

We Need More Nova Scotians

Nova Scotia's population at the end of 2009 is the same as it was five years ago – about 938,000 – and only 4,000 greater than it was 10 years ago. Some might feel that a stable population is not a big worry but the total numbers conceal two big problems.

First, our population is getting older. The number under age 18 has decreased from 211,000 to 176,000 in the last 10 years while those 65 and older have increased from 125,000 to 148,000. Birth rates are much lower than they were a generation ago. Every year there are fewer children in our schools. Meanwhile there is growing demand for seniors housing and long term health care. The population of the province as a whole will decline by 13,000 over the next ten years, and 31,000 over the next twenty years. Over the same twenty years the working age population will reduce by 100,000.

Secondly, the population is increasingly urban. In the last five years, Halifax has grown by 12,000 residents while the rest of the province has lost the same amount. That 12,000 people is about the size of Truro. On present trend, rural Nova Scotia will lose 25,000 people over the next ten years. That is how many people live in Lunenburg County today.

Neither of these trends is unique to Nova Scotia, or Canada. China's rapid economic growth has been accompanied by vast migrations from the countryside to the cities. With few exceptions birth rates have been dropping all over the world.

An aging and declining population will be less and less able to support itself economically and socially. It is a most unattractive direction. There are only three ways it can be mitigated – higher birth rates, higher immigration, or lower emigration. A number of jurisdictions have invested heavily in promoting greater family size; none has achieved more than minor improvements. So this paper will focus on attracting and retaining, where policy initiatives can make a dramatic difference.

Attracting

Nova Scotia has been a laggard in attracting immigrants. It is well known that the larger and resource rich provinces have done well in immigration. Less well known is the all star performance of Manitoba. On a similar population base it attracts more than four times as many immigrants as Nova Scotia.

Because it has done so well in attracting them its school-age population is stable and its workforce is growing. Winnipeg is expanding but so are many rural communities. (Appendix A provides lots of statistics)

During the same period, the unemployment rate in Manitoba has moved below 5%. Manitoba has no equivalent of the employment boom from the Alberta oil sands, so the clear lesson is that immigration has improved employment prospects for all Manitobans.

This success is no accident but rather the result of clear thinking about the demographic challenges faced by every province, ambitious goals, and a well defined strategy for achieving them. A quick visit to the website tells a lot about how engaged they are:-<http://www.gov.mb.ca/labour/immigration/index.html>.

The essential starting point is to build a consensus around the importance and urgency of rapidly increasing our immigration numbers. Governments have done a poor job of explaining the threats – particularly to rural communities – if we do not grow our province's population. Attracting and retaining newcomers will require sustained effort by government, businesses, and communities:

1. Toronto has dozens of ethnic groups with sufficient numbers to form a local community. Nova Scotia does not. We will have best success by focusing on a small number of countries, preferably already represented, so that the arrivals will feel socially comfortable and supported. Manitoba gets 59% of its immigrants from Philippines, Germany, India, and China, and three quarters from its top ten sources.
2. Newcomers will often have different customs, faith traditions, eating habits, and language skills. We must welcome these as valuable additions to our communities.
3. The welcome mat must be visible even before immigrants arrive. Advance communication can help people find housing, arrange schooling, and access to health care, find employment, and secure recognition for foreign credentials. Where bridge training is needed it can be planned before arrival. Schools and post-secondary institutions must provide programs that help families to integrate quickly.

4. Businesses and other employers must provide leadership in identifying needed skills. Extensive use of the Provincial Nominee Program can focus on getting those skills.
5. There will be bumps in the road. Not everything will work as planned. But in general new arrivals will be very glad to be here and can provide new energy to our communities.
6. An especially good opportunity lies with the thousands of university students from other provinces and countries, if they can be persuaded to take up residence after graduation. As discussed in the Scholar Dollars posting, out-of-province students could be encouraged to remain by creating provincial income tax credits for the tuition they paid.
7. A good target would be to get to 10,000 immigrants per year by 2015. Manitoba is heading for 20,000.

