



BOOK REVIEW // CRITIQUE DE LIVRES

Running on Empty: Canada and the Indochinese Refugees, 1975–1980

Reviewed by Robin Higham

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RUNNING ON EMPTY is the most recent addition to the prestigious McGill-Queen's collection of Studies in (Canadian) Ethnic History. This impressive tome recounts the intriguing story of Canada's response to the Indochinese refugee crises from 1975 to 1980. Proposed by retired diplomat Michael Molloy and accompanied throughout by colleagues Peter Duschinsky, Kurt F. Jensen and Robert Shalka, the book is a highly readable and yet intellectually rigorous. It recounts a period in modern Canadian history that reflected, and in many ways re-defined, our emerging national self-awareness. Its nearly 600 pages are divided into three parts: (1) the history of the crises itself and Canada's public policy and programme responses to the plight of Indochinese refugees fleeing post-war Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia; (2) the refugee selection and resettlement operations largely created and managed by Canadian Immigration Officers working out of Indonesia, Singapore, Bangkok, Hong Kong, Macao and Malaysia; and (3) the newcomer support story as refugees restarted their shattered lives in a strange new country.

There is too much here to do justice to all aspects of the book, so your reviewer will extract some of the most important messages and lessons for Canadians about how successful public policies were developed and how public servants and perhaps especially Canada's Immigration Foreign Service officers, were mobilized to implement those policies.

Most would agree that in many ways the history of immigration to Canada is a front-window look into the history of Canada; of who we were as a people and who we have become as a result of that history. *Running on Empty* then, not only reminds us of good public policy work but also, of who we are or...who we would like to think we are.

Many readers may find that most troubling are the standards that the lessons in *Running on Empty* set for contemporary Canadians as they face the current global refugee crisis. It raises the question: are up to it this time around?

Common-Cause as National Unifier

Running on Empty reminds us that the motivating rationale for the 1975/80 programme was primarily humanitarian and public acceptance that Canada must collaborate with other western democracies, as well as regional neighbours of the Indochinese countries, in sharing the "burden of refugee resettlement". But there was a counterpart to that national altruism; the refugee programme was eventually perceived by the public as a nation-building project that not only brought "high quality" newcomers to our cities and towns but also served to unite normally disparate groups of citizens around a common objective.

We see the formation of a hyper public-private partnership movement involving federal, provincial and municipal government players as well as civil society groups and individual citizens. There was a joint political and societal consensus on what needed to be done ... inspired by both feel-good compassion and community-reinforcing opportunity. Responding to the worsening refugee crises appears to have served as a powerful generator of social cohesion in Canada. Even in the trying economic and employment conditions at the time, Canadians mobilized to help those who were in so much more desperate circumstances. For example we are reminded how normally diverse religious groups formed interfaith mechanisms for collaborating in refugee settlement challenges.

Immigration Is Us

Because of their immediate and direct impact on a broad spectrum of social, fiscal and employment issues, Canada's immigration policies have always required public and media support. But that support is fragile and so, in turn, it is a function of public confidence in media and government messages. Because they are always urgent, controversial and emotional, refugee policies are particularly prone to generating national malaise. Keeping the borders open means that the public needs to trust the media, the political community as well as the counterpart ethnic groups already established

here. Without that confidence, this policy file risks undermining, rather than reinforcing, national social cohesion. After the humanitarian arguments, the nation-building opportunity was certainly the best selling point for winning and maintaining support, but the public nevertheless understood that there are two sides to the refugee-immigration discussion and that net benefits must justify policy or policy changes.

Leverage Mobilisers, Beware of Blockages

Time and again we see in Part 1, the historic review of refugee policy development, how fragile public support could be reinforced through messages focused on compassion for the plight of refugees and their families. A second driver was the national embarrassment that would accompany a do-

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nothing Canadian response in a clearly global crisis. The flip side of that shame stigma was potential national pride in designing a successful and generous Canadian model. Voters and taxpayers were also recruited to the cause by arguments that emphasized Canada's need for a constant flow of immigrants and the refugee community as a source of skilled energetic newcomers anxious to fill our vacant spaces.

But there were powerful counter concerns as well. Blockages to a more open border policy stance for refugees included the worrying level of unemployment in Canada (which had doubled from under 4% in the mid 1960's to over 8% in the late 1970's). Other blockages to refugee accommodation included imagined and real financial costs of refugee settlement, perceived risks of importing public health problems as well as, in the haste of refugee processing, admitting newcomers who would prove to be somehow incompatible with Canadian citizenship expectations or because of their wartime allegiances rendered them "unworthy" of being sheltered in Canada.

