Immigration blues in CARICOM

By Lindsay Holder

Immigration policies and the status of immigrants in their host countries are today as they have been at other times in the past, current issues that provoke discussion all over the world. Barbados is no exception to the controversy surrounding immigration. It is important, however, to recognise from the outset that even though one government may adopt more liberal immigration policies and another government less liberal policies, the optimal approach is one that is based primarily on economic realities as well as on social considerations.

The potential of countries to derive significant benefits from immigration depends on the economic fundamentals of those countries. If we accept that the upper limit to the number of immigrants that a country can sustain depends on the geographical size of the country, its resources, and the use that is made of those resources, then, given the culture and expectations of its citizens, the country can realize significant long-term benefits through the use of immigration policies that are well formulated and implemented.

Typically, immigration benefits countries that are under-populated, have aging populations, or that have labour shortages in some economic sectors. For those countries, use of immigrant labour helps to sustain the engine of economic growth which, in turn, results in several indirect benefits. Of particular importance is that with economic growth, the countries are better placed to maintain their physical infrastructure, e.g., schools and roads, as well as to provide for new infrastructure.

For countries that have to resort to the use of immigrant labour at different times, social considerations may be taken into account in determining the composition of that labour. If homogeneity or sameness is highly prized, then countries will seek immigrants with the same racial, ethnic, or cultural traits of their existing populations. On the other hand, if multiculturalism or diversity is highly valued, less importance would be attached to the racial, ethnic, or cultural composition of the immigrants.

Where the immigration programmes are designed and implemented well, the countries do not have to bear any economic burden as a result of the immigrants. This would be the case since the tax revenues accruing to the government as a result of the economic growth together with the taxes the immigrants themselves are required to pay should be more than sufficient to offset the costs of public goods and services provided to the immigrants and their immediate dependents.

Immigration and Barbados

Where does Barbados fit into the picture? Barbados is a very small water scarce country, 168 square miles in area, that has experienced remarkable economic growth and improvement in the quality of life of its citizens since the end of the second world war. Within Caribbean Community (CARICOM) countries it ranks the highest on the United Nations Human Development Index, and out of a world wide total of 179 countries it was ranked 37th in 2008. Within the Americas for that year it was ranked third behind Canada and the United States, which were ranked first and second, respectively.

The progress of the country can be attributed to two primary factors. Firstly, there was and continues to be the visionary leadership of our premiers and prime ministers who have sought to make optimal use of our resources for the benefit of all citizens. Secondly, there has been the desire, matched by commitment, of Barbadians to succeed and to improve their standard of living. Because of those two factors, a partnership, though rocky at times, was forged between the two main population groups: blacks, that made up and continue to make up the vast majority of the population, and whites, who were and continue to be a small minority but who for the better part of the post world war two period either owned or controlled the bulk of the island's wealth.

In the last 10 to 15 years, Barbados was forced to rely increasingly on immigrants, mainly from Guyana, to satisfy the demand for labour in two important sectors: construction and agriculture. The labour shortages in the construction sector were a result of three factors: aging population, insufficient vocational training places for all the individuals who were desirous of becoming artisans, and an excess demand for labour that was so great that even training opportunities were available for all those individuals desirous of becoming artisans the demand still would not have been fully satisfied. In the agricultural sector the labour shortages were also a result of the aging population, but an additional factor also played an important role: the reluctance of most unskilled Barbadians to work in the sector because of the perceived back-breaking nature of the work and low wages.

As the number of legal or undocumented immigrant workers from Guyana increased over the years, the pattern of linkages associated with those labour flows changed. In the early years in the mid 1990s, the presence of Guyanese immigrant workers was to reoccur alone to Barbados, seemingly content to remit money to their homeland for the benefit of their dependents. Over the years the pattern changed, as many of the documented workers sought, either legally or illegally, to have their spouses and children settle in Barbados. In the early years the vast majority of the immigrants were of African-Guyanese ancestry, but recent years have witnessed an increasing proportion of Indo-Guyanese.

As the number of documented Guyanese immigrant workers increased, so too did the number of undocumented immigrants. This phenomenon can be explained by the fact that as the number of documented workers gradually increased over the years, other Guyanese believed that there were employment opportunities to be had and they acted on that belief by relocating to Barbados in search of work even if they remained in the island illegally.

