada, it is imperative to be cautious of increasing the vulnerability for individuals not in the country but hoping to enter Canada in pursuit of TR or PR status.
- **Employer related changes – Trusted Employer System:** As part of the government's political platform, they are committed to establishing a Trusted Employer system for Canadian companies hiring TFWs to fill labour shortages. The government will modify the Global Talent Stream of the TFW program to simplify permit renewals and uphold the two-week processing time. They are also planning to establish an employer hotline.
- **Safe Third Country Agreement (STCA):** A commitment to "modernize" the STCA. Recently, the Federal Court of Appeal granted the Government of Canada's appeal of the July 2020 Federal Court decision that the STCA is unconstitutional, and therefore, the STCA remains in effect.

WHAT'S NOT INCLUDED IN THE MANDATE?

- **Addressing the gaps present in the Interim Federal Health Program (IFHP):** There have been various changes between 2012 and 2016 to the IFHP, but it has now been restored to

its 2012 format. However, there are gaps present with the IFHP resulting in the delay or prevention of access to healthcare services. For example, there is evidence of IFHP illiteracy as there is a lack of clear information on how to access IFHP and lack of consistent information. The IFHP program also has other barriers such as coverage gaps, health access barriers facing IFHP beneficiaries, and administrative hurdles facing IFHP service providers ([Chen, 2021](#)).

- **Protection of migrant workers:** The mandate letter did not emphasize concerted efforts to safeguard migrant workers against exploitation and improve their experiences. Through the Temporary Foreign Worker Program, the federal government can provide temporary resident integration services to TFWs and revisit the Federal-Provincial Agreements with provinces to fund a proactive and effective Federal Provincial TFW Monitoring Advocacy System. This would ensure employers and TFWs are educated on regulations, employers are monitored, and guarantee TFWs have equitable access to worker protections (AAISA, 2022).
- **Commitment to respond to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's (TRC) Calls to Action:** Through colonialism, the immigration system in Canada continues to have implications on Indigenous Peoples. The mandate letter acknowledges that the Minister's duty to further the work of reconciliation is by implementing the [United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples](#) and to work with Indigenous Peoples to advance their rights, but it fails to outline specific actions that would address the [TRC Calls to Action](#). More specifically, the TRC Call to Action #93 calls on the Government to “revise the information kit for newcomers to Canada and its citizenship test to reflect a more inclusive history of the diverse Aboriginal peoples of Canada, including information about the Treaties and the history of residential schools.” Since [2017](#), the Government announced its partnership with the Assembly of First Nations and discussions have taken place, however, concrete results have yet to materialize.
- **Commitment to newcomers and newcomer-serving agencies confronted with hate crimes, racism, and xenophobia:** Recently, IRCC commissioned and received an internal [Departmental study](#) that showed flagrant racism within IRCC, particularly amongst Black and racialized employees within the department. Police reported hate crimes in Canada have also increased sharply by 37% in 2020, marking the largest number of police-reported hate crimes since comparable data became available in 2009 ([Statistics Canada, 2021](#)). For racism and xenophobia to be addressed, and these barriers to newcomer integration removed, concrete action and commitment are required within IRCC and agencies. As a sector, more investments are required to increase the capacity of agencies to ensure that issues of racism and xenophobia are addressed within their communities through education and awareness.



- **Longstanding delays impacting Immigration and Refugee Board (IRB) refugee claims:** In 2020, IRB had more than 90 000 refugee claims waiting to be determined. Increased investments to manage the rising intake of refugee claims have allowed IRB to finalized refugee claims. However, there continues to be rising numbers of refugee claims that outpace IRB's funded processing capacity (IRB, 2021). Continuous funding to increase IRB's capacity to address backlog growth are not one of the commitments highlighted in the mandate letter but will be a challenge that will require more attention from the Government.