

Trudeau and the New Immigration And Refugee Policies Implications for Mexico

David Rocha Romero*

Canada's Liberals won the October 19, 2015 elections with 39.5 percent of the votes, giving them 54 percent in the House of Commons (184 seats); this, after winning only 34 seats in 2011. The Conservatives lost their majority, dropping from 166 to 99 seats with 31.9 percent of the votes. The New Democratic Party also lost ground, declining from 103 to 44 seats.

The Liberals won their majority mainly in Ontario and Quebec.¹ Canada is thus living proof that only democratic elections can change the political course of a nation peacefully. With this win, Justin Trudeau, the second-youngest prime minister in Canadian history and son of former Prime Minister Pierre Elliott Trudeau (1968-1979 and 1980-1984), sparks great expectations in Canada's political, social, and economic spheres.

He will have to face issues that span everything from legalizing marihuana—as soon as possible—, taking in 25 000 Syrian refugees, maintaining a commitment to women's right to choose, and improving relations with Canada's neighbors in North America. In other words, his is a very ambitious agenda, committed to the voters.

To start off, Trudeau has managed to create a talented multi-ethnic cabinet that will be a pillar for fostering the different reforms his government has proposed, supported by his parliamentary majority. The opposition, then, will not be able to do much to interfere with the decisions of this new Liberal government.

VISAS FOR MEXICANS

On the campaign trail, Trudeau said that the Conservatives, led by Stephen Harper, had "sour" Canadian-Mexican rela-

tions by imposing a visa for Mexicans in 2009, which to a great extent was due to the large number of "bogus refugees." The visa did seem to bring down the asylum requests, which dropped from 7 594 in 2009 to only 651 in 2011.² The new Liberal government promised to eliminate the visa requirement, arguing that Canada accepts refugees from all over the world when they are persecuted for different reasons. At the same time, it has said that, as members of the North American Free Trade Agreement, there should be no barriers to traveling between the two countries, saying that processing refugee applications can be done in other ways.³

Without going into what the new procedures would be if the visa requirement were eliminated for Mexican travelers, it may well happen in the coming months and very probably Canadians would think it a positive thing. At least at the start, Justin Trudeau offers a more conciliatory, alternative, and broader vision.

In accordance with his discourse, Trudeau changed the name of the Ministry of Citizenship and Immigration to the Ministry of Immigration, Refugees, and Citizenship, which he appointed John McCallum to head up. McCallum is an academic with a doctorate in economics and has been a member of Parliament since 2000. However, this should not be considered a simple name change, since what is intended is to make this ministry an institution that will reopen Canada's doors to those who want to contribute to the country's development.

In other words, the idea is to create a ministry that reflects Canadian values and is open, understanding, and generous, qualities that must be part of immigration policies. Among the new government's strategic actions is making the necessary efforts to receive 25 000 Syrian refugees; double the number of immigrants' parents and grandparents granted entry to 10 000 a year; offer additional points through the Express Entry System to provide applicants with brothers or

*Professor-researcher at the Autonomous University of Baja California (UABC); davidro_2000@yahoo.com.

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sisters in Canada with more opportunities; reduce the wait period for processing citizenship or visa applications; and change the temporary foreign worker program by eliminating the Can\$1 000 Labour Market Impact Assessment fee for hiring caretakers. In addition, the ministry will work with the provinces and territories to develop a system of companies registered to hire family caretakers and to facilitate the entry of low-risk travelers, including investors, as well as to eliminate the visa requirement for Mexico.⁴

It should be underlined that it is a faculty of the Ministry of Immigration, Refugees, and Citizenship to determine which countries are considered safe, since they offer broad protection by the state and, as a result, should not be the point of origin of a considerable number of refugees. Mexico has been in this category since 2013.

I should add that when people from a safe country request refugee status, their applications are usually denied without right to appeal. Mexican refugee-status seekers have been pointed to as liars and abusers of the Canadian system, and the vast majority have been turned down.

Under the outgoing Conservative government, the decisions of the Ministry of Citizenship and Immigration about categorizing these countries were discretionary. That is, they were not based on a consistent explanation, and it was not very clear how the decisions were made. The transformation of the ministry will not necessarily change Mexico's classification as a "safe" country, but the process and decision-making in this regard will be more transparent. Trudeau himself proposed extending the right to appeal to asylum seekers from "safe" countries, and even taking away the ministry's power to determine which countries are safe, putting that decision in the hands of a panel of experts.⁵

HUMANITARIAN RATIONALITY AND MEXICO

It is important to point out that Trudeau's discourse during his campaign and now that he has taken office as prime minister,

does not describe the Mexican state as unable to protect its citizens who say they have had their human rights violated. Doing so would mean Canada's doors should be opened to asylum seekers for Canada to afford them the protection they do not have in their own country. Rather, his discourse is about compassion and support for all those who suffer persecution in the world, guided by an interest in the highest level of cooperation.

Certainly, the prime minister has neither said he is concerned about the state of human rights in Mexico, nor that he expects that it will be taken off the list of safe countries. That could be considered a step backward in bilateral relations, which clearly the new Canadian government is interested in strengthening. For that reason, it is expected that it will find the mechanisms needed to unblock this part of its bilateral relationship.

