

## British Columbians have role to play in helping immigrants adapt

BY ETHAN BARON, THE PROVINCE MARCH 26, 2011



Paula Carr from Collingwood Neighbourhood House spoke to The Province at the Wall Centre about the integration of immigrants into our society during the Metropolis 2011 Conference in Vancouver.

**Photograph by:** Ric Ernst, PROVINCE

---

Immigration is a two-way street that requires British Columbians to adapt to immigrants while immigrants are adapting to B.C., a major conference in Vancouver heard this week.

“Let’s not just look at how immigrants adapt but let’s also look at what’s happening with British Columbia systems and what’s happening with British Columbians,” provincial government immigrant-settlement director Catherine Poole told participants in a workshop at the four-day Metropolis 2011 conference, which finished Saturday. “We want to see governments and communities adapting their

services.”

Among the thousand-plus participants in the conference at the Sheraton Wall Centre were dozens from other countries, including speaker Paul Spoonley, a professor at Massey University in New Zealand. Spoonley said it didn't appear to him that anti-immigrant beliefs were rife in Canada, but he expressed concerns about their spread from the U.S. and Europe. "I've got to question how contagious they are for your country and mine," Spoonley said.

Soon after Spoonley's statement on anti-immigrant sentiments, Ontario MP Olivia Chow appeared by video, suggesting that such ideas have made their way into federal immigration policy. Canada has a "very checkered history" on immigration, welcoming Irish migrants and Vietnamese boat people, but importing Chinese labourers to build the railroads then sending them home, Chow said. The mindset that allowed the latter treatment is reviving in Canada, Chow said.

"We are seeing a drift towards seeing immigrants as economic units," Chow said. "We are seeing a drift away from seeing immigrants as nation-builders."

Immigration policy needs to focus on kids as the best mechanisms for the integration of immigrants into the Canadian economy and society, Chow said. "Their presence unites a community and a neighbourhood," she said. "They bring hope."

By going to school and using libraries and community centres, immigrants' children forge ties that allow for two-way evolution, Chow said.

"They become integrated and they mould to Canadian culture and our culture begins to evolve," Chow said.

At Collingwood Neighbourhood House in Vancouver, staff and volunteers seek to bring immigrants together with non-immigrants, and also to bring together immigrants from different nations of origin. "It may be something as simple as getting a group of people together to build a garden," said Collingwood's Paula Carr, who spoke at Metropolis on Thursday.

An initiative bringing together ethnic Chinese and Filipino seniors for exercise ran into language barriers, until a Filipino man who was a former teacher offered his skills. "They teach English in the exercise class, they teach English as they go dancing or go on trips within the community," Carr said.

Engaging immigrants in activities that allow them to contribute to their communities provides benefits on both sides of the two-way street, Carr said. "They feel good, they feel connected, they feel like they're helping people out, not just being helped, and that just advances our society," Carr said.

Members of the Renfrew-Collingwood community - which has seen English-as-a-second-language residents grow to 74 per cent of the population from 30 per cent in 25 years - have told Carr repeatedly that their lives have been expanded and improved through involvement with immigrants, she said. "How they describe it is, as our neighbourhood grew and changed, they grew and changed on a personal level," Carr said.

While immigration policy has focused on helping immigrants adjust, more resources need to be devoted to helping “host communities” adjust to immigrants, said New Zealand professor Spoonley. Key “gatekeeper” groups such as employers and teachers need guidance so they can contribute to effective integration of immigrants into society, Spoonley said. “They actually are the front line between the immigrant and the host society,” he said. “If they don’t adjust to immigrants, then that is one of the most significant barriers to settlement.”

Participants at Metropolis heard that politicians may exploit political divisions among immigrant groups by supporting particular sides to gain political power. Such behaviour can create new divisions in Canadian society, Carleton University professor David Carment told participants in the Wall Centre's packed Grand Ballroom. Political power-plays over diaspora groups shape Canada’s foreign policy, as government initiatives are framed to benefit nations or groups aligned with the interests of government or politicians, Carment said.

In guiding foreign policy, immigrants are a vastly underused resource, said John Monahan, executive director of The Mosaic Institute, a Toronto think tank. “When we are deciding foreign policy,” Monahan said, “why wouldn’t we seek the citizen expertise from foreign countries?” Canadians originally from conflict-torn nations have knowledge and understanding that can “contribute to peace-building and democracy around the world,” Monahan said.

[ebaron@theprovince.com](mailto:ebaron@theprovince.com)

© Copyright (c) The Province