

The *Hai Hong* incident: One boat's effect on Canada's policy
towards Indochinese refugees

Dara Marcus
dmarc073@uottawa.ca

The *Hai Hong* incident: One boat's effect on Canada's policy towards Indochinese refugees

Introduction

In October 1978, a boat carrying roughly 2,500 refugees garnered widespread attention across Canada and around the world. “Boat people” had been fleeing Vietnam since the fall of Saigon in 1975, but the *Hai Hong* incident transformed Canada's response to the Indochinese refugee movement. Refused permission to land in Malaysia, and with a disabled engine, the boat anchored off the coast of Port Klang, where it was caught in a standoff with Malaysian officials. With only 2,500 people on board, it was not an overwhelming problem within the scope of the Indochinese refugee movement, but it was an emergency situation for those on board the overcrowded boat, who lacked food, water, medical supplies, and adequate shelter. The *Hai Hong* attracted more media attention and prompted more public action than other Indochinese refugee situations had thus far. The *Hai Hong* situation set off the large-scale implementation of the new immigration legislation that had come into effect just months earlier, including a coherent, humanitarian refugee policy, provincial involvement in immigrant selection, and the private sponsorship program.

In this paper, I consider the Canadian response to the *Hai Hong* situation within the historical framework of the *1976 Immigration Act* and related legislation. Beginning with an account of the context in which this event took place, I then review Canada's refugee legislation at that time, and the political, media, and public response to the *Hai Hong*. Lastly, I examine the event's effect on Canada's overall response to the Indochinese refugee issue.

Background leading up to *Hai Hong* incident

On April 30, 1975, Saigon was captured by the National Liberation Front and the People's Army of Vietnam, and South Vietnam was taken over by North Vietnam. As the Communist regime came into power, many South Vietnamese, especially those who had ties to the government, were jailed, forced into hard labour in re-education camps, or moved into New Economic Zones (NEZ). Professors, previous government employees, artists,

businessmen, and draft-age youths felt pressure to flee Vietnam. Around 130,000 left in 1975, resettling mainly in the US (Chan 21). After the initial exodus, a steady flow of around 2,000-5,000 people escaped Vietnam each month; however, starting in the second half of 1978, up to tens of thousands were fleeing each month, peaking at 21,505 in November 1978 (ibid. 37). While many escaped in secret, others bribed officials thousands of US dollars to allow them to leave.

The majority of passengers on the *Hai Hong* were South Vietnamese ethnic Chinese, who were in a position similar to that of the Ugandan Asians when they were expelled from Uganda in 1972. They were well-integrated into the South Vietnamese capitalist economy, controlling 70-80% of it, including 100% of the wholesale trade and about 50% of the retail trade (Trần 56), and ethnic Chinese owned 28 of the 32 banks in South Vietnam (ibid. 61). In 1975, many had their property and businesses seized, and in 1976, special taxes were introduced on excess profits, as the state attempted, and failed, to gain control over the economy in South Vietnam. In response to this failure, a campaign, code-named “X2,” was launched on March 23, 1978, clamping down on private business. The government confiscated goods from tens of thousands of businesses and ordered people out of the cities to settle in the NEZ, where there was usually very little to eat, and virtually no means of making a living (Chan 41). Relations between the Vietnamese and Chinese governments had been slowly deteriorating since the fall of Saigon, and on April 30, 1978, the head of the Overseas Chinese Affairs Office of the State Council in Beijing stated that “the Vietnamese authorities had stepped up their expulsion of ‘Chinese residents;’” over 40,000 had been expelled since the start of April, and this number would exceed 160,000 by mid-July (Chan 39).¹ Those living in South Vietnam were unable, and often unwilling, to escape to China, by land or by boat, and many therefore set out toward Malaysia and Indonesia.

On August 24, 1978, an old ship called the *Southern Cross* was supposedly going to pick up a load of salt in Bangkok, Thailand. Instead, it docked in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam, and picked up 1,250 people who had paid the government for their freedom. The ship was escorted by government officials out to open waters, where it then radioed for help, claiming

1 China responded by closing its border with North Vietnam, leaving many of those attempting to escape with no alternative but to go by boat to Hong Kong. Most of the ethnic Chinese in North Vietnam had been integrated into the socialist economy before being expelled, and desired to go to China.

to have just picked up refugees from a boat in crisis. Neither Singapore nor Malaysia believed the story, and refused to allow the boat to land. The passengers were dropped off on an uninhabited Indonesian island, where the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) assumed control of the situation and convinced Indonesia to put the boat people in refugee camps that had already been established for Indochinese refugees.

