

"The Islanders are a gentle, friendly people, but just not too used to a diversity of backgrounds and interests. I still get asked why I came to the Island, even though I have been here 8 years. What is more scary is that I have started to ask the same question myself to other newcomers!"
(Respondent #257)

Settling in Charlottetown and P.E.I.: Recent Settlers Speak

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Prince Edward Island (P.E.I.) is the only Atlantic province of Canada to register an increase in its population, albeit a slight one, in the latest intercensal period (1996-2001). Most of this demographic increase is attributable to the net influx of migrants, which includes Canadians (interprovincial migrants) and non-Canadians (international migrants). Between 2002 and 2003, the population of P.E.I. grew from 136,998 to 137,781, a net difference of +783. There were 1,374 live births and 1,246 deaths during the same period, a net difference of +132. In the same period, net international migration and interprovincial migration was +588.¹

However, if the facts speak for themselves, settlers certainly haven't.

P.E.I. has not yet had the opportunity to mount a full-scale investigation about what settlers make out of their immigration experience to Canada's smallest province. There exists considerable and up-to-date numerical data about immigration flows and characteristics; however, information resulting from a more *qualitative* study of recent immigrants, noting their *stories* and listening to their *voices*, has only been made available recently.

Looking at the immigration phenomenon "from the other end" obliges a radical change of focus. Instead of arguments relating to growing the population, expanding the pool of

skills and talent, and diversifying our culture, one comes across stories by newcomers about attempts at cultural adjustment, the challenges of seeking and securing employment, the appreciation or disappointment of welcoming experiences. Rather than immigrants, one mainly comes across settlers – individuals or families moving in *with* some intention of settling down, and settling in, seeking integration with – but not necessarily *in* – the host culture.

Regional background

Canada has seen a whopping 4% overall increase in its population in the 1996-2001 intercensus period; yet, within Atlantic Canada, only P.E.I. has registered a minimal population increase during 1996-2001; of the rest of Canada's provinces and territories, only Saskatchewan has registered a decline. The population of Atlantic Canada, 10% of the national total in 1971, was down to 7.5% by 2001, and is now less than 7%... and still falling.

An assessment of these statistical trends confirms that non-metropolitan centres of Canada are facing population declines and that a strategy to attract immigrants to such regions, if any such strategy exists, does not seem to be working very well. Atlantic Canada (while representing 7% of Canada's total population) is only attracting 1.3% of Canada's recent immigrants. To make matters worse, it is claimed that between one-third and two-thirds of all immigrants to the region move away

¹ Statistics Canada and P.E.I. 31st Annual Statistical Review 2004.

Table 1

Immigrants into P.E.I. – Population 5 years and over⁶

Period	1991–1996	1996–2001	2001–2004
External (foreign) migrants to P.E.I. (+)	792	765	496
External (foreign) migrants from P.E.I. (-)	281	373	100
Interprovincial migrants to P.E.I. (+)	13,670	13,072	8,987
Interprovincial migrants from P.E.I. (-)	11,644	12,890	8,461
Net change	+2,537	+574	+922

within two years. Their destination is predictable: the main urban centres of settlement.

This pattern acts as a vicious cycle. Toronto, Vancouver and Montréal are centres of multi-culturalism that attract immigrants; the presence of the latter in turn acts as a magnet to lure others, since family and friends impact where immigrants decide to settle down.² In contrast, regions like Atlantic Canada remain largely culturally “white” and poor;³ this in turn renders them less attractive to potential immigrants with different ethnic backgrounds, cultural traditions and linguistic capacities.⁴

Immigrants and settlers to Prince Edward Island: Recent trends

The 2001 Census data indicates 4,140 residents in P.E.I. reported as immigrants (of whom 1,310 born in the United States, 2,195 born in Europe, 410 born in Asia and just 225 from elsewhere). There had been slightly more persons registered as immigrants to P.E.I. in the 1996 Census exercise: 4,395 (of whom 1,255 born in the United States, 2,305 in Europe, 595 in Asia and 240 elsewhere)⁵.

Over recent decades, many thousands of potential “settlers” have moved in to (try to) settle in P.E.I., both from other Canadian provinces and territories; as well as from beyond Canada (see Table 1).

What the above statistics do *not* tell us is how many hopeful immigrants *actually stay and settle* in the province; and how many have come and gone (perhaps more than once) from and to the island. Settlers are mobile: probably the most mobile segment of any population. Tables like the one above are therefore likely to capture the same person or household more than once, especially if the retention rate is very low.⁷ Such gaps in P.E.I.’s knowledge base may one day be removed by means of longitudinal studies of particular respondent cohorts.

