

# The Parent and Grandparent Sponsorship Program Reforms: The Consequence of a Neoliberal Shift

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RCIS Working Paper No. 2015/5

June 2015

**SERIES EDITOR**

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***RCIS Working Paper***

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ISSN: 1929-9915



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## **Abstract**

Since the formal enshrinement of Canada's immigration objectives in the *Immigration Act of 1976*, Citizenship and Immigration Canada has been tasked with the responsibility of balancing the demands of the labour market and reuniting immigrant families. Policy changes in the 1990s suggest that neoliberal ideology, which promotes market economy principles, has become increasingly influential in the shaping of Canadian social policies and practices, and has had significant implications for immigration policy and admission trends (Arat-Koc, 1999). The prominence of neoliberal logic in immigration policy has resulted in the framing of immigrant value in terms of economic contributions. As a result, Family Class admissions have been the target of criticism, particularly sponsored parents and grandparents, who are absolved of meeting the point system criteria and are therefore perceived as having little ability to contribute to the economy (McLaren & Black, 2005). This paper explores the extent to which recent reforms to the parent and grandparent sponsorship program are a reflection of, and maintain, the prevailing neoliberal discourse that subordinates Family Class immigrants, especially parents and grandparents, conceiving of them as burdens to the state as opposed to contributing Economic Class entrants. This economic framework provides an incomplete picture of the contributions that sponsored parents and grandparents make to Canada. Furthermore, the insufficiency of empirical data supporting the claim that parents and grandparents are a potential burden on the state suggests that the recent reforms are an explicit expression of fear rather than fact (VanderPlaat, Ramos & Yoshida, 2011). This paper concludes with future research suggestions that lend themselves to redefining "contribution" to incorporate social, cultural, and indirect economic contributions, to provide a more nuanced conception of the value of sponsored parents and grandparents.

## **Editor's Note**

This paper received the Best Term Paper Award for 2014-15 of the Master's Program in Immigration and Settlement Studies, an annual award granted by the Faculty of Community Services. The award was delivered by Dean Usha George at the 10th Anniversary Gala of the ISS MA Program, May 1, 2015.

## **Introduction**

In September 2011, Immigration Minister Jason Kenney announced the impending initiation of Phase I of the Action Plan for Faster Family Reunification, emphasizing that the objective of the redesign of the parent and grandparent sponsorship program was to cut backlog and subsequent wait times, to reunite families quicker with their loved ones. However, in a conference in May 2013, preceding his announcement of Phase II, Kenney's rhetoric was less concerned with reuniting families, and more concerned with "deal[ing] with some of the abuse of [the government's] generosity in the parent and grandparent sponsorship program" (qtd. in CIC, 2013). In particular, Kenney alluded to the additional social welfare and healthcare costs that sponsored elderly immigrants incur against the state. Despite Canada's obligation to family reunification, as specified in the *Immigration Act of 1976* and reaffirmed in the revised *Immigration and Refugee Protection Act of 2002*, the government's commitment to supporting certain groups of sponsored relatives has limits (Kelley & Trebilcock, 2010). The new reforms maintain

previous provisions to ensure family reunification, but the regulations imposed on the sponsor are far more stringent, emphasizing economic capacity, directly corresponding with the government's concern for ensuring that sponsored immigrants do not become dependent on the state.

Despite being initially framed as a response to the overwhelming backlog of applications, the imposed changes to the parent and grandparent sponsorship program over-emphasize the responsibility of the sponsor as the sole supporter of the sponsored relative. When the state distances itself from any responsibility for sponsored relatives, financial or otherwise, this calls into question the value that it places on family reunification. To adequately understand the reforms to the parent and grandparent sponsorship program, an exploration of the previous decade of Family Class reformations is necessary. In this paper, I will explore the recent history of immigration policy changes, particularly in the 1990s, which were characterized by diminishing opportunities to immigrate within the Family Class due to an emerging neoliberal ideology, which emphasized fulfilling labour market needs as the purpose of immigration. From this historical context, the new reforms will be contextualized, and analysis will illustrate that neoliberalism has prevailed and directed immigration policy reforms and admission trends into the current period. Finally, I will challenge the narrow economic logic that operates within the pervasive neoliberal paradigm to suggest that a concept of contribution based solely on an economic calculation neglects and devalues the more complex contributions that parents and grandparents make to their families and larger communities. Most importantly, empirical evidence supporting arguments both for and against the sponsorship of parents and grandparents is limited at best. Future research needs to adopt a more holistic approach to contribution to effectively weigh the costs and benefits of parent and grandparent sponsorship, and ensure that policy reforms are informed by the actual experiences of those most impacted.