Due to the financial success of the *Southern Cross* venture, the same group decided to purchase another boat and fill it with more Vietnamese willing to pay dearly for their freedom (Davies 99). The *Hai Hong* was built in 1948 in Panama, and purchased for scrap metal in 1978. Instead of going to Hong Kong where it would be demolished, the rusting boat docked in Vietnam, where the captain and crew intended to pick up 1,200 passengers. However, the government forced them to take an additional 1,300 people. Those fleeing included a few young people escaping military conscription, but the vast majority were ethnic Chinese. Each refugee paid roughly \$3,200 US, or 16 bars of gold: ten to Vietnamese officials, and six to the boat promoters. The *Hai Hong* departed Vietnam on October 24, 1978, with roughly 2,500 passengers on board.

From the Mekong Delta, the boat headed toward Indonesia, but was blown off-course and damaged by Typhoon Rita. With engine trouble, and virtually no food or water, the *Hai Hong* spent several days attempting to land in Indonesia and being turned away, and finally dropped anchor near Port Klang in Malaysian waters. However, because the passengers had paid the Vietnamese government to let them leave, Malaysia, like Indonesia, refused to accept them as refugees. Malaysia voiced legitimate concern that accepting these “boat people” as refugees would simply encourage the trafficking of refugees from Vietnam.

The *Hai Hong* stayed anchored offshore, receiving food and medical supplies delivered by the UNHCR and the Red Crescent. Malaysia, like Indonesia and Thailand, had not signed the UNHCR Convention relating to the Status of Refugees, and were technically not held to the same expectations as those countries that had signed. Malaysia was also trying to avoid increasing the number of people already in its Indochinese refugee camps; the price of acceptance to a Malay camp was that someone else would have to leave, whether via acceptance by another country, or voluntary repatriation. Many countries, including Canada, expressed sympathy for the plight of the *Hai Hong* passengers, and argued with Malaysia and

each other over what was to be done, but initially avoided making any concrete commitments. Malaysia finally announced its intention to tow the disabled boat out to open waters and leave those on board to their fate. Bud Cullen, then the Minister of Employment and Immigration Canada, felt that “Malaysia was calling our bluff, and heaven knows they had every right to, having accepted something in excess of 35,000 refugees” (Pappone 14).

The Situation in Canada

At this time, Canada was working with its new *Immigration Act of 1976*, which came into effect in 1978. Before the new legislation was enacted, Canada's response to refugee crises was decided on a case-by-case basis. One purpose of the new legislation was to have a humanitarian refugee policy that stood apart from Canada's other immigration considerations, instead of the series of *ad hoc* responses employed up until that time, which were “influenced by many factors, among them political and economic factors” (Somerset 108). Refugee movements were no longer a once-in-a-decade issue; there was a need for a consistent policy on how to address them, rather than just deciding, each time a refugee crisis arose, whether it included immigrants who could benefit Canada.

The *Immigration Act of 1976*, reflecting Canada's recent pro-diplomacy, pro-peacekeeping, pro-aid attitude,² had a focus on who should be allowed into Canada rather than who should be kept out, and included refugees as a new immigrant class, exempted from the point system used to determine the admissibility of potential immigrants. This new class included not only refugees fitting the UNHCR definition, but also “persecuted and displaced persons who do not qualify as refugees under the rigid UN definition,” but whom the cabinet declares to nevertheless be in need of humanitarian assistance (Knowles 209). Refugees were exempt from being barred for medical or health reasons, and were not held to the same standards as economic immigrants regarding the ability to establish themselves successfully in Canada.

However, despite these new regulations for refugees, economic concerns were still

² At this time, Canada had peacekeeping missions in Cyprus, the Middle East, Southern Africa, and Vietnam. In 1968, the Canadian International Development Agency had been formed; in 1970, Canada set a target of allocating 0.7% of GDP to foreign aid, and the International Development Research Centre was created. In addition, in the early 1970s, Canada was one of the first Western nations to establish diplomatic relations with the People's Republic of China.

likely in play. In the 1950s and 60s, Canada's need for skilled labour was filled by refugees from Hungary and Czechoslovakia, “with perhaps a corresponding desire to embarrass the Soviet Union adding an international political incentive” (Somerset 108). Somerset suggests that “[w]hen the refugee exodus from Europe came to an end in the late 1960s, it was Canada's continuing demographic and economic needs for immigration which led to the acceptance of refugees from further afield” (109).