In the same vein, it is also to be expected that it will promote the defense of human rights of minorities—among its priorities is reestablishing dialogue with Canadian First Peoples—, of diversity, and of free choice. The government is also not expected to openly condemn the worrying situation that has existed in Mexico over at least the last 10 years, enmeshed as it has been in an open war against organized crime that has endangered the human rights of thousands of people.

Taking into consideration that Mexico is a member of NAFTA and, of course, the enormous weight of the United States, Trudeau may think it unnecessary and politically incorrect to point out the domestic situation of one of its most important trade partners, Mexico. However, restraint is a sign of his political ability, although this might be misinterpreted by human rights defenders both in Canada and in Mexico. It could therefore also be thought that these same groups would consider the anticipated goodwill gesture of eliminating the visa requirement for Mexicans as part of a political strategy of economic and trade positioning in the region.

Naturally, I think the humanitarian intentions of the Liberal Party and its leader are more genuine than those of the previous Conservative government. Nevertheless, there will always be those who question them. That is precisely what the new Trudeau government is going to have to deal with in the future.

I should also point out that Trudeau's favorable place in public opinion could very quickly be reverted if his campaign promises disappear amidst the activities of governing and a rapid change is not quickly perceptible. If that happens, how far will the charismatic Liberal prime minister get with his

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progressive ideas? This is on the table because he is putting them forward in a country where legalizing marihuana, achieving gender equality, reforming the political system, extending the enjoyment of human rights, and fostering sustainable development, among other things, would not seem to earn him all the allies he needs, at least not for the time being.

The previous government's position on the visa for Mexicans can be linked to anti-immigrant views influenced by xenophobic political currents from Canada's southern neighbor. However, it can also be understood in a context of cooperation, exchange, and economic competition. The Conservatives probably saw the visa as a bargaining chip for future economic negotiations with Mexico. This is by no means beyond the stretch of the imagination since the day it was imposed, the same was done with the Czech Republic, which also had a high number of asylum seekers, particularly Roma.

By the end of 2013, during the negotiations of the free trade agreement with the European Union, the old continent saw the visa as a barrier for economic negotiations, and the Czech Republic promised to not ratify the trade agreement if Canada did not change its position. In the end, the visa requirement was eliminated. The matter of Roma refugees faded into the background and economic interests prevailed. We will never know now if the Conservatives thought of the visa for Mexicans in the same way.

Very probably, the elimination of the visa requirement will make the number of asylum applications by Mexicans increase. This would presuppose more active communication between the two governments, since Ottawa would have to use every means to express its concern to the Mexican government, prompting a responsible response from the Mexican side, which has only been offered to Washington, but for different reasons.

CONCLUSIONS

We can say that the visa issue plays an important role in economic negotiations: if it is eliminated, it will make for a rapid

increase in Mexican tourism, which will benefit certain business and leisure sectors in Canada. At the same time, however, it is an issue that also opens up space for more profound reflection about human rights and insecurity in Mexico, about organized crime, or about a government, like Mexico's, that has been overwhelmed because it has not been able to guarantee the security of its own citizens within its own borders.

Analyzing the role of political positions to understand and deal with an important social phenomenon leads to thinking about the extent to which Canada's Liberal government can innovate using politics as a mode of dialogue.

The ideas of multiculturalism have been handed down to the new prime minister from his father, who in the 1970s established the basis for a model of social organization open to ethnic diversity, integrating immigrants into Canadian society without forcing them to adopt a single identity, with a less utilitarian vision of accepting only those who contribute economically to the country, as Stephen Harper's Conservative government did.

The challenge is huge for the Trudeau's new government. And while we will not see Canadian government pronouncements about human rights in Mexico before it lifts the visa requirement, we should not discount the possibility of finding appropriate channels for institutional collaboration with the aim of decreasing the number of Mexicans requesting asylum in Canada. Those requests, however, will undoubtedly tend to increase in coming years after the Canadian government eliminates the selective requirement for Mexicans who want to or must visit Canada. ■■■

NOTES

¹ "Federal Election Results 2015. Justin Trudeau's Liberals to Form Majority Government," CBCnews, Canada Votes, <http://www.cbc.ca/news2/interactives/results-2015/>.

² Tobi Cohen and Jason Fekete, "Canada and Mexico working to eliminate visa requirement for Mexican visitors," Canada.com, November 28, 2012, <http://o.canada.com/news/national/canada-and-mexico-working-to-eliminate-visa-requirement-for-mexican-visitors>, accessed November 1, 2015.

³ Giuseppe Valiante, "Liberal Leader Promises to Remove Visa Requirement for Mexican Citizen," *The Globe and Mail*, September 25, 2015, <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/politics/liberal-leader-promises-to-remove-visa-requirement-for-mexican-citizens/article26547474/>, accessed November 7, 2015.

⁴ "Minister of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Mandate Letter," Office of the Prime Minister, n.d., <http://pm.gc.ca/eng/minister-immigration-refugees-and-citizenship-mandate-letter>, accessed November 1, 2015.

⁵ "Refugees," Liberal Party of Canada, <http://www.liberal.ca/realchange/refugees/>, accessed November 1, 2015.