### **Immigration Policy in Transition**

Despite the long-history of immigration to Canada, the goals of Canadian immigration policy were not formally articulated until the *Immigration Act of 1976*. The primary objectives of Canadian immigration were to maintain a strong and viable economy, reunite families, and fulfill international obligations with respect to refugees. Immigrants were categorized based on the objectives they fulfilled: Economic Class, Family Class, and Humanitarian Class respectively (Kelley & Trebilcock, 2010). However, what was crucially unclear and led to much debate was the proportion of entrants that would represent each of these newly established categories. The debates regarding the proportion of each class of immigrant were largely couched in economic considerations. In the mid-1970s, the Canadian economy was in turmoil, and beginning in 1981, Canadians experienced the most severe recession since the Great Depression in the 1930s. By the early 1990s, Canada was leading other industrialized countries with unemployment rates at 12 per cent, interest rates at 15 per cent, and government budget deficits rapidly increasing (Kelley & Trebilcock, 2010). In response to the economy, immigration levels plunged and immigration admissions became a salient issue in the restructuring of the welfare state (Arat-Koc, 1999). The escalating government deficits in the early 1990s led to "policies of 'fiscal restraint' with severe cuts

to social spending” (Arat-Koc, 1999, p. 34). This form of restraint is indicative of an ideological shift toward neoliberalism, which promotes the primacy of the market economy and emphasizes “fiscal restraint, smaller government, reduced social spending and increased privatization” (McLaren & Black, 2005, p. 12). In relation to immigration policy, neoliberalism legitimizes the privileging of immigrants who are selected under the point system, a mechanism for defining an immigrant’s worth based on human capital criteria – language proficiency, education, skills, and work experience – that indicate a high potential for economic adaptability and labour market integration (VanderPlaats, Ramos & Yoshida, 2012).

The paradigm shift to align immigration policy more closely with the economy by emphasizing the ability of immigrants to settle and integrate quickly into the labour market is prevalent in major policy changes and admission trends of the 1990s. Prior to the 1990s, Family Class admissions dominated immigration, accounting for 46 per cent of the total immigrant admissions, as compared to independent immigrants and their dependents who made up 25 per cent. However, the government made significant amendments to the Family Class in the 1990s, namely limiting the sponsorship of children in 1992 to those under the age of nineteen and abolishing the “assisted relatives” class in 1993, which included extended family relatives (Kelley & Trebilcock, 2010). The government argued that the changes signified an attempt to more effectively capture the concept of the family; the unspoken intention, and more direct result, was restricting the potential for excessive growth in the Family Class. In 1994, Citizenship and Immigration Canada released *Into the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: A Strategy for Immigration and Citizenship*, emphasizing the move away from obligations to Family Class admissions and toward greater admission of independent immigrants who showed more potential for economic contribution. This sentiment was reaffirmed in a 1996 immigration panel report, *Not Just Numbers: A Canadian Framework for Future Immigration*, which recommended improved measures of assessment, such as standardized language tests and minimal levels of education, to ensure that immigrants could readily adapt and integrate into the labour market upon arrival (Kelley & Trebilcock, 2010). In addition, the report implied that immigration outside the Economic Class would be burdensome to the recovery of the Canadian economy, and it advocated for “self-supporting immigrants” in order to benefit and help grow the Canadian state (Arat-Koc, 1999).