The *Immigration Act of 1976* also allowed for provinces to make individual immigration agreements with the federal government. In the 1970s, Québec's government had realized it was facing the lowest birth rate in Canada, and fewer immigrants than desired were choosing to settle there, so Québec took advantage of this legislation to obtain the right to select its own immigrants, based on the need to promote its French language, culture, and society. On February 20, 1978, Cullen and his Québec counterpart, Jacques Couture, signed the Cullen-Couture agreement, giving Québec the freedom to choose and recruit its own immigrants (Knowles 218). This agreement would have a significant effect on Canada's approach to the *Hai Hong* issue, as well as later Indochinese refugee resettlement decisions.

Of equal importance was the new private sponsorship program, according to which, “in addition to informal assistance, interested groups [churches, volunteer groups, and organizations of at least five Canadian citizens, called Groups of Five, or G5] could also 'sponsor' one or more refugee families, over and above any number involved in the government's refugee program” (Chénier-Cullen 203). The refugee sponsorship program came into effect April 10, 1978 (Pappone 22). However, the Canadian public would not embrace it until after the *Hai Hong* incident.

Canada first accepted a large group of non-European refugees with the Ugandan Asian movement in 1972, widely considered one of the most successful refugee resettlement programs in Canadian history. Somerset mentions that, before 1978, “Canada had considerable experience in the resettlement of refugees, and by 1978 a specific legal structure existed for their reception and resettlement” (109). Thus, when large numbers of Indochinese began to flee their home countries, Canada had the know-how and legal means to play a significant role in addressing the issue.

Canada's response to the *Hai Hong*

In a Cabinet document from June 26, 1975, Minister Andras, Cullen's predecessor, “stated that he would not be seeking authority to admit Vietnamese and Cambodian refugees beyond the 3,000 already authorized by Cabinet” (A-5-a, Volume 6457 2). Later, however, it turned out that the Government of Canada's commitment to the Indochinese refugee issue “had been inching up since October 1976, from an annual quota of 180 Vietnamese 'boat people' to 50 families a month by January 1978” (Anderssen and Jiménez 2). Between 1975-1978, Canada had already accepted 9,060 Indochinese refugees:

Most of them had settled in Montreal, Calgary, Edmonton, and Toronto, and in smaller numbers elsewhere. Most of these refugees were professionals or highly skilled, and many of them were able to find employment. In general, it would seem that their resettlement had been reasonably successful. (Somerset 109).

In June 1978, Cullen announced an additional “special refugee movement to admit up to 20 families of [Kampuchean] Indochinese refugees a month into Canada up to an unannounced total of 1000 persons... It would seek the assistance of voluntary organizations and churches in helping the new immigrants to become established with the backing of Federal Government funds” (Cullen 305-78MC 4-5). Until the *Hai Hong* incident changed the landscape of media and public opinion, the intention was to continue accepting 70 families a month.

On November 15, three weeks after the boat left Vietnam, and six days after anchoring in Malaysian waters, the first articles about the *Hai Hong* situation started appearing in newspapers in Canada. At first, media coverage mainly discussed Malaysia's unwillingness to allow the refugees to land, “because of reports that the ship [was] owned by a syndicate” that charged for passage (UPI *The Gazette* 15/11/78). There was limited suggestion that Canada was “willing to consider refugees holding promise-of-visa letters” that had been handed out by Canadian officials before the fall of Saigon, as well as those “with relatives in Canada” (CP *The Gazette* 15/11/78). Ottawa was also willing to consider taking others, but was “awaiting results of an investigation into the plight of the refugees by the UN commission” (Gazette News Services *The Gazette* 16/11/78).

