

# Foreign workers present a moral dilemma

## Canada has the capacity, and obligation, to integrate guest workers

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Germany is experiencing a crisis of multiculturalism.

Last summer, Thilo Sarrazin, board member of the German Bundesbank, hit a populist anti-immigration nerve with his controversial book accusing Muslims of not integrating into German society. In an effort to calm the escalating debate, German President Christian Wulff countered that "Islam belongs to Germany." Bavaria's influential president, Horst Seehofer, retorted that Germany "does not need additional immigration from other cultural regions," supposedly because immigrants from Turkey and Arabic countries are not integrated. Finally, Chancellor Angela Merkel, Germany's chief policy-maker, pronounced multiculturalism an "utter failure."

These events led Canadian commentators to speculate that Canada's policy of increasing its temporary foreign workforce will result in a similar conclusion.

The problem Canada faces, however, is not the potential failure of multiculturalism, but the moral dilemma of exploiting the labour of 400,000 foreign workers currently in Canada. These people contribute to Canadian society and our economy, but are denied the right to live among us.

Critics comparing Germany and Canada are ignoring the vastly different political traditions and cultural policies of the two countries.

As a traditional immigration country with a commitment to diversity, Canada has the capacity to integrate newcomers. Germany never possessed, or even aspired to, policies that would permit large-scale permanent immigration.

Germany's current crisis has its origin in the country's guest worker program, which existed between 1953 and 1973 and provided needed labour for Germany's postwar economic reconstruction. As the name "guest workers" indicates, the German government never intended these migrants to become future citizens.

The German guest workers program permitted foreign workers to accumulate "postnational" economic and social rights over time that could not easily be revoked. The longer the workers lived and worked in Germany, the greater their entitlements to permanent residency.

From a human rights and social justice perspective, these "postnational" rights appropriately reward workers for the contributions they make to a society.

Millions of migrants decided to stay and bring their families to Germany. With no assistance in place to

ease their integration into German culture, these migrants remained at the margins of society for generations.

The lesson that the Canadian government has learned from Germany is that people who are wanted as workers, but not as citizens must be denied the possibility to acquire rights that would allow them to stay in the country. Accordingly, Canada's temporary foreign workers program was designed from the very start to prevent what happened in Germany.

Currently, Canada's temporary foreign workers program restricts work permits to such short periods and rigid employment conditions that foreign workers never acquire extended rights, including the right to stay. Furthermore, Canada's immigration system carefully separates highly skilled from low-skilled foreign workers. Highly skilled workers are invited to permanently immigrate to Canada via the points system.

The solution to Canada's moral dilemma is either to end the temporary foreign workers program -- at great economic cost -- or to extend permanent residency to all temporary foreign workers, regardless of their skills.

Canada can afford to extend postnational rights to these workers because, unlike Germany, it possesses the experience, political will and cultural infrastructure to accommodate newcomers in society.

Harald Bauder is an associate professor in the Graduate Program of Immigration and Settlement Geography at Ryerson University in Toronto

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