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The fate of the region: attracting and retaining newcomers to Halifax

Vibrant city regions are increasingly seen as pivotal to economic vitality. Richard Florida's (2005) research on the creative class has suggested that cities need to attract talented workers if they hope to compete in an economy where innovation plays a critical role. For smaller cities with limited population growth, attracting and retaining newcomers to the region offers a significant strategy for meeting labour market needs and stimulating economic activity.

As part of a national project to understand how the social dynamics of city-regions shape innovative and creative capacity we have been investigating the perceptions of decision makers and representatives who work with economic, social and cultural development associations in the Halifax city-region. One of the topics we explored in the work was how the city-region welcomes and accommodates newcomers. Given the tendency of immigrants to concentrate in a few major Canadian cities (Ley and Germain 2000), how can smaller city-regions capture a greater share of immigrants? Given the dynamic growth in parts of western Canada, how can slow growth cities like Halifax attract more newcomers from outside the Atlantic region?

Since the 1980s, urban planning has focussed attention on creating better places to attract economic growth. As Stephen Ward (1998) noted, place selling has engaged most of the major cities. Government investments in the built environment have at least in part focussed on making cities more attractive in order to convince people to want to call the place "home". What features of city-regions help to attract newcomers and make them want to stay? Can urban planning contribute to making city-regions better magnets for innovation?

This paper briefly describes the preliminary findings of our study on respondents' thoughts about how the Halifax city-region deals with newcomers. While Halifax continues its trends of modest growth, it has a small proportion of foreign-born residents (GHP 2005). How do decision makers and those dealing with development in the region explain the region's small share of immigrants coming to Canada, and what do they think the city region can do to attract and retain more newcomers from abroad?

In the context of the research we discovered that while respondents believed that Halifax has a great deal to offer newcomers in the way of physical beauty and amenities, the city-region may need to find social strategies to overcome some of the challenges that newcomers – especially those whose first language is not English or French -- face in making themselves at home. Urban planners looking to help attract and retain newcomers to the city-region must attend not only to matters such as urban design and transportation strategies but also must consider mechanisms to help address social and community needs that newcomers face.

The case study:

In the summer of 2006 we interviewed 13 government representatives and 14 individuals working with a range of associations involved in social, cultural and economic development in the Halifax city region for their views on the factors that encourage social innovation in the region. Respondents were evenly distributed by gender (see Table 1). Interviews took 30 to 90 minutes to complete, with the comments recorded and transcribed.

Table 1: Gender of respondents interviewed

Representatives of:	Male	Female	Male and female together
Government	7	6	
Association	5	7	1
Total interviews	12	13	1

One set of questions in the interviews focussed specifically on the region's ability to accommodate newcomers. Given the importance of newcomers to innovation, we asked several questions of each respondent or set of respondents (see Table 2).

Table 2: Questions asked regarding newcomers

<p>Are newcomers easily able to integrate into the Halifax city region?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">a. What mechanisms are most effective for integrating them?b. What challenges affect the integration of newcomers?c. What physical features of Halifax help to attract and integrate newcomers?d. What associations assist newcomers to integrate? <p>How do civic leaders in the region respond to the diverse gender, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds that newcomers bring?</p> <p>How do local associations respond to new perspectives on regional development brought by newcomers?</p>
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The answers to the questions allowed us to identify several key themes in the data.

The need for newcomers

Association and government respondents generally agreed that the Halifax city region, and the province more generally, need people to move here. They feared that a legacy of slow growth or population decline threatens the regional economy. A three-pronged approach of attracting immigrants, encouraging Canadians (especially displaced Maritimers) to come east, and retaining youth tempted to move westward appealed to many respondents. Several of those interviewed spoke about the need to attract and retain immigrants as a principal means of securing population and economic growth. Without such mechanisms, Halifax cannot be internationally competitive, as a government representative indicated:

Some people may not understand how important immigration is to the economic growth, but if you look at communities like Montreal, Toronto, Vancouver, the main reasons they've grown so much is because of immigration, and the entrepreneurialism that immigrants bring with them. Calgary has grown for its own reasons basically around the energy sector -- and Edmonton as well. But those other three communities that I referred to, the three biggest ones in Canada, are growing more because of their ability to attract newcomers.

