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Tasha Kheiriddin: In the age of Trump, Canada must stem the refugee tide

Ottawa must send a clear message that the country is not a migrant free for all

Tasha Kheiriddin

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A supporter holds up a sign reading "deport illegals now" as former US President and 2024 Republican presidential candidate Donald Trump speaks during a campaign rally at the Bojangles Coliseum in Charlotte, North Carolina, on July 24, 2024. PHOTO BY LOGAN CYRUS/AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES

U.S. President-Elect Donald Trump is not just revving his engines — he is ready to go. There have been a flurry of proclamations and appointments, including that of former ICE director [Tom Homan as his “border czar.”](#) What will Homan do in the role? At the 2024 National Conservatism Conference in Washington, he promised, “Trump comes back in January.... I will run the biggest deportation operation this country’s ever seen.” With 11 million migrants illegally in the country, he is not kidding.

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Forget trade, foreign policy, or even defence. The most critical issue facing Canada under the new Trump administration will be migration. The social, economic and political impact of millions of migrants coming into Canada in a short span of time cannot be underestimated. It would destroy what is left of the Canadian consensus on immigration. On one side, 58 per cent of Canadians already think there are [“too many immigrants”](#) in our country. But on the other, [64 per cent of us would have voted for Kamala Harris](#) — and many might want to offer sanctuary to desperate people fleeing Trump’s regime.

And their desperation will be on full display. Social media will be swamped with images of families running in the dead of night before they are split apart. Smugglers will get rich off their misery. People will freeze to death crossing farmers’ fields and forests in the dead of winter, in the hopes of getting here before Trump sends them to an internment camp.

To stave off this scenario, the first thing the federal government must do is revise the [Canada-U.S. Safe Third Country Agreement](#). The agreement provides that if a refugee claimant first arrives in the United States, they must claim refugee status there before attempting a claim in Canada. As of today, the agreement applies to anyone crossing into Canada along our entire land border, by train and at airports.

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However, there is still a glaring loophole. Under the act, a person who enters Canada illegally, other than at a designated port of entry, and remains undiscovered for 14 days, is exempt from the prohibition on seeking asylum in Canada per the agreement. They can then file an application for asylum from inside Canada. The issue has been flagged by the Canadian-American group [Lawyers for Secure Immigration](#) and [brought to the attention of Immigration Minister Marc Miller](#), but so far, immigration lawyer Veronique Malka says the group has had no response.

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According to [the government of Canada website](#), estimated processing time for refugee claimants is currently 25 months outside of Quebec, and 42 months inside Quebec. Lawyers for Secure Immigration say [the truth is closer to four years and longer](#). In other words, if you want to stave off deportation to your country of origin for Trump's entire term in office, while working and receiving benefits, come to Canada. Now add a million applications to that backlog, and that time will only get longer.

To discourage people from coming, the government must remove the 14-day exemption and require all refugee applications to be made solely from outside of Canada. It must also allocate more resources to speed up claim processing times.

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Critics will say that this will drive migrants underground, like in the U.S., where they cross the border illegally and never seek status for fear of being deported. This is a risk notably in Canada’s seven designated “sanctuary cities,” where illegal migrants can receive services and benefits without having to disclose their status: Toronto, Vancouver and Montreal, Ajax, Edmonton, Hamilton and London. Since cities are legally creatures of the province, Ottawa needs to cooperate with provincial government to find a legal means of revoking or outlawing the designation.

Unfortunately, we may not get a lot of cooperation from our neighbours. American cities have already encouraged migrants to leave, [including to Canada](#). All the more reason to send a tough signal now that we won’t let this happen, before Trump takes office — and before the migration tsunami hits.

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