Charlottetown

Because of these specificities of geography and jurisdiction, a study of settlers to Charlottetown is very much a study of settlers to P.E.I. The size of the island (224 km, tip to tip) means that it is possible to commute to Charlottetown (or to the second largest city, Summerside) from anywhere on the island within one hour by car. Many newcomers to the province settle in, or close to, Charlottetown anyway.

The town itself is a unique settlement: P.E.I. was originally home to the Mi’kmaq people. The site of modern day Charlottetown was then settled by the French in 1720, became capital of a new British colony in 1769, was incorporated in 1855, and played host to the Charlottetown Conference discussing Confederation in 1864. Its most recent population count is of 32,245 (Census 2001); while Greater Charlottetown (with such suburban locales as Cornwall, Stratford and Winsloe, forming the Census Metropolitan Agglomeration) boasted some 58,358 residents (Census 2001) – some 40% of the island’s total population. It is a combination of downtown chic baroque residences, a university town (the

² “Family, Friends, Impact Where Immigrants Decide to Settle Down,” *The Guardian*, Charlottetown, September 5, 2003, p. A5.

³ John Ibbitson, “Why Atlantic Canada Remains White and Poor,” *The Globe and Mail*, August 20, 2004.

⁴ Manju Varma, *Issues of Diversity & Immigration in Atlantic Canada*, document prepared for the Department of Canadian Heritage, March 2001.

⁵ Source: Statistics Canada, <http://www.statcan.ca/english/Pgdb/demo35a.htm>.

⁶ Sources: Statistics Canada and P.E.I. 31st Annual Statistical Review 2004.

⁷ Definitive statistics on this are lacking. However, the staff at the P.E.I. Association of Newcomers to Canada (P.E.I.-ANC) have estimated that 75% of all refugees coming to P.E.I. leave before their second year, “having failed to become gainfully employed or otherwise successfully established here.” Smith Green and Associates, *Opportunities for Collaboration: Immigrant Settlement on P.E.I.*, submitted to P.E.I.-ANC, Charlottetown, July 2001, page 6.

University of Prince Edward Island [UPEI], the island's only university, has its campus there); a provincial capital (federal and provincial departments; Lieutenant-Governor's office, apart from a city with its municipal council); and the site of the bulk of the administrative and civic infrastructure befitting a provincial jurisdiction (including an airport, cruise ship passenger terminal, arts centre, hospital, churches, court house, movie theatres, shopping malls, gyms, swimming pools, farmers' market, technical college and, since last year, a public transit system) – all within an atmosphere that is distinctly rural, intimate and laid back. No other city in Canada comes close.

P.E.I., by far Canada's smallest province in area and population, but with its highest provincial population density, is where: (a) people can most easily commute to and from work irrespective of where they live and work in the province; (b) where provincial infrastructure – such as government agencies, the university, technical colleges, airport, hospitals, schools, are most within reach; (c) where contact with the provincial political establishment is most intimate and personal, explaining high voter turnout; (d) where cultural industries, church attendance, community involvement are amongst the most dynamic nation-wide; (e) where crime is low; (f) where roads are typically safer; and (g) where children can be safely allowed to play in public areas. Most islanders would take these, and similar, "quality of life" indicators for granted. But they can be critical assets in determining, or swaying, the decision to migrate.

Research objectives

One wonders: What do those persons who have recently immigrated to P.E.I. and settled in Charlottetown – and are still in the province – think about their settlement experience? Particularly, what are P.E.I.'s "selling points" to actual and would-be settlers from the rest of Canada and overseas? What attracts, and what frustrates, potential settlers to P.E.I.? And how do these responses tally with the background of the immigrant?

Such a study was actually undertaken in the fall of 2005 with the support of the Population Secretariat of the P.E.I. Provincial Government and UPEI. From an approximate 4,500 immigrants to P.E.I. between 1998 and 2003, an indicative sample of 320 respondents (just over 7.1%) answered a survey questionnaire. Almost

half the respondents (48.1%) live in Charlottetown or its immediate suburbs. 65.3% live in the island's 2 cities and 7 towns. The bulk of newcomers to P.E.I. are from other provinces in Canada; in fact, Ontario is the province where the largest number of respondents had been born (41 respondents) and spent most of their lives (75 respondents).

Research Results⁸

The 25 survey questions included a few open-ended questions that inquired about reasons for coming, reasons for leaving, and/or reasons for staying on P.E.I. These were couched in such a way as to elicit *stories* from respondents, encouraging them to provide a narrative for an answer.

Reasons for coming to P.E.I.

