

**Immigration**

# Proposed mass approval of visitor visas cause for serious concern | Sergio R. Karas

By **Sergio R. Karas**

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(January 25, 2023, 1:48 PM EST) -- A recent article in the *Globe & Mail* based on information obtained from senior officials of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC) states that the federal government is prepared to use extraordinary measures to address the 500,000 applications for visitor visas that are currently in their backlog.

The article cites a memo presented to the minister of immigration, with two policy options. The first is to grant approvals to approximately 200,000 applications in bulk. The second option is to approve half a million applications, waiving the requirement that each applicant show sufficient funds to support themselves in Canada and satisfy a visa officer that they will leave at the end of their authorized stay. According to the article, the proposals being considered to have caused IRCC employees considerable dismay. The proposals appear to be politically motivated and not based on sound policy.

To understand the magnitude of this policy action, we must put it into context. The 500,000 visitor applications are part of the nearly 2.1 million inventory for all immigration categories, including work permits, study permits and permanent residency that has built up during the pandemic. The visitor visa backlog relates to applicants from countries that require a Temporary Resident Visa (TRV) before they can enter Canada. The bulk of TRV applications is from China, India and the Philippines. The visitor backlog does not include applicants from visa-free countries like the U.S., EU, U.K., Israel, Mexico, Singapore and others that are exempt because they present a low risk of overstaying or are signatories of international mobility treaties with Canada. Conversely, those who require TRVs often come from countries that are subject to more thorough scrutiny for reasons that may include fraud, security, insufficient funds, or weak ties to their country.

Along with the TRV backlog, two programs that have a considerable impact on allocating resources include the resettlement of over 40,000 Afghan refugees and the granting of an unlimited number of visas under the *Canada-Ukraine Authorization for Emergency Travel Measures* (CUAET). Other categories of applicants are affected by lengthy delays. They include work permits for those who have arranged employment or are already working in Canada, post-graduates who are applying for permanent residency, spousal sponsorships and study permit applicants. Also, the government announced a goal to bring half a million permanent residents annually by 2025. This will further affect the allocation of already-stretched processing resources. The federal government's handling of the immigration program is disconnected from IRCC's ability to accomplish those lofty goals, and it has a ripple effect on all immigration categories.

By waiving eligibility requirements for visitor visas, IRCC may trigger collateral consequences on other lines of business. First, a high level of fraud may be involved in many visitor applications that will not be detected. Second, some visitors may intend to claim refugee status, adding pressure to an already-overtaxed Immigration and Refugee Board. A similar situation arose when the visa requirements for Mexico were removed, resulting in a multifold jump in refugee claims. Third, there may be a portion of visitors who will overstay and look for other avenues to try and regularize their status in the future. Unfortunately, many will fall prey to unscrupulous individuals who will promise them residency but will do nothing or pursue applications using fraudulent means.

Most important, a ministerial decision that will waive long-standing sound and sensible requirements to verify the legitimacy of applications undermines the rule of law. It will virtually abolish the legal process and will invite a tidal wave of new fraudulent applicants who will hope to get through the system undetected. Also, the inventory will be quickly replenished by new applicants. The measures will be viewed as unfair by many who abide by the requirements to present applications well-supported by documentary evidence and will destroy public confidence in the system.

The impact of the potential sudden approval of half a million applications will go well beyond immigration. It will result in increased demand for flights to and from Canada when airports and airlines are still struggling to cope with post-pandemic dislocations. Many will remain in Canada for the long term, exacerbating the housing crisis. Last, there may also be some impact on health care, as many elderly visitors may require medical assistance. It may also increase maternity tourism, an already-problematic issue. Unscrupulous agents will take full advantage of the situation.

From all the policy choices at the federal government's disposal, the approval of visitor visas in bulk is the worst option. Directing processing resources to those who are not allowed work detracts from the minister's recent declarations that Canada needs more immigrants to address labour shortages. If the federal government were serious about reducing talent shortages, it would instead direct those resources to process work permits. The government could also process work permit extensions, which are currently taking five months, much faster. It could also allocate resources to shorten delays in processing permanent resident cards, which are hampering residents' travel plans, as they are unable to return to Canada without that document. They could also make it easier for employers to obtain Labour Market Impact Assessments (LMIA) for applicants they want to hire, instead of insisting on long periods of advertising, a high filing fee of \$1,000 and several weeks of processing time.

The unintended consequences of a bad policy choice are readily apparent and must be avoided to protect the integrity of the system, prevent uncertainty by applicants and ensure that Canada continues to be viewed as a country valuing the rule of law.

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