Some government respondents suggested that government had come fairly late to realize that they need to encourage immigration to the region. The challenge to fill some specialized jobs now threatens the regional economy and is stimulating belated action. A few respondents cautioned, however, that immigration cannot solve all of the problems of the region.

I will say immigration is important. I think if you went back and tracked the press coverage on immigration, you would see a significant change in the last eighteen months. Eighteen months ago there was a lot of hype about immigration. But I think there is a recognition now, that it is not a silver bullet.

The challenge of integration

Some respondents noted relatively few barriers to integrating newcomers to the region.

Q: How, how do you think that new residents integrate into this region?

I think it's actually fairly easy, yeah. From a personal perspective, I mean I've found the people here, in Halifax, in Nova Scotia, Atlantic Canada, are friendly, very friendly, very easy to get along with. It's not a rushed society, so yeah, if you're not familiar --if you come somewhere and you're not familiar with things and you ask questions, they take all the time to help you, and that's completely different in other parts of the world that I'm aware of.

One respondent who saw few challenges for integrating newcomers spoke regarding the situation within the film industry. Sectors like the arts community may create conditions which do not require long-term accommodation of newcomers. Respondents also indicated that some industries, like the research sector, may generate social networks that do not rely on the local community for integrating newcomers.

By contrast, many respondents spoke about how difficult it is for those who come from outside the region to integrate into the community.

Q: You're a new resident so this is actually kind of good: how have you found this area to be for integrating new residents?

It's difficult. It's difficult. I have an advantage because my spouse --the reason that we relocated here was my spouse was recruited, and I have an advantage because my spouse is from here, and so we have a personal connection to Atlantic Canada, but I think that it --I could see that it would be --I do find it difficult, in some sense. I think that it would be very difficult for a visible minority... and it isn't -- I think that it is not so much the reaction as it is there is less cultural and ethnic diversity here, and so that makes it very difficult.

With small immigrant communities, Halifax does not have the extensive social networks that can provide connections and social support to newcomers from a vast array of nations. The city has a large Lebanese community, as several respondents noted, but other ethnic groups may be spottily

represented. A government representative talked about “what I call the MTV syndrome”: immigrants feel more welcome in Montreal, Toronto, or Vancouver than elsewhere.

Long-term residents form strong networks that can keep newcomers at arms’ length. As an association representative said,

I think in general the community is one that’s willing to work together and, you know, it is a small community, too, which is sometimes a blessing and sometimes a curse. It’s a blessing in the sense that you do know, you can pick up the phone and you can call people who work in different organizations, and they know each other and they, you know, they talk to each other. You run into people downtown, that sort of thing. It’s a curse sometimes in the sense that it can be very daunting for people who do come from other places to come into a community like this that’s fairly close-knit. Where, you know, there are a lot of people who know each other, who grew up together, that are part of that fabric. So, that is a potential barrier as well, you know, that type of community.

One government respondent put the concern more forcefully.

You know, you still hear the CFA, “come from away”, bullshit, right? Yeah, that’s a problem, like there’s a parochialism in our society that is not as welcoming as it might forecast or foresee, and you know what, it’s to their detriment. You have to reverse that way of thinking. I think our Office of Immigration’s trying to do that very thing. Um, you know, and let’s face it, this is a one dimensional society in many ways. It’s uni-cultural, right? White European. That’s not the future, you know. The future is diversity. So there’s a massive challenge there, I mean, bigger than anything I’ve ever seen. I mean, if Nova Scotia’s going to succeed and grow in the future, it has to open its view of life and realize the world is a diverse place and you have to welcome it. I think the thing is, if we achieve it, you know, we will have the kind of place where diverse cultures can come here and feel celebrated and be happy. ...Big challenges there.

Some respondents contrasted the region’s reputation for the friendliness of its people to visitors with the obstacles new residents face to becoming part of a community that is relatively homogeneous in its characteristics. Nova Scotia has the reputation of being a conservative area that resists change. Several respondents reflected on the rural perspective that influences Halifax because rural residents from across the region migrate to Halifax and bring their rural attitudes with them to the city.

Some government respondents offered extensive critiques of the unwillingness of residents to accept the views of newcomers, especially from places like “Upper Canada” or Toronto.

Q: How do local associations respond to new perspectives on regional development brought by newcomers?

