

Cathy Bennett, Board of Trade
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The most recent Census of Canada data were released a few weeks ago, and it didn't come as any surprise that Newfoundland and Labrador's demographic picture doesn't look all that promising.

Then again, we really didn't need the official hard numbers from Statistics Canada to tell us the population of our province has declined over the five-year period from 2001 to 2006. The 2006 Census population count for Newfoundland and Labrador was 505,469. That's down from close to 513,000 in 2001 – or, a decline of roughly 1.5 percent.

I'm not suggesting it's a completely bleak picture for the province. That decline wasn't near as sharp as the one seen during the 1996 to 2001 period, when our population dropped by seven percent.

Nevertheless, this makes it the third Census in a row that our province's population has decreased. Furthermore, we're bucking the national trend. Newfoundland and Labrador was one of only two provinces to experience population decline from 2001 to 2006 (Saskatchewan being the other).

Unfortunately, we can't count on "natural" forces to improve things. The Census also pointed out that Newfoundland and Labrador has the lowest fertility rate in the whole country, averaging about 1.3 children per woman since 2001. The low birth rate, and the fact that our population is aging, has led us to the point where natural population change in this province is now negative – in 2006, 4400 people were born and 4500 died – and the gap will continue to widen if projections come to pass.

What's the big deal about our population getting older and shrinking? For one thing, it affects our labour market. Where are our businesses going to get employees in the future? Worker and skills shortages are a real problem now, and are only going to worsen.

The Census noted that all the Atlantic provinces share many of the same demographic characteristics, including low fertility, net out-migration, and not much at all in the way of international immigration.

The question is, how do we mitigate all this. Again, there won't be a sudden and significant reversal in our natural population change any time soon.

But we shouldn't consider it a lost cause at all when it comes to the trying to stem out-migration and to boost in-migration.

Simply put, we need to create the opportunities for people to stay here and for more expatriates to come back to live and work.

Immigration has a role to play here, too.

Employers and our province as a whole have something to gain from a proactive, strategic, concerted effort to attract newcomers to our province, retain them and guide their effective integration into our society and workforce. It's in our best interest to have a plan to facilitate this, as opposed to having no plan at all for how we're going to approach and handle immigration.

Several other provinces have already taken proactive approaches to increasing immigration, including Nova Scotia, PEI, New Brunswick, Manitoba and Saskatchewan.

Newfoundland and Labrador is following that lead with a new immigration strategy of its own.

Before it gets widespread buy-in, we may need to dispel the myth at most immigrants are a drain on the economy.

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Along with contributing to cultural and social diversity, immigrants can transfer innovation and creativity and help stimulate economic growth by establishing businesses and employing local residents. They may offer connections to international markets and can perhaps help open export doors for Newfoundland and Labrador companies.

Some research has suggested that, when compared to the general population, immigrants to Canada generally have lower unemployment rates, higher education levels, and higher levels of entrepreneurship. Immigrants, therefore, can contribute positively to productivity and job creation.

As for the new strategy, it includes targets and timelines for attraction and retention, which is important. The objective is to attract 1200 to 1500 annually within the next five years. It also proposes to up the retention rate to 80% for Provincial Nominees (those with targeted professional qualifications), and 70% for other categories of immigrants.

It recognizes the value of boosting intake of international post-secondary students; professionals; skilled workers; and immigrant entrepreneurs who can start businesses, attract capital, and create jobs.

Clearly, increasing immigration alone is not the answer to our demographic and labour shortage challenges. However it provides part of a much-needed response to those challenges. We have to take a broad approach. Just like we diversify our strategy to grow the economy, we need to diversify our response to building the labour market and reversing population decline.

Arguing that we shouldn't put an ounce of effort into an immigration strategy until we "take care of our own" by halting out-migration and bringing back Newfoundlanders and Labradorians from Alberta, is a bit like saying we shouldn't waste time and money developing new industries and economic opportunities until we put our fishery back in a thriving state.

It is absolutely critical that we as a province continue to work towards creating opportunities and favourable conditions in this province under which we are better able to retain native Newfoundlanders and Labradorians and entice expats to return to live, work, raise their families and contribute to our economy. But, there is also an important place for attracting newcomers to the province.

The two are not mutually exclusive - we need to provide opportunities for born-and-bred Newfoundlanders and Labradorians and find ways to attract and retain immigrants at the same time.

Cathy Bennett is the president of the St. John's Board of Trade.