

# DON MILLS: Immigration blind spot imperils Nova Scotia



Corporate Research Associates CEO Don Mills: “The reality is that only four per cent of the population in this region was born in another country. The average for Canada is more than five times higher. It is 22 per cent.” (INGRID BULMER / Staff)

For the past 30 years, our company, Corporate Research Associates Inc., has been tracking the attitudes and habits of Atlantic Canadians — last year we interviewed more than 18,000 — and it is evident to us the majority point of view is often not adequately represented in public debate about important issues.

Too often, a well-organized and vocal minority dominates public discussions and skews media coverage. This column examines the silent majority opinion on one important issue: the population challenge facing Nova Scotia and the entire Atlantic region.

Like the rest of the region, Nova Scotia’s population has been largely stagnant over the past decade. This is mainly the consequence of an historically weak provincial economy, particularly since the 2009 recession.

The average annual GDP growth in Nova Scotia over the past six years has been only slightly above one per cent, on average, well below the rate of inflation over this period.

Nova Scotia's GDP growth has trailed all provinces in 20 of the last 22 years, only coming ahead of New Brunswick in the past two years. Little wonder Nova Scotia was dead last in terms of population growth in the last census.

In this economy, job creation is all but impossible, as is the ability to provide wage increases sufficient to keep pace with inflation, let alone get ahead. This is not an environment that attracts new residents to Nova Scotia, particularly those of working age.

At the same time, Nova Scotia suffers from two important demographic trends that will have negative consequences for the provincial economy.

The aging population will significantly decrease the number of working-age Nova Scotians by 2030. Indeed, there are expected to be 100,000 fewer people of working age within the next 15 years.

Last year, for the first time, there were more deaths than births in the province. This trend will continue.

In other words, Nova Scotia cannot count on its natural birth rate to replace the workforce in the next 15 years. Like the rest of the region, we will have to rely on attracting other Canadians and/or immigrants to keep the workforce in a healthy position.

This is where the majority point of view comes into play. The current majority view of immigration — specifically on the perception of cultural diversity and the number of immigrants needed to better serve the economic needs of Nova Scotia — is a clear barrier to the future economic success of the province.

Our research indicates the majority of Nova Scotians believes the province is either more diverse or equally diverse, in terms of population and culture, compared with other parts of Canada.

The reality is that only four per cent of the population in this region was born in another country.

The average for Canada is more than five times higher. It is 22 per cent.

When asked, nearly 70 per cent of Nova Scotians favoured either keeping immigration at the current level (41 per cent) or having fewer immigrants (25 per cent).

Nova Scotia currently attracts and retains a little more than 2,000 immigrants from other countries annually. The Ivany report recommended an increase to 7,000 a year. The current rate of immigrant attraction is far below what the province will need to replace the tens of thousands of Nova Scotians who will be leaving the workforce over the next 15 years.

Clearly, Atlantic Canadians and Nova Scotians will need to change their opinions toward immigration and become more welcoming and accepting of immigrants from other countries.

Overcoming the lack of experience with living in a diverse population will take time.

Nonetheless, it is critical that the private sector step up and become a better advocate for a more open and welcoming environment for new immigrants to Nova Scotia and lead the way by developing its own strategies to hire and integrate qualified immigrants into the economy.

In the case of immigration, every effort is needed to better inform Nova Scotians of the impending population crisis and to change attitudes toward the value of attracting people from other countries. The majority point of view must change on this important issue for Nova Scotia to have a better economic future. It is as simple as that.

**Don Mills is chairman and CEO of Corporate Research Associates. Follow him on Twitter @DonMillsCRA**