It’s getting to be a little bit of a touchy issue, I would suppose, but from my personal, from my department, um, I’d say hesitant. I come from away, and so -- you know, “someone from Upper Canada, people from Upper Canada telling us what to do”.

In response to the same question, another government respondent suggested that an element of racism may pervade thinking in the region.

You know, I’ll go back to where I said before, Nova Scotians are parochial. ... I think they, they like their little white box.

The attractions of Halifax

Halifax enjoys many attributes that respondents see as attracting newcomers to the city region.

I think that Nova Scotia is renowned for being open and welcoming and inclusive. I've heard that from many people, in fact, especially in the film industry. We've had some really successful film makers just get tired of the rat race whether it's in Toronto or Los Angeles, and they've moved to Nova Scotia for what they call "quality of life" ... So I think Nova Scotia is fantastic because people are very friendly, very welcoming. They're very well-educated, the province is beautiful, it has great infrastructure. So it's all-round pretty appealing.

A government respondent noted that Halifax has a “*small town feeling*” with the “*amenities of a big city*”. Another commented that “*Halifax shows really well*”, referring to the beautiful harbour, waterfront and downtown. One respondent said “*It would be more difficult to do our job [selling the region] in Sudbury.*” Natural features such as forests, lakes and beaches struck many as attracting interest in the region.

Some respondents noted the high quality of life and slow pace of the region.

I think the society in Halifax as a whole is, certainly from my perspective, not so much different than most European societies. It's a little bit more laid back. ... coming into a research organization is always easy, yeah, because research organizations are built for that, they are built to attract people from outside, yeah, and so they always have –some of them have formal programs, some of them don't- but it's always easy because you're always surrounded by quite a lot of other strangers. ...From the other people that I know that came from outside and that don't work here, but the rest of the community, the general perspective I get is that it was easier for them to identify – I wouldn't say that- but to integrate. Um, it's that they felt, they felt at home fairly quickly ... Most of the people I know who are not from Canada are probably from somewhere in Europe. One of the two key comments are always: so few people, so easy to live here because there's not a heck of a lot of regulations compared to [Europe], and therefore it's very easy, yeah, it's relatively easy, and, well they complain about the taxes and the bureaucracy, but it is not even as high as most of the European countries. So yeah, it's not a bad, it's not a bad place to live, not at all.

The relative affordability of housing, compact nature of the community, and low crime rates appeal to newcomers, said some respondents. Several people mentioned that the universities in the cities bring in young people and a mix of interesting folks who energize the region. Good sea connections to ports like New York make the city internationally competitive.

The barriers in Halifax

Some of the features that attract people to Halifax may discourage others. A relatively small city, Halifax can seem conservative. It has few cultural amenities to attract particular ethnic groups, especially those who don't speak English. The city's history in dealing with African Canadians may discourage some minority groups from wanting to come to the region.

Several respondents noted that the Maritime climate can discourage some would-be immigrants; one respondent did suggest, however, that the weather is better in Halifax than in Edmonton.

The placement of Halifax on the edge of the continent, with easy air connections to relatively few cities, can seem far from the centres of power. As a government respondent told us:

I lived a short time –a couple years -- in Boston and when you live in the northeast corridor there –Boston’s at kind of the end of it, but you got New York and D.C. and Baltimore -- you really feel like you’re in the centre of the universe, because everything you see on the news is happening in your backyard. It’s a two-hour drive away. You’re surrounded by 14 million people and you really do feel like there’s activity going on all the time and you know about it, because it’s happening around you. You move here and you feel disconnected from that. Your time zone – I find the time zone to be a problem. You know, everything happens after you go to bed. I like the West Coast for that reason. You get to watch the whole continent do their thing. You can read it on the news then go to sleep. It’s different here. So, yeah, I find geography to be limiting, I do.

The features that make Halifax special may simultaneously limit opportunities for innovation. For instance, the tourism industry relies on heritage conservation, pristine environmental conditions, and small town hospitality. By contrast, an economy that seeks innovation needs new people, new urban models, and new ideas. Some respondents referred to a recent land use dispute in the downtown over a high rise development known as the “twisted sisters” project as an illustration of the problem:

We have ... what I call established Haligonians, who have, you know, strong values and strong feelings for things, viewpoints, which I share. I don’t have an issue about that, but [they] take a completely different view of what new development looks like in contrast to heritage buildings. I find that that’s a very narrow minded mindset that they have.