Retaining

Retention is an issue for both new arrivals and those already here. Sometimes people need to leave to find work elsewhere, but in many communities that is no longer the primary reason. In fact, job opportunities often go unfilled in resource industries, health care, and information technology because qualified young people, including those with roots in the communities, cannot be attracted to fill them.

Here, for example, is what has happened since 1991 in:

Queen's County:

	1996 Census		2001 Census		2006 Census		Percent Change 1996 - 2006
	#	%	#	%	#	%	
Total Reporting	12,420	100.0	11,725	100.0	11,215	100.0	-9.7
By Selected Age Groups							
Pre-School Age (less than 5 yrs)	665	5.4	485	4.1	435	3.9	-34.6
Elementary/ Secondary School Age (5-19 yrs)	2,265	18.2	2,100	17.9	1,825	16.3	-19.4
Labour Force Ages							
20-34 yrs	2,430	19.6	1,835	15.7	1,520	13.6	-37.4
35-54 yrs	3,610	29.1	3,690	31.5	3,425	30.5	-5.1
55-64 yrs	1,315	10.6	1,490	12.7	1,815	16.2	38.0
Seniors							
65-74 yrs	1,085	8.7	1,100	9.4	1,150	10.3	6.0
75+ yrs	1,045	8.4	1,025	8.7	1,030	9.2	-1.4

The drop in school-age children, though very rapid, is outpaced by the reduction in young workers—just the people who would be raising young families if they were still there.

Similar patterns can be observed for every part of the province. Even Halifax, which has considerable benefit of immigration, has had a declining population of young workers:

Halifax County

	1996 Census		2001 Census		2006 Census		Percent Change 1996 - 2006
	#	%	#	%	#	%	
Total Reporting	342,965	100.0	359,185	100.0	372,855	100.0	8.7
By Selected Age Groups							
Pre-School Age (less than 5 yrs)	22,455	6.5	19,935	5.6	18,210	4.9	-18.9
Elementary/ Secondary School Age (5-19 yrs)	66,950	19.5	68,995	19.2	66,355	17.8	-0.9
Labour Force Ages							
20-34 yrs	86,770	25.3	80,600	22.4	80,005	21.5	-7.8
35-54 yrs	104,980	30.6	118,110	32.9	119,980	32.2	14.3
55-64 yrs	26,610	7.8	32,020	8.9	43,340	11.6	62.9
Seniors							
65-74 yrs	20,075	5.9	21,555	6.0	24,255	6.5	20.8
75+ yrs	15,135	4.4	17,980	5.0	20,725	5.6	36.9

What is needed to improve on this track record?

Jobs

Communities need an economic base. Jobs will always be a prerequisite to maintaining or growing population. But government often focuses on the wrong opportunities. For most of rural Nova Scotia, the best opportunities will be resource-based—forestry, fishing, mining, and perhaps energy. (Some readers will be outraged by the omission of agriculture. The long decline of the hog industry, in spite of large infusions of taxpayer money, is no reflection on the skills or hard work of the farmers. Rather it reflects an economic context which favours producers elsewhere. The same is true for most other agricultural products outside of supply managed areas – dairy and poultry.) Manufacturers can also be competitive and should be supported, but they will have to have the skills and ingenuity to be competitive in export markets. Call centres and low wage processing do not represent a viable economic foundation.

Services

In a country and world with considerable labour mobility, skilled workers and their families have a choice about where to live. Their choice will be heavily influenced by the availability and quality of schools and health care.

Families

Decisions are taken not only by the “principal applicant” but also by the spouse and are sometimes influenced by kids.

Fun

Evenings, weekends, and holidays are very important to families. A great asset for all parts of Nova Scotia is the easy access to natural environments for hiking, boating, camping, etc. But there also must be baseball and soccer fields, skating and curling rinks, theatres and cinemas, pubs and restaurants, churches and clubs.

Halifax

Halifax needs to succeed in its own right, but its success is important to every other part of the province. If it grows, there will be increased demand for goods and services produced in other parts of the province. More importantly, it can provide accessible leisure and entertainment possibilities that are not available in smaller centres.