Respondents appreciate best the attractive quality of life that living on P.E.I. provides as the main reason for moving to the island. Being close to family, or to one's roots, is another key consideration. Availability, promise or prospects for employment or business follows, along with affordable housing or farm land, sedate tempo, rural-urban balance, lure of ocean and beaches, and relatively mild winters. A balanced, well thought-out reply would identify pros and cons thus:

"[The island is] safe; size is manageable; generally friendly; good air (except when south wind brings Scott paper smoke from Pictou, N.S.). Generally clean ocean; not too speedy; human – don't want to move again! Least attractive: pollution of ground water – amount of pesticides used here – most per person in North America." (Respondent #024)

In fact, when sharing their stories about moving to P.E.I., many respondents cite hassle-free security, lower crime, slower tempo, shorter distances and commuting times, "small town" atmosphere, lovely summers and affordable housing as the main "pull factors," while big city life, with its dirt, noise, crime and stress, is the key "push factor" enticing people to move to P.E.I.:

"The need to slow down, enjoying the peace P.E.I. had to offer was very attractive. Compared to Ontario, the air quality, slower pace of life and relatively safe environment for

⁸ A full copy of the settler survey study (85 pages) can be downloaded from <http://www.gov.pe.ca/immigration>.

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our children was very important. In selling my husband’s dental practice and our home, we were able to relocate here, renovating an older home we had purchased two years earlier.” (Respondent #064)

Reasons for Wanting to Leave P.E.I.

As if to prove that immigrants tend to be mobile, and not all are willing, or able, to settle down, 36 respondents (11.25%) indicated that they were “actively planning on leaving P.E.I.” at the time of the survey. Proportionately, the keenest to leave are non-Canadians, especially refugees and those in the “skilled worker” category. Proportionately, the keenest to stay are, not surprisingly, those born on P.E.I.

A variety of economic reasons are the most numerous inducers towards likely out-migration:

“It is [also] very expensive to live here and wages are dreadful – particularly if you’re single and like to live in a nice neighbourhood. The cost of everything is more than in any of the neighbouring provinces: higher taxes, higher costs for food, electricity, insurance (car and house), restaurant meals and alcohol.” (Respondent #166)

Yet, it is the alleged close-mindedness of islanders that is identified as the most common single explanation for the desire to relocate. P.E.I. society is seen as patronage driven, conservative society where “who’s your daddy” is more important than objective skill and merit, where privacy is eroded and where gossip is rife. By virtue of not being part of this webbed community, immigrants cannot and are not allowed to fit in. They feel that they are distrusted and discriminated against:

“I feel that, unless one is from P.E.I., he or she is looked down on. I have felt this while trying to gain and maintain employment. I have had employers tell me that they have received calls

complaining about the hiring of someone ‘from away’ in positions.” (Respondent #100)

Reasons for Staying on P.E.I.

Meanwhile, the respondents who have chosen (so far) to stay in P.E.I. disclose that the lure of P.E.I.’s quality of life remains paramount; it is followed closely by the availability of decent and attractive jobs: economic considerations are vital to immigrants for deciding whether to stay and settle on P.E.I. The charm of the place, and living in safe and welcoming neighbourhoods are also important, and follow next on the list. Affordable housing is next: an important decision for anyone wishing to become more rooted in a place. The existence of close family and friends comes in as a distant 8th in this case.

Returned islanders, realistically, report the smallest difference between their assessments for coming to and for staying on the island. Males remain more appreciative of employment availability; females remain happier with the rural charm of the island. The youngest age-cohort (20-29 year olds) remains most critical of what P.E.I. has to offer.

Connecting with the locals is important, for both economic and social reasons. Getting involved in, or introduced to local activities improves the likelihood of integration, overall satisfaction, and therefore settlement. Community brokers of some kind play a vital role:

“A couple of months after I arrived, the Welcome Wagon Lady came to visit. She was wonderful. She introduced me to another woman ... whose husband was with the RCMP here. They had moved from Ottawa. My foster-father was a Mountie. The three of us formed the Welcomers Club (now called the Friendship Club). We now have 30 or 40 members. They are all from away, except three of us who were born here and returned to live here. I am

enjoying living here. I do volunteer work for CNIB and the Library and my Church. I have one sister living here and my foster-mother as well as all my new friends.” (Respondent #081)

The difficulty of “fitting in” is well highlighted, but none more so than by an episode involving an immigrant operating for some time under a false, island name:

“I am well aware I’m not ‘from here’ without people pointing it out over and over. ... I once taped ‘Gallant’ over my last name on my work name tag and for those three months not one person turned their nose up at me, clicked their tongue or pointed out I did not have an island name.” (Respondent #103)