*The Five Year Immigration Plan of 1995-2000* also placed greater emphasis on attracting immigrants based on human capital criteria, assuming that such immigrants demonstrate a greater propensity to settle quickly and integrate seamlessly into the Canadian economy. Furthermore, Family Class entrants were criticized, and a sentiment emerged that family sponsorship should be perceived as a privilege rather than a right (DeShaw, 2006). While family reunification has consistently been a pillar of immigration throughout Canada’s history, even before it was formally enshrined in policy, the shifting emphasis toward self-sufficient immigrants and their value to the labour market has exaggerated the tension between Canada’s obligation to the family and labour market needs.

By the end of the 1990s, the Economic Class represented 58 per cent of total immigrant admissions, while Family Class admissions had drastically declined to 27 per cent (Kelley & Trebilcock, 2010). The shift in admission trends clearly conveys the connected nature of the different immigrant categories, and the downsizing of the family class reveals the preferential treatment of immigrants who meet the point system admissibility criteria (Simmons, 2010). The admission categories are interconnected such that as the Economic Class increases, the Family Class must decrease to meet, and not exceed, annual immigration targets. The prevalence of labour market principles as the driving force for immigrant admissions subordinates the Family Class and devalues the category's worth to the state. Despite both labour market fulfillment and family reunification being objectives of immigration policy, the prevalence of neoliberal ideology establishes a hierarchy, preferring economic immigrants over Family Class entrants. This preferential treatment places the categories in tension with one another, and advocates of both classes emerge in popular discourse.

### **Emerging Discourses**

In response to the impact of neoliberal values on immigration policies in the 1990s, two discourses emerged: the first, the economist, that echoes valuing immigrants based on their ability to economically contribute; and the second, the humanitarian, that advocates for family reunification based on broader conceptions of contribution, and moral concerns. From an economist perspective, immigration for the purposes of family reunification is not in the best interest of the state by virtue of sponsored immigrants' diminished capacity to contribute to the economy and potential stress on the services of the welfare state (Collacott, 2013; Grady, 2012). Sponsored immigrants are viewed as less likely to be able to contribute to the economy based on the assumption that they do not satisfy the basic criteria of the point system and are therefore unable to become independent, economic immigrants. From a humanitarian perspective, family reunification is not an economic concern but a moral one. Canada is obligated to fulfill its commitment to international conventions that stipulate the rights of immigrants to join or be joined by family members. Furthermore, an immigrant is a member of a family, and the family unit as a whole, is fundamental for the well-being of newcomers to Canada based on the contributions that family members make beyond the labour market: namely social, cultural and emotional support (VanderPlaats et al., 2012).

The tension between expansive humanitarian consideration for family reunification and the prohibiting economist perspective has created the foundation for dispute over the value of family reunification generally, and the sponsoring of parents and grandparents particularly. The parent and grandparent sponsorship program is the most vulnerable to criticism because of sponsored elderly immigrants' perceived cost to the "public purse" in terms of additional healthcare and social assistance expenditures (Collacott, 2013). The economist perspective emphasizes that parents and grandparents possess reduced human capital, specifically limited language skills and education, and are unlikely to fully participate in the Canadian labour market, thus contributing only to the growing fiscal burden of Canada's ageing population, rather than helping to alleviate it (Grady, 2012). In sharp contrast, advocates for the sponsorship of parents and grandparents argue that measuring immigrants' worth in narrow economic terms fails to

appreciate the cultural, social and psychological contributions that immigrants make to their family and larger community (Neborak, 2013). Furthermore, humanitarians argue that the economist discourse obscures the role that sponsored elderly immigrants play in supporting family settlement, which includes providing necessary domestic assistance to allow mothers the opportunity to enter the paid workforce (McLaren & Black, 2005).

An appreciation of the changes to immigration policy and the shifting emphasis on economic immigrants at the expense of Family Class entrants is important for understanding the redesigned parent and grandparent sponsorship program, and for assessing what the newly reformed program reveals about the nature of neoliberalism in Canada. Do the current reforms diverge from previous policy changes, suggesting that the fiscal restraint experienced in the 1990s was simply characteristic of a temporary policy fluctuation? Or do the current reforms reflect neoliberalism as a prevailing ideological policy shift?