The already complicated public debate weighing these pros and cons was sometimes

overwhelmed by an aggressive community of refugee advocates focusing on the advantages and compassion arguments and dismissing the blockages as illegitimate in the circumstances.

Nothing Mobilizes Canadians Like Direct Involvement

The 1976 Immigration Act gave birth to the Private Sponsorship Programme, which has become a cornerstone of refugee settlement today. The programme harnessed public support for refugees by transferring ownership for projects motivated by national compassion, to civil society. Private sponsorship has been copied by many countries wrestling with sudden refugee accommodation challenges even today.

Motivating and Managing Public Servants

Running on Empty reminds us that high-risk programme implementation works best when the judgment of experienced officials is harnessed but given loose reins. Officials and managers of Canada's Indochinese refugee programme needed and usually got room to exercise their judgment and with that exercise their judgment strengthened as the programme matured. In the always unpredictable circumstances at their posts abroad, the fewer rules and rigid guidelines, the better. The pre-condition was a clear statement from government and Ottawa headquarters of programme objectives and constraints. Left largely to their own devices those dedicated officials were innovative policy makers and creative problem solvers. They were alert to government and public sensitivities on immigration matters and so knew how to remain faithful to the spirit of emerging refugee programmes. Distributed authority yielded distributed responsibility, just as management gurus promise.

Innovation Through New Mechanisms

Uncomfortable with the constant need to improvise, the Immigration Service quickly learned how to institutionalize their own guidelines by proposing new formal mechanisms to facilitate their tasks and to standardize procedures. Amongst the many such innovative mechanisms catalogued in Running on Empty, we learn of: (1) the creation

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of a two-step refugee acceptance mechanism – first “eligibility” and then “acceptability”; (2) the creation of an Indochinese Designated Class; (3) the introduction of an expanded Private Sponsorship Programme; (4) changes to eventually expand the notion of immigrant eligibility; (5) the employment of a series of standardized Circular Memorandums for communicating operating guidelines and priorities to distant officials; (6) the establishment of a Refugee Annual Plan for shifting refugee management from one-off and short-term to an institutionalized part of the government’s total immigration and international humanitarian agenda; and (7) the incorporation of multi-departmental consultations and input into the annual planning process.

Moderation Please, We’re Canadian

Finding just the right balance between Canada’s absorptive capacity for refugees and the seemingly endless supply is often played out in the media and public debate. The phenomenon of overly assertive domestic refugee-advocates pressing for what may be viewed by more conservative citizens to be too many, too different and too fast, can precipitate a public backlash against accommodating newcomers.

Clear Objectives, Flexible Rules

One of Running on Empty’s important contributions to the study of policy development in Canada is that it unpacks a process that, by accident or by design, led to a remarkably successful total response to a volatile situation involving a complex mix of domestic and international issues. The model: (1) got political and public agreement on objectives; (2) set out a makeshift immediate implementation plan with only flexible guidelines to start; (3) entrusted authority to the judgment of experienced officials; (4) continuously monitored results; and, (5) continuously recycled back into the loop any new lessons, objectives or information.

Conclusions

Running on Empty is entertaining and informative recent history but the book is also scholarly, rigorous and disciplined. It is less about integration than it is about the selection and recruitment of newcomers and their immediate settlement in Canada. As the authors themselves point out, there is little attempt here to measure the long-term integration success rate of the desperate and disparate 70,000 refugees who arrived in Canada 40 plus years ago.

Nevertheless, along the way, the discussions inevitably bump into the issue of absorptive capacity of Canadians to accommodate newcomers with sometimes radically different backgrounds, needs and expectations from their host communities. The specter of too many, too fast and too different, seems to have been set aside with a national wager on the power of universal good will across host and newcomer communities alike.

Officials had difficult and stressful daily choices to make in all that chaos. Their licence to reject desperate refugee candidates for security, public health and criminality risks as well as those viewed as “unlikely to integrate” obviously weighed heavily on them and clearly contributed significantly to the kind of running-on-empty spiritual fatigue indicated in the book’s title.

In the end, there may be too much to swallow here. The first 180 pages and the final conclusions are enough to deliver the valuable policy development and programme implementation messages. Those lessons may risk getting lost as the reader pushes on in Parts 2 and 3 to follow the fascinating human drama of the officers on the front lines in this crises. Parts 2 and 3 are nevertheless witness to a reflection of Canadian values, good and bad, strengths and weaknesses, and to remind ourselves that, on occasion we are able to set aside our fears and self-doubt and timidity and (blush) get it right. [bdp](#)