At this point, Couture made use of the Cullen-Couture agreement and his provincial

powers, announcing, on November 15, that Québec “would be willing to accept at least 200 *Hai Hong* refugees, or 30% of the number Canada accepted, if that number exceeded 200” (Pappone 15). For Québec, it made sense to accept some of the refugees; not only did the province already have a fairly large Vietnamese population, but also, as Vietnam was a former French colony, many Vietnamese spoke French already, fitting well into the Cullen-Couture agreement's objectives. There was also a strong political motivation to this stance; Couture was a minister of the separatist Parti Québécois, and as such, there was value in taking action and leading the federal government on international issues. By announcing Québec's willingness to accept 200 refugees from the *Hai Hong*, Couture demonstrated Québec's will to act separately from the federal government; the new provincial immigration powers made it possible to do so.

However, despite Couture's announcement, with the current monthly quota of 70 families, there was little expectation that Canada would actually accept more Indochinese refugees, and although media coverage on the refugees increased, there was no general suggestion that Canada should raise its intake. Francophone newspapers began running long stories, not just about Malaysia's unwillingness to accept the refugees, but also in-depth descriptions of the situation from journalists who visited the *Hai Hong*, who reported that “one literally walks on people, men, women, children, and elderly, stretched out or squatting, visibly exhausted and distressed, yet maintaining, without exception, great dignity” (Paringaux 16/11/78).³ Other newspapers, concentrating on the refusal of Southeast Asian countries to accept the *Hai Hong* passengers, began to run editorials appealing to humanity in general, not suggesting that Canada accept the refugees, as “[a] Vietnamese peasant would find it all but impossible to adjust himself to this different world, culture, and climate,” but that the Canadian government “induce our Malaysian friends to take in some of the sick and hapless human cargo” on the *Hai Hong* (Editorial *The Toronto Star* 15/11/78).

In the meantime, the UNHCR and various countries, including Canada, were engaged in talks with the Malaysian government. The UNHCR had taken the position that the *Hai Hong* passengers were refugees, and, with a personal appeal from Poul Hartling, the United

3 My translation. Original: “on marche littéralement sur les gens, hommes, femmes, enfants et vieillards, étendus ou accroupis, visiblement épuisés et angoissés, mais demeurant, sans exception, d'une grande dignité.”

Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, “began to pressure the Malaysians to allow them to go ashore,” (Pappone 12). However, Malaysia continued to deny the boat's occupants were refugees, citing their paid passage. Ottawa and other governments worked to convince Kuala Lumpur to delay towing the *Hai Hong* out to open waters; however, with no concrete commitments from any country, Malaysia continued its threat and tightened security around the vessel. After several meetings, Malaysian officials finally agreed to recommend to their Prime Minister that they “delay forcing the *Hai Hong* out to sea long enough to give the UNHCR and other countries time to make resettlement arrangements” (Pappone 14). However, if the PM agreed, the recipient countries would “have to take immediate action to... remove [the passengers] from Malaysia” (ibid. 14).

The decision the Government of Canada faced regarding the *Hai Hong* involved a moral dilemma: although it did not want to abandon the 2,500 refugees on board the *Hai Hong*, accepting them would mean bypassing tens of thousands of refugees already in camps awaiting resettlement, including over 35,000 in Malaysia alone. Cullen wondered if, in this case, Canada should “give priority to people on the *Hai Hong* who had just arrived” (Pappone 15). He publicly stated that Canada would support whatever position the UN took, but he felt that the UNHCR was taking too long to decide how to handle the situation. He was determined to take quick action on the *Hai Hong*, and he was convinced Canada should take a leadership role, a “commitment of such magnitude that other countries would be encouraged to follow,” despite concern that Canada might end up “caught with the whole thing” (ibid. 19). In the end, Cullen chose to take the risk, allowing the emergency situation of the *Hai Hong* to trump fairness to the refugees waiting in camps.

As previously mentioned, Couture had announced earlier that Québec would accept 200 *Hai Hong* refugees; Cullen later described Québec's offer as “the first real break” for Canada's involvement in the *Hai Hong* issue (Pappone 15). The federal government's decision to commit to taking 600 refugees was made quickly, with little Cabinet discussion. It was not without support, however, as Cullen noted that the media was “pushing [us] in the very direction that we wanted to go by constantly asking us what we intended to do” (Cullen quoted in Pappone 15). Members of Parliament “kept up their questioning in the House of Commons, and telegrams and letters from the public flowed into the [Employment and

Immigration] department” (ibid. 15). The media had succeeded in capturing Canada's attention on the issue.