On 5th May 2009 the Government of Barbados announced its new immigration policies with the focus being on managed migration, in contrast to the perceived notion that the immigration policy of the previous administration was an open door one. According to the Government, the main aim of the managed migration approach is to address the unacceptably continued
The three major benefits of managed migration

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high number of illegal CARICOM immigrants living in the island. Although no definitive statistics are available, it is generally accepted that the level of undocumented immigration is not as high as previously thought. However, it is thought that a significant number of individuals, primarily Ghanaians, have been living in the island for a substantial period of time, without legal status. In the case of CARICOM immigrants, they are not required to obtain a work permit for a specific number of years, as they are considered to be of the same nationality and therefore require no special authorization.

Across the length and breadth of Barbados, the number of undocumented CARICOM immigrants, primarily Guyanese, have been living in the island for a number of years. It is not uncommon for these individuals to have taken up residence in the country for a number of years, often working in the informal sector, without legal recognition. These individuals are often referred to as "illegal immigrants," and their presence has led to a number of challenges for the Barbados government.

The three major benefits of managed migration

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The Prime Minister of St. Vincent and the Grenadines, Dr. Ralph Gonsalves, and President of Guyana, Bharrat Jagdeo, have been vocal in their support for managed migration policies. They argue that such policies would allow for a more orderly and controlled flow of immigrants, reducing the burden on the hospitality and labour market sectors, and allowing for more effective integration and productivity. They also argue that managed migration policies would reduce the risk of exploitation and violence, as well as providing a more stable and predictable flow of workers.

In response to the announcement of the Barbados Government's proposed managed migration policy, the Prime Minister of St. Vincent and the Grenadines, Dr. Ralph Gonsalves, stated, "The Barbados Government has taken a responsible approach in developing its managed migration policy, and we fully support this initiative. This policy will ensure that Barbados can continue to benefit from a stable and skilled workforce, while also protecting the rights of the Barbados population." The President of Guyana, Bharrat Jagdeo, added, "We welcome the approach taken by the Barbados Government, as it will contribute to the stability and development of both our countries."
Various responses to Barbados’ announcement

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Comments on the Responses

The responses to the Barbados Government’s announcement could be said to have ranged from the ludicrous to simply emotionally charged.

For our part, we consider the response of the Prime Minister of St. Vincent and the Grenadines as nothing else but an emotional outburst that ignores the problems posed by illegal immigration for Barbadian society. He cited a case where the five and 18-year-old nieces of a Vincentian woman married to a Barbadian man had to leave Barbados within a seven-day period on the instructions of the Barbados Immigration Department. (Nation Newspaper of Friday, 15th May 2009.) Clearly, if they did not have legal status in Barbados why should they be allowed to stay? The fact that their aunt is married to a Barbadian man does not automatically confer legal status on them. That would be a dangerous precedent for the Barbadian Immigration authorities to set.

In contrast to that example, a comment suggests that the local cardiologist who refers her to the local cardiologist and he and his team agreed to waive their fees for the operation. The balance of the overall cost of the operation was paid for by her then Barbadian financial assistance.

At best, the assistance provided to the young lady by the Government of St. Vincent and the Grenadines could only be described as meagre.

The comments of Mr. Corbin and Mr. Jagdeo are both ludicrous and remarkable for various reasons. Many Afro-Guyanese, when asked why they believe and are willing to work as undocumented immigrants in Barbados state that, in addition to lower wages, the policies of the government and the hiring practices of most businesses tend to favour Indo-Guyanese. A 2000 Report on Minority Issues in Guyana prepared by an independent expert, Mr. Gay McDougall, for the United Nations Commission on Human Rights, corroborated the views expressed by some Afro-Guyanese immigrants in Barbados, and it also indicated that Guyana was an ethnically polarized country. The response of the Guyanese government was to describe the findings of the Report as being grossly inaccurate and extremely offensive.

Thus, we have a situation where Mr. Corbin, fully aware of the claims by Afro-Guyanese that they are being discriminated against in their home country, has not seen it fit to recommend that a CARICOM fact-finding mission should visit Guyana to investigate the claims. Yet, he has seen it fit to recommend that such a mission should visit Barbados to investigate claims of discrimination against undocumented Guyanese immigrants. With regard to the Government of Guyana, just as it has accused the Barbados Government of treating West Indians in a despicable manner, similar language was used to describe the McDougall Report.