### **Current Reforms: A Reflection of the Past**

In 2011, the Government of Canada developed and implemented Phase I of the *Action Plan for Faster Family Reunification* with the aim of responding to the increasing backlog and subsequent wait-times for the sponsorship of parents and grandparents (CIC, 2011b). However, the changes that followed disproportionately emphasized the income and ability of the sponsor to financially support a sponsored elderly immigrant, rather than merely reducing the backlog and reuniting families more quickly, as the policy redesign initially advocated. There is evidence to suggest that beyond the backlog of nearly 160,000 applicants, and wait-times reaching nearly 8 years, the government was motivated by concerns of the ‘cost’ that elderly sponsored immigrants place on the state. Findings from the Longitudinal Immigrant Database (IMBD) suggest that immigration category impacts income later in life and that the sponsored parent and grandparent category reflects low employment earnings, while receiving high provincial supplements directly following the ten-year sponsorship period (Dempsey, 2005). From the same IMBD data-set, one year after the sponsorship period ends, nearly 19 per cent of sponsored parents and grandparents receive social assistance, a drastic increase from the less than 2 per cent who receive assistance a year after landing in Canada (CIC, 2012). Furthermore, in a memo released just three months prior to the initiation of Phase I of the *Action Plan*, estimates suggested that elderly immigrants cost the government upwards of \$3 billion annually in healthcare. Given that elderly immigrants, on average, report earnings of less than \$15,000 a year, these figures were cause for concern and were certainly motivating factors for reassessing the parent and grandparent sponsorship program (Cohen, 2012).

Phase I initiated an unprecedented “freeze” on all new applications for the program for a period of 24 months while the government consulted with stakeholders on ways to ensure that the program “is sustainable in the future” (CIC, 2011b). The measures implemented in Phase II, following the temporary pause, align with neoliberal principles, particularly the emphasis on reduced social expenditures, which was indicative of policy changes in the 1990s. Beyond being informed by neoliberal principles, the language

employed by the government to explain the reforms establishes immigrant parents as antagonistic to Canadian taxpayers, reinforcing the economist discourse of elderly immigrants as a drain on the system (McLaren & Black, 2005).

Prior to 2011, sponsors had to meet an annual income minimum in accordance to the Low Income Cut-Off established by Statistics Canada. The reforms have increased the minimum required income by 30 per cent in an effort to “ensure *sponsors* can adequately provide for their sponsored parents and grandparents and... reduce the net costs to the *Canadian taxpayers*” (emphasis added, CIC, 2014). The 30 per cent increase, combined with the explanation, exaggerates the neoliberal emphasis on self-sufficient immigrants so as to diminish state support and responsibility to sponsored elderly immigrants. The emphasis on sponsors’ responsibility, versus the necessity to protect the Canadian taxpayers, suggests that sponsors are not taxpayers. This is problematic, especially as the second new qualifying criterion is that the sponsor must be able to verify his/her income for a three year period, and proof must be provided by the Canada Revenue Agency (CRA). The more stringent verification is intended to “ensure sponsors have income stability and have *contributed* through taxes” (emphasis added, CIC, 2014). This contradictory sentiment creates a dichotomous relationship between “immigrant” and “Canadian”, despite many immigrant sponsors being Canadian citizens: the Government of Canada wants to offload the complete cost of sponsored elderly immigrants onto the sponsor to alleviate the burden on “Canadian” taxpayers; yet the sponsor must *be* a taxpayer to assume the responsibility of a sponsor. In this respect, the sponsor contributes to the Canadian welfare state, but the services are exclusively for “Canadian” taxpayers, not sponsored relatives.