Canada did not end up acting alone. France and the US announced their intentions to take some of the refugees around the same time as Canada, although Canada was the first country to select, process, and remove people from the *Hai Hong*. In the end, Canada took 604, the United States took 897, the Federal Republic of Germany accepted 657, France took 222, Switzerland accepted 52, New Zealand took 9, and Australia accepted 8.⁴ In addition, the US volunteered to take any refugees left over at the end of the selection process; the last group of 76 refugees left the *Hai Hong* on April 24, 1979, bound for the United States.

Canadian Public and Media Reaction to the Decision

With the high profile of the *Hai Hong* incident in Canada, the media and public reactions to the government's handling of it were sure to have significant consequences for further dealings with the Indochinese refugee crisis. While the crisis was over for the 2,500 people on the *Hai Hong*, there were still tens of thousands of people waiting in refugee camps; 61,000 Vietnamese had escaped to Malaysia in 1978 alone, with another 49,000 landing in Indonesia (Robinson 42). The Government of Canada noted in its *Indochinese Refugee Program* report that Canada “took special measures to accept 600 refugees from the *Hai Hong*, thus breaking the impasse in that difficult situation. The dramatic *Hai Hong* situation together with the increasing exodus from Viet Nam have heightened Canadian media and public interest in and sympathy for these people” (Indochinese Refugee Program 4). Indeed, although the newspapers had regularly mentioned the crisis going on in Southeast Asia, with the *Hai Hong* standoff, the amount of coverage grew considerably. We will now examine the reaction to the government's acceptance of the *Hai Hong* refugees and see how it opened the possibility of increasing resettlement in Canada beyond 70 families a month.

The first sign of the media's response came at the press conference where the announcement was made. It was three days after the Québec National Assembly “voted unanimously... to ask federal government permission to accept 200” of the *Hai Hong* refugees

4 Interestingly, resettlement in Germany was conducted through an individual program set up by the Minister of the State of Niedersachsen, and all refugees accepted by Germany were resettled there (Iken 1).

(CP Teletype 16/11/78) that Cullen and External Affairs Minister Don Jamieson held a news conference to announce Canada's intent to accept 600 *Hai Hong* passengers, and officially accept Québec's commitment to resettle one-third of them. Cullen had voiced concern that, as the news conference would be held during a political convention, "it might very well appear to be a bit of political hokery pokery" (Pappone 21), and the initial feeling seemed to confirm these fears. However, when the reporters began asking questions, the tone quickly changed course, and the journalists "became interested and emotionally involved," rather than turning the public against the government's stated commitment (ibid. 22).

The day after Cullen's announcement, the newspapers applauded Canada's intention to accept 600 refugees, with articles such as "Canada first to offer haven" and "Selection of 'lucky 600' refugees to begin today" (*The Toronto Sun* 19/11/78 and *Ottawa Journal* 20/11/78). Media coverage then concentrated on what was being done to prepare for the refugees' imminent arrival, and to what extent and how many each province was willing to commit. In addition, newspapers frequently published human-interest profiles of Vietnamese refugees already settled in Canada (as fifty families of "boat people" had been quietly arriving each month). The profiles indicated an enthusiastic embrace of the goal to rescue at least the *Hai Hong* refugees, and cheerful stories of Vietnamese refugees experiencing Canadian food and snowy winter for the first time warmed the public further. The reaction of the media set the overall tone for how the story would unfold before the public, and how Canadians would then react to the ongoing Indochinese refugee issue.

However, despite the media's presentation of near-universal goodwill and acceptance of the *Hai Hong* refugees in Canada, a few dissident voices came through, as well. The weakened economy made many concerned about the possibility of an increase in taxes to pay for refugee resettlement, or immigrants taking jobs from Canadians (Letters to the Editor: 03/12/78 *The Toronto Sun*; 11/12/78 *The Toronto Star*). Some mentioned that Canada's unemployment rate was the highest it had been in years, and that people whose ancestors had helped settle Canada "[were] going hungry and [had] no work and yet our government [was bringing] these people here" (11/12/78 *The Toronto Star*).