Success

It may seem trite to observe but success breeds success. Look at the numbers for some important Nova Scotia and Manitoba communities:

Nova Scotia	2001	2006	Manitoba	2001	2006
Halifax	359,111	372,679	Winnipeg	619,544	633,451
CBRM	105,968	102,250	Brandon	39,716	41,511
New Glasgow	9,432	9,455	Steinbach	9,227	11,066
Truro	11,457	11,465	Winkler	7,943	9,108

As noted above, the flat numbers for Truro and New Glasgow mask the decline in young families. And CBRM is just one of several communities already in serious difficulty. Meanwhile, not just Winnipeg but also a number of secondary Manitoba communities are showing excellent growth. How much better would it be for Truro or New Glasgow to have had that kind of growth? It provides the demand and tax base for more community services and facilities which will in turn help to attract and retain more residents.

Conclusion

Having more Nova Scotians never makes the list of most pressing issues because it evolves so slowly. But every time a school closes or a medical facility can not be staffed or a vital transportation link is lost, it is because there are not enough people to use them. We continue to be among the least densely populated countries in the world—in an area only twice the size of Nova Scotia, England has over 50 million people.

We must aggressively pursue immigration strategies that can benefit from Manitoba's successful example. Immigration can not solve the problem of low birth rates for ever. In the very long term we must find strategies that will encourage larger families.

Join the conversation about We Need More Nova Scotians

I am convinced that this topic is of extraordinary importance but also that I may be missing some important aspects. Please contribute your thoughts:

1. Do you agree that it is important to keep our province's population stable or growing?
2. Are there other good strategies to attract and retain Nova Scotians?
3. A recent Statistics Canada release suggested that Atlantic Canada is much less diverse than the rest of the country. Would you welcome greater diversity in your community? Would others?
4. Where does the leadership have to come from?
5. Do you agree that a bigger Halifax is good for the rest of the province, and likewise that Halifax is better off if the rest of the province is growing rather than shrinking?

APPENDIX A

Nova Scotia attracted 2,651 immigrants in 2008, up from 1,595 in 1999. This was a useful improvement but still far below Nova Scotia's proportionate share of Canada's 247,000 total. Based on our 3 % of total population, we would have had 7,500 immigrants.

Manitoba, which has less than 4% of Canada's population, grew from 3,725 immigrants in 1999 to 11,221 in 2008. It has now set a goal to reach 20,000 immigrants by 2016. Instead of stagnating, the population of the province has grown by 47,000 over the last five years, (78,000 over the last ten years) to reach 1,220,300 at the end of 2009. The City of Winnipeg represents more than half of Manitoba's population (vs. 40% of Nova Scotia for Halifax) and has received most of the immigrants. But the parts of the province outside of the city have also benefitted, growing by 20,000 over the last five years (33,000 over the last ten years).

The population has aged much less rapidly. The number of children under 18 is virtually level over the last five years. The working age population has grown by 40,000, while Nova Scotia's has remained stagnant. With the further planned increases in immigration, the workforce will also continue to grow. So the economy will grow as well as the ability to provide services for the growing population of seniors.

Demographics

Population by Selected Age Groups – Nova Scotia

	1996 Census		2001 Census		2006 Census		Percent Change 1996 – 2006
	#	%	#	%	#	%	
Total Reporting	909,280	100.0	908,005	100.0	913,465	100.0	0.5
By Selected Age Groups							
Pre-School Age (less than 5 yrs)	55,855	6.1	47,455	5.2	42,045	4.6	-24.7
Elementary/ Secondary School Age (5-19 yrs)	186,270	20.5	179,315	19.7	165,830	18.2	-11.0
Labour Force Ages							
20-34 yrs	199,555	21.9	171,400	18.9	162,000	17.7	-18.8
35-54 yrs	268,955	29.6	290,705	32.0	285,570	31.3	6.2
55-64 yrs	79,540	8.7	92,570	10.2	119,805	13.1	50.6
Seniors							
65-74 yrs	64,780	7.1	66,645	7.3	73,300	8.0	13.2
75+ yrs	54,345	6.0	59,925	6.6	64,920	7.1	19.5