

LEACOCK ON IMMIGRATION

It is often pointed out that because Stephen Leacock was a British Imperialist, he was opposed to the idea of non-British immigration into Canada. There are many instances where Leacock argued this exact stance. However, his views on immigration were not consistently anti-immigration. Leacock made a passionate argument in favour of immigration in *My Discovery of the West*. This book was a reflection on his 1936 lecture tour of western Canada. It won the 1937 Governor General's Award for non-fiction. When Leacock wrote *My Discovery of the West*, the laws governing Canada's immigration were the tightest in our history: Canada welcomed only 11,000 migrants in 1936 and our anti-immigration laws were "not seriously contested by any group"¹². Against a tide of anti-immigrant public opinion, Leacock changed his mind from his previous stance. He marvelled at the foreign-language newspapers and migrant community organisations in Western Canada. He said it was a mistake to think that migrants posed a threat to Canada. Leacock called migrants an "asset" who—along with their families—should be welcomed to Canada "in floods." His rebuttal to people who based their opposition to migrants on economic reasons is still worth considering today:

The fundamental fallacy in all such thinking is that the immigrant takes away the other man's job. The truth is the other way. The tide of immigration raises the home waters.¹³

Leacock's stance is consistent with the prevailing view of economists today. As a 2017 *New York Times* report noted, "there is no clear connection between less immigration and more jobs. Rather... immigration increases economic growth, improving the lives of the immigrants and the lives of the people who are already here"¹⁴.

To be clear Leacock was only promoting diversified European immigration, including Jewish people who were actively being denied entry into Canada. The book made no mention of Canada's—and the western world's—long-standing discriminatory immigration policies against visible minorities. This omission cannot go unnoticed. However, Leacock's willingness to embrace rather than admonish non-Anglo, non-Franco migrants at a time when they were being rejected by the government and by the general public can also be seen as a small step on the path towards Canadian multiculturalism. As philosopher Charles Taylor said, the "tremendous success" of our initial embrace of non-Anglo, non-Franco European migrants helped pave the way for the 1962 deracialisation of Canadian immigration policy. This, in turn, helped lead to the multicultural Canada of today¹⁵.

12 Kelley, Ninette and Michael Trebilcock. *The Making of the Mosaic: A History of Canadian Immigration Policy*. U of Toronto P, 2010, p. 221.

13 Leacock, Stephen. *My Discovery of the West*. T.H. Best Printing Company, 1937, p. 185.

14 Applebaum, Binyamin. "Fewer Immigrants Mean More Jobs? Not So, Economists Say." *The New York Times*, 3 August 2017. www.nytimes.com/2017/08/03/us/politics/legal-immigration-jobs-economy.html

15 "Charles Taylor's clear-eyed vision of our distress coupled to a deep-rooted celebration of humanity." *The Sunday Edition*, CBC Radio One, 22 January 2017, <http://www.cbc.ca/radio/thesundayedition/the-trudeau-vacation-saying-no-to-chemo-marjorie-harris-retires-charles-taylor-on-trump-1.3941092/charles-taylor-s-clear-eyed-vision-of-our-distress-coupled-to-a-deep-rooted-celebration-of-humanity-1.3941096>



DISCUSS

1. In an editorial on CBC Indigenous, Doug Cuthand discusses some current hostilities towards migration. He makes the point that:

It's kind of late to complain about immigration. There are 35 million people in Canada and only 1 million of us are members of the original First Nations. What difference will a few more make?¹⁶

 - a) Is it possible to discuss immigration without understanding that all non-Indigenous people are migrants or descendants of migrants?
 - b) How did the Treaties pave the way for immigration into Canada? Have these Treaties been fully honoured?
2. In 1936, Leacock changed his opinion on immigration after having met many communities of new Canadians in the west. What does his experience tell us about the importance of getting to know people before forming opinions about them?
3. Leacock reverted back to his anti-immigration sentiments near the close of World War II. In 1944 he wrote that "North America can easily take in two million people a year and we need them all British"¹⁷.
 - a) What reasons do you think Leacock would have had for making this statement at the close of World War II?
 - b) If Leacock were alive today, how would you counter this statement to him?
 - c) How should we judge Leacock for such views? Discuss the dynamics of "presentism," the principle of using today's values to judge people from the past.
4. The people of Mariposa in *Sunshine Sketches* are white, British, and Protestant. However, University of Toronto Professor of English Dennis Duffy points out that "Mariposans themselves hold no firm identity, but parade instead as Irish on St. Patrick's Day, Scots on St. Andrew's, English on St. George's, and so forth. Extend the ethnic range and you bump into our "multi-culturalism"¹⁸.
 - a) Do you think Canadians in general embrace diverse cultures?
 - b) How can we as Canadians work to better-embrace diversity of all kinds?

16 Cuthand, Doug. "It's kind of late to complain about immigration," says Indigenous writer Doug Cuthand. CBC.ca, 4 March 2017, www.cbc.ca/news/indigenous/opinion-indigenous-perspective-on-immigration-1.4008365

17 Leacock, Stephen. "Woman's Level." In *Last Leaves*, McClelland and Stewart, 1945, p. 101.

18 Duffy, Dennis. "A Humorist's Humanist World View." *The Whig - Standard*, 4 March 1989. <http://search.proquest.com.cyber.usask.ca/docview/353354710>