

# Ethnic strategy undermined by racial slurs

*Immigrant-bashing attitudes and a growing economic gap for racial minorities neutralize political outreach efforts to new Canadians.*



TORONTO, September 26, 08: This week's [immigrant-bashing comments by Calgary Centre Conservative candidate Lee Richardson](#) highlighted the contradictions of his party's strategy to court voters from recent immigrant groups.

Stephen Harper and multiculturalism secretary of state Jason Kenney have worked hard to court "ethnic" voters with grand gestures, public announcements, and hundreds of community meetings. They're working against long-standing impressions that the Conservatives are anti-immigrant, however. These impressions are reinforced both by daily experience and by comments like these, which regularly seem to come from Conservatives.

Even Harper's ethnic diplomat Kenney has had his problems. In 2000, he suggested that ["overheated Sikhs" may be "playing the race card" during the general election that year](#). He later apologized for the comment.

Now Harper is facing demands that Richardson resign or be fired as the party's candidate in Calgary Centre for suggesting that immigrants are prone to commit crimes. "Look at who's committing these crimes ... They're not the kid that grew up next door," Richardson told the Calgary newsmagazine Fast Forward Weekly.

"Particularly in big cities, we've got people that have grown up in a different culture," he said.

"And they don't have the same background in terms of the stable communities we had 20, 30 years ago in our cities and don't have the same respect for authority or people's person or property." Richardson later apologized, saying he was only talking about a "small minority" of people.

Many new Canadians and members of ethnic minorities see comments like these as representing the true feelings of Conservatives, rather than being merely "gaffes".

There is a "perception that the Tories, especially the people behind the new Conservative Party, the old Reformers, are not friends of immigration or immigrants," according to Mohammed Boujanene of the Canadian Arab Federation. He acknowledges "They did make an effort to recruit candidates from different ethnic groups... but at end of day it's not the outreach strategy that counts, it's the policy." Immigrants, he says, feel negative impacts of Conservative policy constantly in everyday life.

"They put forward legislation and policies that are completely against new immigrants and racialized minority groups." The cancellation of the Court Challenges program, anti-terrorism laws, and recent changes to the Immigration and Refugee Act all contribute to a sense of rejection for many. He says it doesn't help that Harper is linked to the US Republicans and that Harper's position on Israel is so "completely biased" that even when Canadian citizens were ducking Israel bombs in Lebanon, in 2006, Harper would not call for a ceasefire.

The controversial changes to immigration under the Conservative budget "were completely oriented toward one goal, the business agenda, and bringing more temporary workers to this country. We're turning our backs on inclusion and on helping families reunify. They gave the minister of immigration incredible power to cherry-pick immigrants, which could open the door to racial profiling," a practice, he says, that the Conservatives have promoted with their security policies. In recent years, immigrants "from the Arab part of the world are waiting longer," says Boujanene. "Refugees coming from Palestine and Iraq have a tougher time." Canada was chastised by the United Nations High Commission for Human Rights in 2007 for its treatment of refugees, he says.

A further insult many members of racial minorities felt, he says, was the government's refusal to attend the UN conference on anti-racism in Durban.

The Conservatives' outreach to immigrant communities clashes with their record in office, according to Boujanene. In the last election, the Conservatives said they would correct the problems foreign-trained professionals are having getting credentials. "The only thing they did was to open a registry service," he says. "It's sad to have people with medical training driving taxis when we don't all have access to a family doctor."

"We tend to hear more about access to jobs than anything else," says Amy Casipullai, of the Ontario Council of Agencies Serving Immigrants. She regularly hears frustrated stories of "internationally trained professionals finding barriers when they try to enter the work force here. They say, 'Canada lied to us. I came here because I was told I could get job in my field.'" She says the Conservatives have achieved some success in immigrant communities with their political initiatives but, "There seems to be tremendous frustration with labour market access."

The other big concern, she says, is delays in sponsorship for family reunification. "There is tremendous frustration around the fact that there are delays, especially delays from certain parts of the world and not others," but she admits some of these problems predate the Conservative government.

The Conservatives' refugee policy, however, is their own, and like Boujanene, she thinks it sends powerful negative signals to immigrants. "There is tremendous concern that Canada's abandoned refugee principles. We seem to have taken a step backward."

The rate of poverty for immigrant families is higher than for non-immigrants, and Boujanene says the gap is growing. A 2007 Wellesley Institute study called *The Colour Of Poverty* showed that, from 1980 to 2000, the rate of poverty for Canadians of European descent was reduced by 20 percent, while for racial minorities the gap increased by 360 percent. "The Harper government is not doing anything to alleviate these problems," he says.

"If Harper is attracting any one, it is most likely the most conservative members of any given community," said Gurpreet Kaur Sodhi, a multi-cultural policy consultant of Punjabi descent who lives in Toronto. "In some case I would say the attraction is only skin deep and goes away once people become aware of the true cost of the Harper policies."

Kaur Sodhi says that while Harper has recognized the political importance of ethno-cultural communities, he "continues to disrespect" them, citing the immigration changes hidden in the budget implementation act, Bill C-50 as a prominent example.

"Recent research and Census data show that immigrants tend to be underemployed, earn less than their Canadian-born counterparts and experience high levels of contingent employment. Immigrants and refugees from diverse communities experience higher levels of poverty than their Canadian-born counterparts. People from diverse ethno-cultural and faith communities, including those born in Canada are over-represented among Canada's poor. The Harper government has not addressed the racialization of poverty."

### **Related individuals, organizations and significant events**

[Immigration changes contradict Conservatives' ethnic outreach](#)

### **Harper Conservative vs. Public Values Frame**

Racial profiling / Inclusion

Symbolic political outreach / Addressing the colour of poverty

### **Links and sources**

[The Colour Of Poverty, The Wellesley Institute, 2007](#)

[Tory candidate blames immigrants for crime, The Canadian Press, September 26, 2008](#)

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