One would have thought that rather than hastening to make all sorts of allegations against the Government of Barbados and Barbadians, the leaders of the two main political parties in Guyana would have adhered to the Biblical injunction “And why beholdest thou the mote that is in thy brother’s eye, but considerest not the beam that is in thine own eye?” How wilt thou say to thy brother, Let me pull out the mote out of thine eye; and, behold, a beam is in thine own eye? Thou hypocrite, first cast out the beam out of thine own eye; and, then shall thou see clearly to cast out the mote out of thy brother’s eye.” (St. Matthew Chapter 7, Verses 3 to 5, Holy Bible, King James Version.)

Mr. Branford’s quoted comments are baffling.

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Executive Recruitment

Our client, a medium-sized, regional financial services institution is seeking to recruit a Country Manager for its Antigua operations. The successful candidate will be part of a dynamic team which prides itself on success on a comprehensive range of high quality and competitive products and services and a commitment to corporate social responsibility in an environment that encourages individual creativity and optimal productivity. This is an excellent opportunity if you are highly motivated and results-oriented and would like to lead a dedicated, customer-focused team with a passion for excellence.

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AUDIT ■ TAX ■ ADVISORY

Leader of the People’s National Congress Reform (PNG/R), Robert Corbin.
Disconnect between comments and other issues

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since, to me, there is a disconnect between those comments and other issues raised in the rest of Mr. Branford’s column. Elsewhere in his column he stated “There is understandable concern about the demands that illegal Caribbean immigrants would put on the country’s social infrastructure.” It is important, however, to recognize that the Revised Treaty of Chaguaramas, mentioned in Mr. Branford’s column, does not provide for the free movement of CARICOM nationals across member states (more on that later). Thus, why should the current Barbadian Government postpone action on the issue of undocumented immigrants when that would only serve as an incentive for more individuals to take up illegal residence in the island? If we accept that action was necessary and had to be taken at some time, then it is difficult to agree with Mr. Branford’s comments with regard to illegal immigrants being viewed as convenient political pawns.

The derisive statement quoted from Mr. Singh’s article is perplexing since it is both consistent and inconsistent with other statements he has made in the past. In earlier Nation Newspaper columns he has railed against what he perceived to be the unfair and unjust treatment meted out by the Barbados Government and Barbadians to other CARICOM nationals, particularly Guyanese. Yet, in the Nation Newspaper of Sunday, 28th September 2008 the following comments were attributed to him: “Managed migration is quite acceptable particularly for small economies like Barbados. Freedom of movement (as in tourists) should not be confused with the freedom to live and work (immigration).” Then again in his weekly column of Friday, 21st December 2008 he stated, “I made it clear that while it remains the respected right of any CARICOM state to pursue a policy of managed migration, this should not be confused with a failure to honour the spirit and letter of relevant provisions of the Community’s treaty, and care should be taken to avoid hostility and human rights violations of affected individuals.”

If Mr. Singh is sincere about his comments on managed migration, why then the vitriolic, sarcastic, innuendo laden article in the Nation Newspaper of Friday, 8th May 2009 in response to the Barbados Government’s announcement of its managed migration policy? To date, as far as I am aware, he has not commented publicly on the findings of the McDougall Report.

(Th Analysis will appear in tomorrow’s Edition.)

History of the integration movement

(Immigration Blues in CARICOM) by Lindsey Holder continues from The Sunday Advocate)

Analysis

Both the President of Guyana and Mr. Singh have alluded to the 'spirit' of what CARICOM and CMAC are supposed to be all about. However, this spirit, one that should promote harmony and cooperation among CARICOM nationals, does not just emerge out of nowhere. To get a feel for this spirit, it is useful to take a look at the history of the integration movement as it relates specifically to the freedom of movement issues.

The West Indies Federation lasted from 1958 to 1962, and one of the divisive issues that had to be addressed was the freedom of movement issue. A later conference convened specifically to deal with the issue, it was agreed that the matter should be left in abeyance for a five-year period. That decision was further compromised by the later decision of the 1961 Inter-Governmental Conference to permit on a gradual and phased application of the principle, which would then not be fully implemented until 1975.