The main trade-off seems to be that of enjoying social and natural assets on a safe island province, including affordable housing, while forgoing employment or high wages, and bearing higher taxes:

“It’s really not so much a decision to stay as a lack of decision to move. ... On balance, this is not at all a bad place to live and we tend to take the lack of traffic and hustle, the clean air and water, and the fact of being able to meet friends by chance all over the Island, for granted. Until we visit somewhere else.” (Respondent #041)

Discussion

Prince Edward Island, like Canada, is a society largely built by immigrants: although, in those early days, they were referred to as “settlers.” When such settlers stopped coming to P.E.I. and Eastern Canada in the 1840s, it has allowed the existing population and its descendants to craft an island identity. The P.E.I. Population Strategy Panel called it “a strong cultural norm of sameness.”⁹ Islanders are today disproportionately WACS: White, Anglophone, Christian, Straight. Given the smallness of this community, and the intertwined roles and relationships, this island identity is bolstered by pervasive, robust and crosscutting family, kin, party political and Christian church networks.¹⁰ These networks provide a whole range of commendable supports and services that explain much of the island’s cultural vibrancy, its cohesiveness in relation to external “threats,” the resilience of its voluntary sector, the high level of voter participation in the polls.¹¹ It is this

complex set of connected homogeneity and rich social capital – supported by an accessible provincial government – that constitutes the island community and society. This is what different recent settlers have explained as finding bewildering, exasperating, cliquish, small-minded, petty, racist... and invariably difficult to plug into. No wonder settlers find themselves befriending other settlers.

On the occupational front, P.E.I. is a small economy with a labour force of just 76,800.¹² With this labour force, it has to run a comprehensive provincial infrastructure, contribute to the federal effort, maintain traditional economic industries that are primarily seasonal (farming, fishing, forestry, tourism) but still launch itself into the beckoning future (aerospace, bio-nutri-ceuticals, knowledge industries, alternative energy). This is a very tough sell, and some of the consequences, even when things go well, include significant seasonal employment, wages and salaries below the national average, and workers expected and obliged to be multi-functional rather than too finely specialized. Settlers express frustration about lack of suitable job openings, lack of full-time positions, and the inability to specialize.

In both these cases, the answer may lie in the appropriate level of response. Already in 1999, The Population Strategy Panel had advised (Recommendation 22, page vii) that:

“...established host communities are an attraction for newcomers and contribute to successful integration; accordingly, P.E.I. should place particular emphasis on working with established host communities in P.E.I. to attract new immigrants...”

Host communities constitute micro-societies that can welcome and help in the process of integration and eventual settlement. Churches, Friendship Clubs, Welcome Wagon are structures that already exist and operate at the local level.

⁹ The P.E.I. Population Strategy 1999 Panel Report: *A Place to Stay?*, p. 56.

¹⁰ Church attendance in Canada is highest in rural P.E.I. (51%), and lowest in Montréal (21%), according to a 2001 study: <http://www.christianweek.org/stories/vol14/no19/story4.html>.

¹¹ 73.7% of eligible islanders voted at the last federal election (23 Jan 2006), the highest in Canada. National average turnout was 65%. See: http://www.cbc.ca/P.E.I./story/pe_turnout_20060124.html.

¹² Statistics Canada data for December 2005. See: www.statcan.ca/english/Subjects/Labour/LFS/lfs-en.htm.

The Farmers' Market, the hybrid arts community, and specific workplaces act effectively as magnets for suitable employment and social integration. People deciding to come and stay in P.E.I. must be helped to connect. If P.E.I. and its people are really committed to welcome newcomers, then these newcomers are to be deliberately roped in to participate in island life, facilitating their eventual settling in and settling down.

Conclusion

While having its limitations, this study hopes to have provided a human face to recent immigration into the province and given a much-needed voice to recent immigrants. Moreover, the survey report is laden with perceptions, opinions and suggestions addressed at a variety of levels and institutions. It quotes liberally from respondent comments, allowing

the reader to reach his or her own conclusions as to what they imply and suggest. It reinforces the wonderful attributes of Charlottetown and P.E.I. – affordable housing, stunning landscape, pulsating civil society, slower tempo, easier access to provincial infrastructure, safety, ideal place for kids to grow, (re)connect with family, attract “urban refugees” or retirees – while recommending various improvements.

Should P.E.I. develop appropriate employment strategies for would-be immigrants, and effectively address the more subtle issue of social exclusion, it could become an unbeatable choice settlement destination.

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