As if in agreement with this viewpoint, Alberta Manpower Minister Bert Hohol sent a communication to Cullen November 21, stating that his province would accept up to 50

refugees, but only if the federal government covered full funding of health expenses, language schooling, and job training (CP *Ottawa Journal* 04/12/78). Hohol stated that “[i]t must be clearly understood that Alberta expects this support to be continued, if necessary, for up to three years, at which time these people can become Canadian citizens” (Jaremko 05/12/78). The communication was publicly released, and, especially juxtaposed with Québec's ready acceptance, whatever the cost, of at least 200 refugees, this provided extensive fodder for shaming Alberta's government. Canada's public, roused by the media into goodwill toward the refugees, refused to listen when Hohol tried to revise the record and accuse Cullen of deliberately misunderstanding him. Letters to the editor generally commended the federal government's action on the *Hai Hong*, criticized wealthy Alberta's stinginess, and suggested Canada could accept far more Indochinese refugees (Letters to the Editor *The Toronto Star* 11/12/78). The public outcry against Hohol and Alberta demonstrated the prevailing attitude of goodwill and desire to help the Indochinese refugees.

After announcing the acceptance of the 600 refugees from the *Hai Hong* in November, immigration service providers were overwhelmed with the public's offers of assistance with babysitting and housing, and donations of furniture and clothing. Not wanting to pass up the public's generosity, the government announced they had all the help they could use for the *Hai Hong*, but asked the public to keep in mind the steady flow of Indochinese refugees into Canada who would continue arriving in need of such assistance (Pappone 48).

With the *Hai Hong* incident, from the general opinion that, although something had to be done, Vietnamese refugees would not adapt to life in Canada, the media coverage, editorials, and public letters to the newspapers changed to suggesting that Canada “has been welcoming persecuted people for many years... [We] should admit at least 10,000-20,000 of the refugees in a similar action as in 1956 from Hungary, in 1968 from Czechoslovakia, or refugees from Chile” (*The Toronto Star* 11/12/78), and that “the least we can do is commit ourselves to... welcome 20,000 of the boat people to Canada as quickly as they can be brought here. Taking that number would be no reason for self-congratulation. But it would be a start” (*The Globe and Mail* 06/12/78). With more and more refugees fleeing Vietnam and Democratic Kampuchea every day, the overall positive response to the *Hai Hong* refugees

would be conducive to policy changes the government would make in order to accept a far greater number of Indochinese refugees.

Post-Hai Hong Policy

As the public interest and desire to help the Indochinese boat refugees increased, the problem in Southeast Asia intensified, as well. From 21,505 in November of 1978, the number of people fleeing monthly by boat from Vietnam hit a peak of 54,871 in June 1979 (Chan 37). By mid-1979, over 700,000 Vietnamese had fled, and over 200,000 of these were still in Southeast Asian refugee camps, awaiting resettlement (Vo 163). Canada's 1976 *Immigration Act* provided the policy means of increasing the number of Indochinese refugees, including the acceptance of those who might not adapt well to Canadian life, and the implementation of the private sponsorship program.

By the end of 1978, the Canadian public's "overwhelming response in terms of material and volunteer help for the *Hai Hong*... provided the impetus for Cullen" to announce a new goal for Canada regarding Indochinese refugee resettlement (Pappone 21-22). The 1979 *Annual Plan for Refugee Resettlement* specifically pointed out private sponsorship as a means to accept more refugees:

To further broaden the range of refugees who can meet the standards for admittance, the Act makes provision for volunteer groups to sponsor refugees. These groups sign a legal undertaking to provide initial support and resettlement assistance during the first year in Canada. This will allow Canada to admit refugees who could not otherwise be considered capable of successful establishment. (631-78RD 3)

With the private sponsorship program in mind, and the consistently-encouraging media publicity, the government's *Indochinese Refugee Program for 1979* implemented an immediate "expanded program to accept 5,000 Indochinese refugees in the calendar year 1979, on the basis of an increase in the present metered intake from 70 to 200 families a month" (630-78RD 2). The government was prepared to re-evaluate the numbers if necessary; the Cabinet agreed "that the Minister of Employment and Immigration report back to Cabinet no later than July 1, 1979 on whether there is need to increase the government's commitment for Indochinese refugee resettlement (ibid. 2).

In a February 1979 Gallup poll, “when Canadians were asked their views on tripling of the Indochinese refugee program to 5,000 in 1979, 52% felt that the number was too high, 37% felt that it was about right, and only 7% felt that it was too low” (Memorandum 336-72 7). However, “offers of private sponsorships for the refugees indicated the existence also of a pro-refugee public response, which may have encouraged the Canadian Government to raise its quota in June 1979 to 8,000” (Somerset 110).