According to Gordon K. Lewis (Growth of the Modern West Indies, 1968, Monthly Review Press), that meant a victory for Trinidad in the Trinidadian view that the Trinidadian economy, being a person-importing economy and not, like Barbados, a person-exporting economy, could not permit an immediate influx of the island's immigrants to threaten existing wage standards and place fresh strains upon its embryonic social services. The fear of being swamped by the 'small island' unemployed, climatically though, was strong enough to outweigh a principle absolutely essential to any viable federation, and could perhaps only be overcome in Trinidad's run, as Mr. Barrow argued at the time, as the problem of freedom of movement was seen as a problem of 'regional, not national, full employment'.

Cassell, Franklyn, in an article in the Nation Newspaper of Sunday, 14th January 1968, referred to the 1965 proposal by the Premiers of Barbados and British Guiana, (both countries had not yet become independent), to form a free trade pact which would have provided for freedom of movement. According to Mr. Franklyn, the Barbados Advocate of 12th July 1965 reported that Dr. Cheddi Jagan, the Leader of the Opposition in British Guiana, argued against the pact, and the Advocate quoted him as saying, 'British Guiana would be across the region. In the post CARICOM era, mass migration within and out of the region began in the late 1970s. It was occasioned by the collapse of the Guyanese economy. When the then governments of those two countries, influenced by the political ideology of socialism, implemented economic policies that turned out to be disastrous, Guyana moved to block migration, putting the issue of freedom of movement once again on the table. The latter Treaty, the Revised Treaty of Chaguaramas signed on 5th July 2001 that officially put the issue of freedom of movement once again on the table. The latter Treaty provided for the establishment of the CSME, and the latter came into effect on 1st January 2006 with Barbados, Belize, Guyana, Jamaica, Suriname, and Trinidad and Tobago as the independent, but it was the Revised Treaty of Chaguaramas signed on 8th July 2001 that officially put the issue of freedom of movement once again on the table. The latter Treaty provided for the establishment of the CSME, and the latter came into effect on 1st January 2006 with Barbados, Belize, Guyana, Jamaica, Suriname, and Trinidad and Tobago the wards globalization, and some regional progress, the similarities between the English-speaking CARICOM countries and English-speaking CARICOM countries, does not just emerge out of nowhere. To get a feel for this spirit, it is useful to take a look at the history of the integration movement as it relates specifically to the freedom of movement issues.

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Barbadians should protect the gains they have made

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interest.

Nor can it now take root by demanding that Barbadians accept the burdens associated with unacceptably high numbers of undocumented immigrants within its borders. There is the notion, expressed by Mr. Singh, that because Barbados benefits significantly from the trade arrangements and services under the single market component of the CSME, it has "obligations to honour disadvantaged economies," including avoiding the path of hostility towards nationals of other CARICOM jurisdictions." (Nation Newspaper of 30th July 2009)

If we infer from Mr. Singh's writings that hostility is consistent with deportation of undocumented immigrants, then we need to recognise that there is no economic doctrine that says that a country is obligated to turn a blind eye to uncontrolled levels of immigrants living within its borders because it has a visible or merchandise trade balance surplus with the countries of origin of those undocumented immigrants.

Until such time as there is a demonstrable level of the playing fields in the various countries, Barbadians owe a duty to themselves to protect the gains they have made over the years, and they should therefore support any governmental policies that seek to promote managed migration. At the same time, it is also their duty to be civil, fair, just, and respectful to those immigrants who respect our valued traditions.

Comparisons with the European Union

In his weekly column of Friday 6th February 2009, titled 'Of Migration, Freedom, and Abuse,' Mr. Picke Singe made the following statement, "CARICOM needs to be reminded that it is also a community that would also be aware that while some pay lip service to the creation of a seamless regional economy, and talk about free movement, freedom, or allowing or adapting lessons from the European Union in the functioning of its administrative arm, the European Union, those countries they expeditiously evade recognising that freedom of movement within the EU is a fundamental right covered by regulations."

Mr. Singh's statement with regard to freedom of movement within the EU is true in principle, but grossly misleading with regard to its implementation. The facts are as follows.

Under European Community law, all citizens of member states plus those of Iceland, Liechtenstein, Norway, and Switzerland, with all combined being known as the European Economic Area (EEA), have the freedom to move within the EEA to work, study, or establish businesses. The right of freedom of movement is one of the four pillars of the EEA. The only exception is that member states can opt to place transitional restrictions on nationals of member countries joining the EU through the accession process.

