IMMIGRATION IN A POSITIVE LIGHT

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By Carol Goar, The Toronto Star, 8 March 2010

Troubled by the rise of anti-immigrant sentiment, a group of charitable foundations in Europe and the United States banded together in 2008 to track public attitudes on both sides of the Atlantic. Last year, they added Canada to the survey. Suddenly they had an outlier: a nation that defied most of the prevailing trends.

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Troubled by the rise of anti-immigrant sentiment, a group of charitable foundations in Europe and the United States banded together in 2008 to track public attitudes on both sides of the Atlantic. Last year, they added Canada to the survey. Suddenly they had an outlier: a nation that defied most of the prevailing trends.

Very few Canadians consider immigration a hot-button issue. Dissatisfaction with our government's immigration policy is minimal. We dismiss the notion that immigration has become more of a problem than an opportunity.
We don't worry greatly about the burden newcomers impose on our country. We don't show a strong tendency to blame immigrants for taking jobs away from native-born Canadians. Alone among the nine countries in the sample, we support government-sponsored language courses for immigrants.

But before anyone starts feeling smug, there were a few unsettling revelations:

We vastly overestimate the number of immigrants in our country.

Canadians believe 37 per of the country's population is foreign-born. It's actually 20 per cent. Americans have an even more skewed perception. They think immigrants make up 35 per cent of their population. In fact, they constitute 14 per cent. Most Europeans' estimates are much closer to the mark.

More than half of us blame illegal immigrants for driving up crime.

We are by no means alone. All countries except France share this attitude. But there is very little evidence to back it up. Statistics Canada, which tracks every aspect of law-breaking, has never found a link between illegal immigration and crime. What seems to be behind the finger-pointing are the fears expressed by politicians – particularly south of the border – about an infiltration of foreign-born terrorists, the concerns expressed by police about criminal gangs with roots in Asia and Europe, and a few high-profile cases of human trafficking.

Asked to identify the biggest barrier to immigrants' integration into Canadian society, 43 per cent of us point to their unwillingness to adjust. Just 37 per cent point to our reluctance to give them a fair

chance.

Our American counterparts are more self-critical. Forty-six per cent of them attribute immigrants' integration difficulties to discrimination within their society. Only 42 per cent say they are unwilling to adapt.

The 30-page publication contains a few danger signals for Ottawa.

The Harper government's shift from permanent immigrants to temporary foreign workers is starkly at odds with public opinion. An overwhelming majority of Canadians – 76 per cent – want immigrants who come here to stay, build a life here and become contributing citizens.

The Prime Minister's foot-dragging on environmental issues also runs counter to the will of the nation. Seeking to gauge nations' willingness to share the burden of climate change, the pollsters asked respondents whether they favour letting migrants displaced by environmental deterioration – natural disasters, rising sea levels, more frequent droughts – settle here. A striking 75 per cent of Canadians said yes. The only country where support was higher was Spain with 78 per cent.

On balance, the findings paint a positive picture of Canada.

Despite our own economic troubles, we remain a welcoming people. We recognize the need to shore up our aging workforce with newcomers. We continue to see immigrants as an asset, diversity as a source of strength and language training as a sensible investment.

We show no sign of the kind of xenophobia that has developed in Europe and parts of the U.S.

It turns out we do have a distinct identity. It comes across clearly in the survey (available at www.transatlantictrends.org). Most Canadians will like what they see.

(A note on methodology: All national surveys were done by TNS Opinion, a Belgian-based firm. It interviewed 1,000 randomly selected Canadians last September.)