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'White Canada' to multicultural mosaic

[Penney Kome \(/category/bios/contributor/penney-kome\)](#) March 29, 2017

[ANTI-RACISM \(/ISSUES/ANTI-RACISM\)](#)



*This is the third blog in a series about how Canada has historically served as a place of refuge during uncertain times in the U.S. Read the **first** (<http://www.rabble.ca/blogs/bloggers/2017-03-24t000000/fleeing-north-time-honoured-tradition-us-dissidents>) and **second** (<http://www.rabble.ca/blogs/bloggers/2017-03-24t000000/canadas-earliest-immigration-policies-made-it-safe-haven-escaped>) installments.*

In 1899, Russian author Leo Tolstoy took up Clifford Sifton's offer of free land. He facilitated and funded moving 7,500 Doukhobors to Saskatchewan from Russia, a major immigration both for them and for Canada.

The immigrants were one-third of the existing members of the pacifist Doukhobor religion, which had enraged the Czar by their men's refusal to wear soldiers' uniforms or to fight. Instead, the conscriptees stripped naked and piled up their rifles into giant bonfires.

In the 21st century, about 25,000 Doukhobor descendants live in Saskatchewan and British Columbia, with about one-third still practicing their religion. Many live in the Kootenay region of B.C., near where U.S. immigrants also have settled.

Liberal Minister of the Interior Clifford Sifton was determined to colonize the Prairies, if only to block American expansion. One of his strategies was creating magnet communities to attract specific nationalities to regions that might suit them. In so doing, he literally shaped the colonial nation.

Forging Our Legacy states, for example,

"large numbers of Ukrainians settled in the aspen parkland of the Prairie provinces, a wide band of country that runs in an arc from southeastern Manitoba through central Saskatchewan to the Rocky Mountain foothills west of Edmonton.

"Today the route that these newcomers took is known as the Yellowhead Highway or Highway 16, also referred to as the Ukrainian Settlement Road."

Meanwhile, Canada's advertisements abroad brought hundreds of thousands of European immigrants to homestead on Indigenous land -- 400,870 in 1913 alone, 158,398 of them from Britain.

That was the peak flow before the law changed. Monthly numbers never again reached that high, not even during the 1950s, when 1.5 million Europeans immigrated to Canada over a decade.

Prime Minister Mackenzie King's unapologetic "White Canada" policy led to incidents like Canada refusing entry to the Komagata Maru, a private chartered ship carrying nearly 400 Punjabi citizens in 1914, at a time when the census reported only 2,050 people from all of India living in Canada.

Historians Irving Abella and Harold Troper charged in *None Are Too Many* (1983) that Canada also turned away most of the Jews who tried to immigrate during the Nazi era. Only 5,000 European Jews landed in Canada during the 12 years of the Third Reich, compared to countries that took in tens of thousands of Jews.

When asked how many Jews Canada would accept, an unidentified immigration agent was reported to have said, "None are too many."

Apart from those stains, Canada generally has a good reputation. In the 1960s and '70s Canada accepted about 100,000 refugees from Uganda, Czechoslovakia, Chile, Indochina, Vietnamese, Kosovo, and Cambodian and Laotian "boat people."

Mind you, "Candinavia" lives next to the U.S. elephant, just as Scandinavian nations live next to the giant Russian bear. When America rolls over, Canada could get squashed.

Still, American dissidents view Canada as a haven -- "Friendly, familiar, foreign and near" as the Ontario tourism ad used to say -- without some of the ugly U.S. policies, such as loyalty oaths and segregation.

Many such dissidents have settled in and near Nelson, B.C. By 1954, seven U.S. Quaker couples had moved to almost-abandoned silver mining town Argenta, B.C.

"Each of the seven families immigrated for different reasons," according to a University of British Columbia paper, "but all were responding to broader themes in Western society of the 1950s: Cold War tensions, McCarthyism, segregation in the American South, and the corporate takeover of family farms."

John and Helen Stevenson, in particular, left the States because California required them to sign loyalty oaths as a condition of employment as schoolteachers. They were soon joined in Argenta by objectors to the Korean war, and then the Vietnam war.

For a few years during the 1960s and '70s, U.S. immigration to Canada actually outnumbered Canadians emigrating to the States. Most of these immigrating Americans enjoyed soft landings (with the possible exception of deserters of colour) thanks to hard work by Canadians called by faith or

ethics to support the new arrivals, often spurred by religious or academic contacts.

"The American and Canadian Vietnam-era anti-draft movements got organized at the same time, around 1966-67," writes Jessica Squires. "Between 1967 and 1972, about 40,000 Americans immigrated to Canada, many of them war resisters. Many Canadians supported the war resisters. Others were not so welcoming..."

"The decentralized network of anti-draft groups, rooted in the New Left, was well-suited to the needs of a movement aimed at supporting American immigrants who could cross the border anywhere.

"Groups in the United States provided assistance in distributing materials and information; in Canada, lawyers, intellectuals, politicians and church groups helped pave the way.

"The groups and individuals shaped, and were shaped by, the perceptions held by war resisters of Canada and the Canadian anti-draft movement."

In other words, if Americans and Canadians both imagine that Canada is North America's Scandinavia--climatically cold, but communally caring--the country shifts to conform with our expectations.

So do demographics. Most Canadians seem to have thrown off "White Canada" in favour of humanitarian aid. Church and community groups joined together in the 1970 to sponsor refugees from Vietnam just as they are joining together to sponsor Syrian refugees now.

But back to the Americans. Many Canadian cities, especially Vancouver, experienced another wave of American immigration after 9/11, as New Yorkers started looking for safer places to raise their children.

The Canadian Supreme Court's 2005 ruling that struck down barriers to same sex marriage triggered another immigration wave as LGBTQ couples visited Canada to get married, and often returned to live here.

Americans looked North with envy again when Naheed Nenshi won Calgary's 2010 election and became the first Muslim mayor in North America. Mayor Nenshi belongs to the Ismaili faith, which brings other Ismailis out of war-torn countries like Sudan and settles them in Canada.

When news reports indicated that Conservative government didn't want to accept Syrian refugees, Mayor Nenshi called on Stephen Harper to honour Canada's longstanding reputation for open doors.

"No one is saying you bring in the refugees and that solves the whole problem," Nenshi told the CBC. "But regardless of all the rest of it, we have tens of thousands, hundreds of thousands of desperate people, and we have a country that's known as being a safe haven and we have to be able to do that."

Lately, Syrian and Somali refugees have been struggling through snowstorms to cross from the U.S. to some Manitoba farmer's field. Canada's humanitarian reputation lures them as much as racist Republican policies repel them.

To them, as to so many generations of Americans before them, the path to freedom appears to lead due North.

Image: flickr/mtsr

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