As of the 30th April 2004 the EU was comprised of fifteen member states, and there were no restrictions on freedom of movement across the member states for citizens of those fifteen countries. On 1st May 2004 the member states comprising the EU were increased to twenty-five with the accession of two member countries: the new member states are now known as the A8 countries; the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia, and Slovenia; plus Malta and Cyprus. On 1st January 2007 a new membership was further increased to twenty-seven countries when Romania and Bulgaria (A2 countries) joined.

When the A8 countries joined, Britain, Ireland, and Sweden were the only three of the original 15 members that did not impose restrictions on citizens of the A8 with regard to freedom of movement specifically in relation to taking up employment. For example, Germany imposed the maximum seven-year transitional ban on nationals of the A8 countries with regard to the freedom to work and France imposed a five-year ban. In 2008, an additional eight of the old EU-15 member states allowed A8 nationals freedom of movement to seek jobs, but Germany, Austria, Belgium, and Denmark did not. In order to keep their labour markets closed to Poles and other A8 nationals between 2009 and 2011, these four countries declared that they expect "serious labour market disturbances, or serious threats for the labour market balance," and from allowing freedom of movement.

From 1st May 2009 EU A8 citizens should have gained equal rights to employment and state support across the EU, but it was anticipated that Germany, Denmark, Belgium, and Austria will retain their right to place restrictions on the freedom of movement rights of citizens of the A8 countries with the accession of the A2 countries.

With the accession of the A2 countries of Bulgaria and Romania on 1st January 2007, the then EU-25 nations could restrict the migration of Bulgarian and Romanian workers. All of the old EU-15 except Finland and Sweden restricted the freedom of movement of A2 workers, but most of the A8 nations in central Europe allowed it to enter and seek jobs. In the second half of 2008, most of the old EU-15 nations announced that they would prolong restrictions on Bulgarians and Romanians for another three years, but Greece, Spain, and Denmark joined Finland and Sweden in removing barriers to these A2 nationals.

With regard to the accession of the A2 countries, the debate that occurred in Britain and the subsequent decisions that were taken are instructive. As indicated earlier, Britain was one of the three countries that did not place restrictions on the working rights of citizens of the A8 countries when those citizens joined the EU on 1st May 2004. The government had projected that approximately 15,000 A8 citizens would migrate annually to Britain. However, by the end of July 2006, official data indicated that approximately 600,000 A8 immigrants had resettled in Britain. The total number was felt to be significantly higher due to large number of unregistered and undocumented migrants.

Thus, leading up to the membership of the A2 countries, there was considerable debate in Britain as to whether a similar situation should be allowed. It was for that reason that Britain decided to place restrictions on the working rights of citizens of the A2 countries. In 2008 a Migration Advisory Committee was established to make recommendations on whether the restrictions on A2 citizens should be removed or maintained. The Committee recommended that the restrictions should be removed, and the British Government accepted in full the recommendations. Professor Metcalfe, the Chairman of the Committee, said, "In this time of economic downturn it was sensible to make recommendations which would avoid any negative impacts on the current UK workforce. That is why we chose to advise that the current restrictions should stay in place, with only a modest increase in the number of temporary workers in agriculture."

The then Immigration Minister, Phil Woolas said, "It is essential that only those we need can come here to work and that is why we have decided to continue restricting the work that Bulgarian and Romanians can do here. This is a prudent decision that will ensure the UK continues to benefit from the positive economic contribution Bulgarians and Romanians make, while protecting British workers and ensuring the numbers coming here are managed in the national interest."

Two important points can be made. Firstly, the CSME Treaty does not provide for full freedom of movement with attendant work rights for CARICOM nationals in the EU except for the states other than their own. Secondly, even if agreement is reached on freedom of movement with the new member states of Barbados, or any other CARICOM member state, can reserve the right to place restrictions on temporary or permanent citizens of other member states with regard to the right to work provisions.

Summary

Generally, managed migration is the best approach that can be adopted as a result of the weakness regard to immigrant labour flows. It provides a high degree of certainty for the host country and it is also better suited for protecting the rights of the immigrants. In the week of 8th August 2006, the then British Home Secretary, Mr. John Reid, gave a speech on immigration, stating that he wanted to end the "dye, politically-correct notion that any少数民族 immigration is somehow a racist." We wish to end by modifying that statement to read as follows, "A Barbadian who raises the issue of illegal or undocumented immigration in the island is somehow a racist, xenophobic or xenophobic and the racist could be attributed to irrationality, self-interest, or ulterior motives."