Also prior to 2011, sponsors signed an agreement to support a sponsored parent or grandparent for a period of ten years. The new reforms have extended the sponsorship period to twenty years to “ensure that sponsors – *not taxpayers* – remain responsible for any welfare or supplementary health care costs” (emphasis added, CIC, 2014). The extended period explicitly expresses the perception that sponsored parents and grandparents are likely to become burdens on the state, and reinforce the sentiment that the Canadian taxpayer must be protected from shouldering the cost of sponsored immigrants. This effectively relieves the government of providing any social services, income supplements or allowances, or housing subsidies, as sponsored parents and grandparents are ineligible for these benefits within the sponsorship period (Koehn, Spencer & Hwang, 2010). Lastly, the ten year, multiple entry ‘Super Visa’ that was introduced in 2011 to provide parents and grandparents with a means to stay for an extended period with family while the parent and grandparent sponsorship program was temporarily paused, will be a permanent fixture of the revised program (CIC, 2014). The Super Visa allows parents and grandparents to remain in Canada for up to 24 months before they have to reapply again for an additional 24 month period. This fixture represents another mechanism for eliminating the potential cost of elderly sponsored immigrants on the state. In order to qualify for the Super Visa, sponsors must provide income evidence, similar to the sponsorship agreement, but in addition, the sponsor must provide proof of Canadian medical insurance for the sponsored immigrant, effectively alleviating the state of any additional healthcare costs (CIC, 2011a).



The new reforms to the parent and grandparent sponsorship program, as detailed above, clearly demonstrate an emphasis on neoliberal principles: they displace state responsibility onto the sponsor, reducing state expenditures; they emphasize the economic self-sufficiency of sponsors, privileging those who are most economically advantaged, as they are least likely to default on the sponsorship agreement; and provide an alternative to sponsorship, the Super Visa, that similarly upholds the primacy of the sponsor to provide support, rather than the state. Beyond indicating that neoliberalism has become a permanent ideology shaping immigration policy, the new reforms frame sponsored elderly immigrants as being in conflict with the “Canadian taxpayer”, assuming that all sponsored elderly immigrants are non-contributing, burdensome members of society, and suggesting that sponsors frequently fail to fulfill their obligations. The narrow emphasis on economic contribution only, and the connotations that sponsors, despite contributing to taxes, are outside the realm of the “Canadian taxpayer”, has significant consequences for the fulfillment of Canada’s obligation to family reunification, and the way in which we “value” the family.

### **Consequences: Neglected Worth**

By narrowly focusing on the economic value of immigrants as defined by labour market participation, sponsored parents and grandparents are framed as an economic deficit, neglecting and demeaning other forms of contribution. Recent reforms adequately reflect the economist discourse previously discussed, with parents and grandparents being represented as an additional burden on an already stressed social welfare and health care system by their inability to be self-sufficient as a result of diminished human capital (Grady, 2012). This discourse implicates the government in increasingly negative attitudes towards elderly immigrant parents and grandparents, placing them in direct conflict with the host society comprised of “Canadian taxpayers”. It effectively creates a political division between “Canadians” and “immigrants”, despite the fact that many immigrant sponsors are Canadian citizens, and sponsored parents and grandparents could potentially be future Canadians. In addition, the new reforms also create a hierarchy among newcomers to Canada: those who are economically advantaged are afforded the privilege of sponsorship; those who are struggling and deemed economically insufficient are disqualified from sponsoring parents and/or grandparents. In other words, income will determine which immigrant families will be reunited with their parents and/or grandparents, and those that will remain apart (Root et al., 2014). This creates conditions for inequality and destabilizes the presumption that the family unit is an entitlement for all, not only for those who are economically advantaged (Neborak, 2013).

Beyond the immediate consequences experienced by those impacted by the new reforms, there are broader implications for the narrow economic conception of worth and contribution. While from an economist perspective, the estimated figures for social assistance and health care costs incurred by elderly immigrants are staggering and cause for reasonable concern, there are other, less easily measured forms of contribution that should be, at the very least, given some consideration and attention

when determining reforms that will greatly impact the lives of Canada's continuously growing immigrant population.