The regional approach

To address the interest in attracting and retaining immigrants to the region, all levels of government have been reviewing policies and practices, and reorganizing to become more competitive. The Greater Halifax Partnership developed an immigration strategy for Halifax Regional Municipality in 2005 (GHP 2005). The provincial government recently created an Office of Immigration to coordinate its approach to encouraging migrants to come. Several government respondents suggested that the Office promises to make a difference in future, and indicates the government’s commitment to immigration.

I know that in the Province of Nova Scotia, our agenda is to celebrate diversity: encourage it, you know. The Office of Immigration is clearly designed to help sort of, you know, bring newcomers into the community ... Those are there because the current leaders felt strongly enough that we should have this type of mechanism, so I guess that’s a positive indicator.

Respondents associated with social and cultural organizations were critical of the local approach, arguing that provincial and regional policies undermine the potential for retaining talent and encouraging innovative development. Arts agencies were especially critical of financial support given to a Rolling Stones concert in the same period that government was cutting funding to local cultural groups.

One respondent spoke of a recent contact with someone who works with immigrants:

She told me she couldn’t believe how awful it was in terms of the lack of support for people who come here generally. There’s the Immigration Department of Nova Scotia, which I think is fairly new office. First of all the amount of money you pay to get into the

region is unbelievable but they just don't seem to...she's the one that's helping them find a family doctor or job networking and all that kind of stuff. I'm like "where are these people when they first come here?" It seems to be the most simple thing to do just to provide a list of services and people to contact. I don't know what the City of Halifax is doing to be honest. They don't really seem to get it. I mean the city is still divided by a racial line for God's sakes! I don't really know how they expect --They talk about multiculturalism in this city, and they haven't even resolved the pervasive issues. It's one of the things I find very displeasing about this city.

The suggested fixes

Many respondents recognized that immigrants to the region need ways to validate their credentials and to gain access to basic services if they are to make a new life for themselves and their families. Consensus on the need for English language training went across most of the interviews. Several respondents noted that until Halifax has larger communities of people from different regions, it will remain hard for newcomers to make the transition to feeling at home.

Government respondents often noted that government needs to play a role in encouraging greater tolerance of diversity, and in setting an example for others to follow. Hiring more immigrants and finding ways to accommodate a wider range of languages and cultural practices is critical. Some association representatives spoke quite critically about government's unwillingness to do what it takes to make newcomers welcome and to appreciate diversity.

How do civic leaders in the region respond to diverse culture, gender, ethic and cultural backgrounds: great question, great question. They ignore it. And mostly because they don't understand it. ... What the various communities can bring here, and what they can offer --it's ignored at best. And you can ask the mayor that question, and you'll get a lot of bullshit.

Another association respondent indicated the challenge the region faces:

Q: How do you find the response of civic leaders to the diverse gender, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds?

Well, I think they try hard, but we have had a couple of examples just recently. I was just reading in the paper that someone was quite upset with our Provincial Minister of African-Nova Scotian Affairs because our new African-Nova Scotian MLA ... has said that he thinks that the province should apologize for the disrespectful treatment of black people in Nova Scotia. I think the Minister said, oh well, he'd like to know what he was apologizing for. Unfortunately, this caused an outcry from the black community: what do you mean what for? Also, I have been reading about our mayor who has never gone to the gay pride parade. Although, he has written a letter saying he supports it, he has never gone. You know, I think our leaders try to respond well to the fact that we are living in an increasingly diverse culture, but I'm not sure how much they actually do. I don't think our diverse culture is very well reflected yet in our governing structure. We don't see a lot of diversity in our City Council or our provincial government, not even gender. Nova Scotia doesn't fare very well in terms of the number of women in the provincial legislature. I'm not sure about Council, I think there's a few there, but I'm sure it doesn't fare very well either. And that's supposedly one of the easier ones. I don't think that we have caught up yet with in terms of our diversity. Our civic leadership is not diverse. That's probably one of the reasons why they don't do a very good job of handling these issues.