Nevertheless, in terms of the scale of the problem, this increase was still not nearly enough, with over 200,000 refugees already awaiting resettlement and the numbers growing daily. Thousands of Canadian applications for private sponsorship were flowing in. Pat Marshall, writing for the Canadian Immigration Historical Society, credits the *Hai Hong* with launching the private sponsorship host program:

In the beginning was the *Hai Hong*, a boat straining under the collective anguish of 2,450 refugees, victims of the communist takeover of South Viet Nam. When Malaysia refused to allow the boat to land, the ensuing stand-off attracted world attention to the plight of all Indochinese refugees. Constant media coverage brought the faces of the refugees into all of our homes... By June, 1979... refugee sponsorship by private groups had been made possible. (Marshall 1)

In June 1979, the Liberals lost power, and Joe Clark and the Progressive Conservative party took control of the government. Contrary to a few months earlier, by July 1979, only 38% of Canadians disapproved of accepting more Indochinese refugees, while 52% now approved of admitting more. It is possible that “extensive media coverage of the plight of the 'boat people'... may have helped to awaken a humanitarian response in the general public ” (Somerset 110). At this time, with a wide variety of community organizations, from religious groups to bowling clubs, desiring to sponsor refugees, the newly-elected government dramatically increased the quota to 50,000. Apart from the 8,000 already committed to, the government would set up a matching program, allowing up to 21,000 private sponsorships, with one government-sponsored refugee for every privately-sponsored one.

It's not entirely clear why the new Progressive Conservative government increased the Indochinese refugee quota so dramatically. While UN pressure on countries to respond to the crisis likely affected Canada's quotas to some extent, it is also likely that “the fulfilment of

Canada's demographic and economic needs justified the increased quota” (Somerset 111). Canada's immigration numbers had fallen over recent years, and the majority of the Vietnamese refugees were young and able to work.

To the government's surprise, the 21,000 privately-sponsored refugee cap was reached after just four months. Controversially, the government decided to keep the quota at 50,000, but remove the matching program, allowing as many private sponsorships as desired up to 50,000, with the government covering any remainder within the quota. The Minister of Employment and Immigration justified this move by stating that exceeding acceptance of 50,000 refugees would “strain the absorptive capacity of Canada in terms of schools, health and medical aid and the ability to successfully integrate these people into Canadian life” (Canada 01/11/79).

The Liberal party returned to power in March 1980. The following month, the government raised the quota once more, to 60,000 total, including another 10,000 guaranteed government-sponsored refugees. Starting in 1979, “in the space of 24 months, more than 60,000 [Indochinese refugees] were taken in – most of them Vietnamese – and 34,000 were sponsored personally by Canadians themselves” (Anderssen and Jiménez 1). There was suggestion that this increase was partly due to the fall of the Conservative government, which may have been affected by its handling of the private sponsorship/government matching program. Somerset notes that “the Minister for [Employment] and Immigration, Mr. Atkey, lost his seat in the general election... the constituency he represented... had a high proportion of immigrant residents, suggesting that public reaction to the Government's abandonment of the matching formula was a factor in the defeat of Mr. Atkey” (Somerset 112).

Regardless of the reasons, the dramatic increase from 5,000 to 60,000 in just over a year, coupled with the ongoing number of refugees Canada would accept over the rest of the Indochinese refugee movement, made Canada the country that took in the second largest number of Indochinese refugees in absolute terms, and the most per capita. Of the top resettlement countries, the US accepted 1.2 million refugees, Canada accepted over 200,000, Australia accepted 180,000, and France accepted 120,000 (Vo 179-198). Canada's commitment to the 604 *Hai Hong* refugees, and the ensuing public and political will, had opened the door to helping thousands more.

Conclusion

Canada's reaction to the *Hai Hong* incident shows the impact a single focused episode within an overwhelming crisis can have, if it captures media and public attention. We see Québec using its new immigration selection powers to take a leadership role within Canada, and Canada taking an international leadership role on the Indochinese refugee crisis. The *Hai Hong* issue set off a massive private sponsorship movement in Canada, which led to large-scale implementation of Canada's new refugee policy. After several years of taking very little action on the Indochinese refugee movement, the impetus provided by the *Hai Hong* resulted in Canada taking the largest number of Indochinese refugees per capita in the world.

