



The points system

Canada's construction industry, among others, has long hoped for changes by the federal government to the complex points system that new immigrants must meet to qualify for permanent residency.

Citizenship and Immigration Minister Diane Finley advised the Canadian Construction Association (CCA) in a recent meeting the government has no immediate plan for major changes in the points system required for permission to stay in Canada, despite the industry's need to meet current skills shortages.

While Ottawa has introduced steps extending the time temporary immigrants can remain in Canada, the existing points requirements will remain—at least for now—she told the CCA delegation.

"What we have not seen anything on—and this is where we're continuing to press—is the permanent side," says Jeff Morrison, director of government relations for the CCA.

Finley made clear that changing the system isn't "a big priority for her right now," he said in an interview. "So we're a little bit puzzled as to why they're so reluctant to move on the permanent side."

On the issue of undocumented workers, no new initiatives are contemplated, a position the minister based on national security concerns and fairness. "They don't want to put in place any sort of amnesty or expedited process to allow illegal workers to stay here," Morrison said. "Again, we were a bit disappointed in that."

Immigration Canada also faces a backlog of close to 800,000 cases awaiting decisions. But it has recently shown movement on the side of temporary workers in Canada, Morrison noted. "They've agreed to extend the time that a temporary foreign worker can stay in Canada from one to two years."

Ottawa has also eliminated a lot of red tape and the time required to get a 'labour market opinion' from the department of human resources. This means it will take a shorter time to bring in temporary foreign workers.

All sectors of industry are really facing this labour crunch, Morrison stressed. "So we're just sort of sitting back and continuing to put pressure on."

CCA President Michael Atkinson said it's possible Ottawa may be considering fast-tracking the process of temporary workers or students already in Canada applying for permanent residency. But such steps have not been confirmed, though they were touched on in the 2007 federal budget.

"It appears that what's going on right now is that the federal government has made a number of partly significant, substantive changes to facilitate the temporary foreign worker process," he said. "But on permanent immigration, other than the change to allow them to stay in the country under this new process, there hasn't really been any change."

The provinces, meanwhile, help fill the void through their provincial nominee programs. Workers with a job offer from a Canadian employer can receive 15 points toward the minimum 67 required under the points system.

"If they're already here working on a temporary basis for an employer, then they've got a sponsoring employer," Atkinson noted.

In a letter to the CCA last month, the immigration minister said the government recognizes a growing skills shortages in domestic construction and agreed immigration can complement the domestic labour supply in meeting these shortages.

"However, launching a review of the points system at this time would be premature," Finley wrote. "It would be beneficial to wait until a more complete picture can be drawn around the results of implementing a human capital model for skilled worker selection."

Awarding those 15 points to applicants with a permanent job offer, she said, is a good tool for responding to labour market demands. "Awarding of these points is entirely demand-driven and in many cases would be a significant factor in determining whether an applicant is selected."

Tim Vail, the minister's press secretary, said immigrants entering Canada under the economic class are selected because they meet criteria for success in the economy and adapt quickly to the labour market. "We want to enhance the probability that these immigrants are able to contribute their skills and talents quickly, to benefit both the individual and Canada," he said.



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Points awarded under the system for proficiency in official languages and higher levels of education and work experience are all assets in today's labour market, Vail added. The system recognizes both skilled trades and professionals, including formal education and training.

However, the system ignores a weighted advantage post-secondary education receives, Atkinson countered, while few points are credited for demonstrated proficiency in a skilled trade.

"I personally cringe at the implication that those with post-secondary degrees are necessarily more skilled and 'more adaptable to the Canadian labour market' than those with simple trade qualifications," he said. "Especially when our track record of recognizing foreign credentials (and) degrees is so miserable."

The government is telling industry, "wait, you'll like what you see" in forthcoming efforts to facilitate permanent status for temporary workers, Atkinson said.

"There's a lot of room for improvement," Liberal MP Omar Alghabra said of Canada's immigration system, and particularly the points system. "There's a perception of lag between the human resources department and our labour market studies to what our points system reflects."

The Liberal immigration critic agrees the present system places heavy emphasis on academic credentials, "which we need, I'm not saying we don't, but there's also a need for other types of skills."

The system not only creates shortage of supply for skills, but also contributes to the undocumented worker problem, he said, adding that workers here illegally find their skills in high demand, get attractive job offers and end up staying.

Alghabra is convinced that if the system had allowed them to apply through the points system to become permanent immigrants, they'd have done that.

"I'm not excusing illegal activities," he said. "But the reality is that if you don't address the root causes of this market dynamic and societal needs, people will find ways around it." 