In 2011, the then Immigration Minister, Jason Kenney, said that "...there have to be practical limits to our generosity. We have to calibrate... limits based on our country's economic needs, our fiscal capacity. There is no doubt that the people who are coming who are senior citizens, they have much, much lower labour-market participation and much higher levels of utilization of the public health system" (qtd. in VanderPlaat et al., 2012, p. 80). VanderPlaat et al. (2012) question the extent to which empirical evidence genuinely justifies such sentiments and the economic principles that drive them. The authors suggest that the economist conception of contribution, and the assumption that sponsored parents and grandparents are burdensome to the state by virtue of their lack of economic contributions, are based on selective evidence and misleading generalizations that suggest if immigrants are not obviously enriching Canada via the labour market then they are useless to Canada (VanderPlaat et al., 2012; McLaren & Black, 2005).

The absence of a model for measuring non-economic contributions, and the assessment of integration outcomes based solely on income indicators, ignores the contributions made by sponsored parents and grandparents that cannot be shown by income-tax. These contributions include: the provision of child care, assistance with family business activities, emotional support, cultural education, volunteerism, maintenance of social cohesion, and housekeeping (VanderPlaat et al., 2012; Neborak, 2013; Koehn et al., 2010). Often neglected is the indirect impact some of these non-economic contributions have on the economy, notably the provision of childcare. Neoliberalism has placed the onus on the family for providing childcare, as the responsibilities of the state have effectively retreated from the welfare state ideology (Root et al., 2014). The burden of child care, traditionally placed on women, is transferred to elderly family members due to inadequate state-provided childcare institutions and the increasing necessity for a dual-income household (Zhou, 2012). In this respect, sponsored parents and grandparents provide necessary care for their grandchildren to support their adult immigrant children's entrance, and continued participation, in the labour market. Unfortunately, this contribution under the current economic model remains hidden and devalued (Zhou, 2012). As strong proponents of the economist perspective, both Patrick Grady (2012) and Martin Collacott (2013) challenge the capacity of activities such as child care or homemaking to generate any sufficient income. But these are assumptions, not empirical facts, and they generate more misconceptions about the contributions and "costs" of sponsored elderly immigrants. There remains a need for the creation of models that more adequately capture the complete picture of contributions made by sponsored immigrant parents and grandparents.

The justification for the new reforms to the parent and grandparent sponsorship program should be representative of all contributions made, incorporating all integration indicators: social, cultural, political, and economic. The limited economic perspective

does a great disservice to the numerous contributions that sponsored elderly immigrants make in the home and the community.

### **Conclusion: Future Research**

Neoliberalism stresses the importance of the economy, and as such, it creates a bias in presuming that economic contributions are the principal indicator of value to a country. This conception of contribution is limited and problematic for sponsored elderly immigrants who are less likely to be employed than other immigrants, but are also less likely to have other contributions counted (VanderPlaet et al., 2012).

Future research should more adequately account for contributions that operate outside the economic discourse but nevertheless have indirect implications for the economy; most notably, the role of grandparental child care. To adequately assess the contributions of sponsored elderly immigrants, and to fully illustrate a cost-benefit model, non-economic contributions must be measured and incorporated. In addition, the International Social Security Agreement, which allows immigrants to transfer their accumulated pension entitlements from their home country to Canada, should be expanded to incorporate the dominant source countries for immigrants to help alleviate sponsored immigrants' dependence (Preston et al., 2013). Finally, a better appreciation and recognition of the integration and settlement of immigrants as family units, not individuals, is necessary. All of these future research suggestions require the collection and analysis of data to allow for the creation of adequate models that show how families work together to achieve their economic, social, and cultural goals in Canada (VanderPlaet et al., 2011; Koehn et al., 2010).

The current reforms to the parent and grandparent sponsorship program are a consequence of the prevailing neoliberal discourse that assesses an immigrant's worth based on economic contribution. This framework as applied to elderly immigrants provides a seriously distorted conception of what these immigrants contribute to society. The consequences of these reforms are felt solely by the immigrant population, segregated by those who are economically viable and those that are not, which becomes the determining factor of family reunification. As a primary social institution, the family unit deserves much more research attention to justify new reforms and to achieve a more nuanced understanding of contribution.

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