

LABOUR: IMMIGRATION

Go West, Saskatchewan urges immigrants

Spurred by his province's economic success, the Premier looks to disgruntled Torontonians to fill a labour void

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September 30, 2008

TORONTO -- Saskatchewan Premier Brad Wall hosted a barbecue of lamb curry and halal chicken biryani in one of Toronto's most multicultural neighbourhoods yesterday, hoping to lure immigrants fed up with menial jobs, smog and ill-mannered drivers to fill a growing labour shortage in his booming province.

Mr. Wall admitted with a chuckle that it's the first time a provincial premier has set out to recruit newcomers from Thorncliffe Park, a low-income northeast Toronto neighbourhood where three-quarters of the 17,000 residents are visible minorities.

"We have a great story to tell," he said, of Saskatchewan's unprecedented economic success, led in part by surging commodity prices.

"Last time [in 2007], we came back with the Grey Cup. This time we hope to come back with a whole lot of newcomers."

Immigrants have for years settled mainly in Toronto, Vancouver and Montreal, bypassing smaller urban centres such as Saskatoon and Regina. There are, for example, twice as many South Asians in Thorncliffe Park, than there are in all of Saskatchewan: 8,665 versus 3,990.

However, even though these recent newcomers are better educated than their Canadian-born counterparts, they are often unable to get jobs in their field, due to reluctance among some employers to recognize foreign credentials.

Mr. Wall hopes to persuade the disgruntled to give up on the Toronto dream - and the shops selling curry takeout and pashminas - and try their luck in Saskatchewan.

"There are a number of immigrants who are underemployed compared to their skill level," he said. "We have everything they would want."

Mr. Wall's trip here embodies the province's new entrepreneurial spirit, as it sets out to lure back expatriates, boost the employment rate among its own aboriginal population, and entice newcomers to fill 10,000 new jobs in every industry from health care and the oil patch to high-tech and construction.

About 80 Thorncliffe Park residents dropped by his party in a nearby ravine yesterday evening, impressed with the gesture - and the chance to finally get a job in their field. They ate naan bread and chickpeas, and listened to the Premier's sales pitch.

"Saskatchewan is a big name in the market now," said Rafiq Muhammed, 35, who sat at a table decorated with a Saskatchewan flag and yellow balloons. Mr. Muhammed is an electrical engineer from Lahore, Pakistan, forced to take work as a bookkeeper. Frustrated and disappointed, he will consider moving to Saskatchewan with his wife, Samina Ghafoor, and their two children, hopeful that with 10,000 jobs, there will be one in his field.

Fellow Pakistani Ambreen Rind, a 32-year-old physician in internal medicine, is also considering relocating with her husband and young daughter. She chose Toronto initially because of the large Pakistani community and the weather. But "it's the job that matters," she said. And even though she has passed all of her qualifying exams, she cannot get a placement to repeat her residency in Ontario.

As Ontario's economy has stagnated, Saskatchewan is leading the nation this year with projected GDP growth of 4.2 per cent, making it the new "it" province. Saskatchewan's population is now just more than one million and this year it grew by 16,000 - the highest growth rate in a half-century.

This dramatic turnaround for a province that for years suffered outbound migration has prompted the TD Bank Financial Group to dub Saskatchewan Canada's "commodity superstore." If it were a country, it would rank fifth in the world among OECD nations in terms of GDP per capita.

Much of the growth has been fuelled by global demand for uranium, oil and potash - the basic ingredient of fertilizer. The province is now the world's biggest potash producer and Potash Corp. of Saskatchewan Inc., is the fifth-most-valuable name on the Toronto Stock Exchange.

Today, 50 employers from Saskatchewan will be at a National Job Fair in Toronto, including Enbridge, Redhead Equipment (a heavy equipment dealer), the University of Regina and Vecima Networks.

Recent research shows immigrants' incomes were actually higher this year in Regina, Saskatoon and Calgary than they were in Toronto.

"We want people to think outside the box, and take a fresh look at what's going on in Saskatchewan," said Rob Norris, Saskatchewan's Minister of Advanced Education,

Employment and Labour, who also attended the barbecue. "We are a 'have' province. The most valuable resource we have is human resource."

Despite global economic gloom in the wake of plunging stock markets and tightening credit, Mr. Wall remains optimistic. He acknowledged that Saskatchewan must protect itself from the boom-and-bust cycle of resource-based economies.