Works Cited

- Anderssen, Erin and Marina Jiménez. "Summer of Love." 2004, July 03. *The Globe and Mail* (Toronto).
- Canada, House of Commons, Issue No. 1, 1 November 1979. Minutes of the Proceedings and Evidence of the Standing Committee on Labour, Manpower and Immigration.
- "Canada first to offer haven." 1978, November 11. *The Toronto Sun* (Toronto).
- Canadian Press. "Alberta's refugee policy called racist." 1978, December 04. *Ottawa Journal* (Ottawa).
- Canadian Press (CP). "Ottawa may allow some in Canada." 1978, November 15. *The Gazette* (Montréal).
- Canadian Press. "Vietnamese with vars refugees." 1978, November 16. *Teletype*.
- Chan, Yuk Wah, ed. *The Chinese/Vietnamese Diaspora: Revisiting the boat people*. Routledge: London, 2011.
- Chénier-Cullen, Nicole. *I Found My Thrill on Parliament Hill*. iUniverse, Inc.: Bloomington, 2009.
- Cullen, Bud. "Memorandum to the Cabinet: Democratic Kampuchea – Human Rights and Refugees. Cabinet document: 305-78MC. 1978, June 08.
- Davies, Sara E. *Legitimising Rejection: International Refugee Law in Southeast Asia*. Martinus Nijhoff Publishers: Leiden, 2008.
- Editorial. "Asian refugees must be helped." 1978, November 15. *The Toronto Star* (Toronto).
- Editorial. "At our own door." 1978, December 06. *The Globe and Mail* (Toronto).
- Gazette News Services. "Malaysia ignores appeals for refugee ship." 1978, November 16. *The Gazette* (Montréal).
- Iken, Katja. "Gestrandete der Apokalypse." 2008, December 01. *Der Spiegel* (Germany).
- "Indochinese Refugee Program 1979." Cabinet document. 1978, December 18.
- Jaremko, Gordon. "Hospitality took back seat to cash." 1978, December 05. *The Guardian* (Charlottetown).
- Knowles, Valerie. *Strangers at our Gates: Canadian Immigration and Immigration Policy 1540-2006*. Dundurn Press: Toronto, 2007.

- Letters to the Editor. "Sunday sound-off." 1978, December 03. *The Toronto Sun* (Toronto).
- Letters to the Editor. "Welcome more Viet refugees, reader urges." 1978, December 11. *The Toronto Star* (Toronto).
- Marshall, Pat. "From Friends to Hosts to Friends: Memories of the origin of the host program," CIHS Bulletin. *The Canadian Immigration Historical Society* (2009) 55.
- Memorandum to Cabinet. "Indochinese Refugees." Cabinet document: 336-72. 1979, June 18.
- Moulton, T.R.J., Supervisor. "Indochinese Refugee Program 1979" Cabinet document: 630-78RD. 1978, December 21.
- Moulton, T.R.J., Supervisor. "Record of Cabinet Decision: Annual Plan for Refugee Resettlement" Cabinet document: 631-78RD. 1978, December 21.
- Pappone, Rene. "The *Hai Hong*: Profit, tears and joy." Employment and Immigration Canada: Ottawa, 1982.
- Paringaux, Roland-Pierre. "Entassés dans un petit cargo, 2,500 fugitifs vietnamiens dans une situation dramatique." 1978, November 16. *Le Devoir* (Montréal).
- Privy Council Office. "RG2, Series A-5-a, Volume 6457, Access code: 90." Cabinet document. 1975, June 26.
- Robinson, W. Courtland. *Terms of Refuge : The Indochinese Exodus and the International Response*. Zed Books: London, 1998.
- "Selection of 'lucky 600' refugees to begin today." 1978, November 20. *Ottawa Journal* (Ottawa).
- Somerset, Felicity. "Indochinese refugees in Canada: Government policy and public response." *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 10.1 (1982): 106-114 .
- Trần, Khánh. *The Ethnic Chinese and Economic Development in Vietnam*. Institute of Southeast Asian Studies: Singapore, 1993.
- United Press International (UPI). "Refugee freighter ordered to leave." 1978, November 15. *The Gazette* (Montréal).
- Vo, Nghia M. *The Vietnamese Boat People, 1954 and 1975-1992*. McFarland and Company Inc.: London, 2006.