In a region where homogeneity has been the rule, and where powerful interests have not readily opened opportunities to others to share power and influence, the space for accommodating

diversity remains relatively narrow. Although authorities recognize that contemporary theory and practice seeks economic growth as depending on diversity and innovation, the inertia of experience remains an impediment. An association respondent put it this way:

Q: What do you think the response of civic leaders in this region has been to the diverse gender, ethnic and cultural backgrounds?

They're um...they understand. They're taking it. They are embracing it –that's the word I was looking for -- they are embracing it because they're told that's what we need to do. I won't say any more than that. ... Everybody is embracing it as being a positive event, everybody's embracing it as "we have to do it if we're going to keep our demographics up".

A government representative commented more explicitly on perceptions of racism in the region.

I think because Halifax is new at the whole immigration thing, we're not really...some people say we are a diverse community, but if you compare us to Toronto or Vancouver, we are certainly not an ethnically diverse community. So I am not sure that is really a question of whether the political leaders have been challenged to really respond to. You know what I mean? We certainly have had some instances in the media with politicians, not all -- but at the Council level there have been some really racist comments that have made at the media level. Certainly not deliberately, but I think there is a little bit of ignorance there. That's not general across the board, but it is something that civic leaders have not been very vocal about. It hasn't been something that they have taken on to actually become vocal and support diversity in the public eye. So that is kind of a tough one. Individually they have responded not very well.

The challenge of “integration”

Is integration of newcomers an appropriate goal? Most of the respondents believed that integrating newcomers could contribute to social, cultural and economic development in the region. Two government respondents raised flags about the idea of integration, though.

Q: What mechanisms are most effective for integrating newcomers?

I'm not sure if I believe in the word integration, especially with all the things that come with it: "leave your culture at home." I'm not into that at all. But if you take the more positive side of integration, you know giving them a chance. Things like MISA [Metropolitan Immigrant Settlement Association] are very powerful. I think there isn't enough there happening. We're doing our part here, but we could do even more. I find in Nova Scotia we do a good game of talking the "royal we", but we don't walk the talk. So to answer your question, I think it is very difficult for people to come in and that is something to be ashamed of.

A political representative described the need for newcomers to preserve their own identity:

One of my favourite things to do, even though I come away every single time with mixed feelings, is to go the citizenship court, which I do every month whenever I'm in town if there is a citizenship ceremony. I always come away with teary eyes. The hopes and dreams and aspirations that are reflected in the faces of those people every time are just awe-inspiring and really overwhelming. But what you know is already that they have been subjected to the patronizing talk about how lucky they are to be here; you know "hope they aren't go to have a hyphenated name"; they're Canadian so they can just forget all that. It's, like, that is who they are! They've also been here by definition for at least three years in order to be eligible for citizenship. They've already experienced poverty, religious bigotry, credentials-blocking them to practice their trade or profession. It's a huge resource that we don't properly deal with on the human level, on the personal level, and

on the broader level of human meaning. And by integration being the antithesis of assimilation, it's not what people want!

Insights for planning

Attracting newcomers to a city-region requires more than an appropriate physical environment: it takes a supportive social context. The respondents interviewed generally suggested that many of the natural features and the built environment features of the city-region make it well-suited to attract newcomers. Affordable housing, beautiful landscapes, and an interesting mix of historic buildings welcome new residents. Views were mixed about the suitability of the public transportation system. Many respondents felt that the social services available to immigrants were woefully inadequate. Licensing programs that limit the ability of professionals to employ their skills undermine the attractiveness of the region to those people most desperately needed by the economy. Improved social planning to meet the needs of newcomers is vital to improving Halifax's ability to retain the people it attracts.

Government may have several roles to play in helping to make the city-region a better social environment for newcomers.

- Provide essential social services like language training
- Facilitate the recognition of foreign professional credentials
- Consider immigration strategies that focus recruiting on particular ethnic groups to help create a "critical mass" of language speakers in the community
- Educate the public to understand the importance of immigration to the economy and to overcome conservative beliefs that may make newcomers feel unwelcome
- Plan a built environment that celebrates and accommodates the heritage and values of a range of community members (not just the early European immigrant stocks)

Contemporary planning discourse celebrates diversity. The ability of community planners to create the conditions where diversity thrives depends, however, on much more than zoning for a mix of uses or designing venues for multicultural festivals. Unless immigrants can find the services they need to get meaningful jobs, all the affordable housing and beautiful scenery available will not keep them in Halifax.

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