

## REVIEW • FORUM

Doug Saunders' *Maximum Canada*<sup>1</sup>**Bigger, bolder, better: Historical images and Canadian population history**

Review by Gordon Darroch, York University

Doug Saunders, known as Canada's leading international-affairs columnist, has become one of Canada's leading public intellectuals. In *Maximum Canada*, he writes for a wide public, aiming to influence public policy and asking that we think carefully about our collective past and about what we are presently doing, and failing to do, to shape our collective futures.

Saunders' 2011 book, *Arrival City*, was received as carefully researched and humane, written for a wide audience.<sup>2</sup> *Maximum Canada* is a very different book, focused on Canada in a rare attempt to make this country's population history a matter of urgent public debate. His starting point is "an often overlooked fact about Canada: it is a country that has long had trouble keeping people" (p. 8). The history of emigration seems an unlikely topic for an intervention into Canadian public-policy, much less for aspiring best-sellers. It is welcomed.

Saunders constructs a tale about how from the seventeenth century onward Canada has been marked by a singular contestation—a "moral war"—between two overarching worldviews, a "minimizing impulse" and a "maximizing impulse." These conflicting typifications are Saunders' central narrative device in his story about Canada's history of "underpopulation" (p. 5).

The book is organized in three parts. First is Saunders' version of the origins and character of his "minimizing impulse," stretching from the early nineteenth century to the beginning of the twentieth. Emanating from powerful governing ideas (p. 9), the formation had six main features: restrictive immigration, which sustained narrow British ethnic homogeneity, primacy of staples exports, a racialized view of indigenous peoples, fearful relations with the US, and unduly limited population growth. The consequence was "insufficient population density, market size, and taxpayer base to service the country's geographic, human, and economic needs" (p. 11).

The second part is the story of the "maximizing impulse." It first surfaced during Canada's greatest immigration experiment in the Laurier-Sifton years, 1896 to 1911, but only bloomed in the late 1960s.<sup>3</sup> The transformations arose from sea changes in the everyday experience and world views of ordinary Canadians—marked visibly, for example, by Expo '67; political elites had to catch up. The new formation began with more diverse sources of immigration, accompanied by a shift from the primacy of resource extraction toward an urban-industrial and service economy,

1. *Maximum Canada: Why 35 Million Canadians Are Not Enough* (Toronto: Knopf Canada, 2017). ISBN 978-0-7352-7309-2. Softcover C\$29.95, 247 pp.

2. See, for example, the reviews posted at <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2010/sep/18/arrival-city-migration-doug-saunders> and <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/03/18/books/arrival-city-by-doug-saunders-review.html>.

3. Between 1896 and 1911, some two million immigrants joined a population of just over five million.

with late-blooming interest in continental trade. Quebec's neo-nationalism emerged in this era, as did a slow conversion toward acknowledging indigenous peoples as sovereign nations that require rights-recognition and negotiation. Concentrated urban populations emerged as the main source of cultural and economic creativity (ch. 5).

A sub-plot in these accounts is a comparison between the negative effects of continuing emigration from Canada and the positive effects of US immigration. For Saunders, if Canada's limited population growth largely resulted from massive emigration to the south, this emigration also drained off the most capable and energetic people. I find this to be his most contentious claim.

In the third part, Saunders assesses the risks of continuing "underpopulation" and makes policy recommendations. The challenge is to boost the population to 100 million by 2100, requiring "a set of family policies to bring fertility rates to 1.7 and a modest increase in immigration, to a rate of 1.3 percent annually," to approximately 400,000 or so immigrants yearly (p. 157).<sup>4</sup> Saunders' focus is not on population growth but on enhancing human "capacity" (p. 152)—that is, intensified urban concentrations of markets, taxpayers, labour forces, cultural audiences, and clusters of expertise. The argument echoes his main theses in *Arrival City*, which documents the dynamism of concentrated migrant communities worldwide, including the Thorncliff community in Toronto.

He makes five key points about the costs of failing to increase population capacities. The first is a familiar argument about an ageing population, which increases dependency ratios and restricts the fiscal basis for public services. He provides a brief, conversant account of the problem, suggesting that although it is the most widely publicized, it is also the most readily resolvable.

Of greater concern are Canada's limited size and concentration of markets, which inhibit the productivity of a generally well-educated and resourceful labour force, making innovators and investors unduly dependent on foreign capital and markets. Saunders is persuasive about how the expansion of innovative urban centres and increased density of urban populations underwrite economic productivity and employment. His third point concerns the environmental costs of a scattered national population, and here Saunders writes against the grain. Population growth is not a problem, he says, if it provides a critical mass of strategically distributed fiscal and human resources, increasing the reliance on green energy, lowering transportation costs and carbon-dioxide emissions, and enhancing coastal and urban infrastructures to face the consequences of climate change.

His fourth issue is national security and stability. He notes that contrary to much public sentiment, immigrant populations tend to reduce crime rates and particularly violent crime (although he skirts the causal question). He argues that larger and more concentrated populations make more efficient use of resources for defense and security needs, while boosting the capacity for multilateral influence. The fifth and last issue is cultural. Multiple dispersed and regionally variable audiences challenge Canadians' ability to cultivate and sustain many cultural institutions, from magazines, news channels, and museums to statistical agencies. He points to Quebec's more concentrated and successful funding in supporting cultural institutions as an example.

Chapter 7, "The case against 100 million," is particularly laudable. Saunders thoughtfully reviews the obstacles and risks faced in attempting to achieve his policy goals. First, he provides a measured account of why political interventions are required; the rare historical conditions engendering immigrant successes in the post-WWII years cannot be duplicated. Then he faults

4. Saunders acknowledges the objective is not an original idea, serving as a symbol for a larger set of proposals (p. 157). See the Century Initiative (<http://www.centuryinitiative.ca>), Advisor Council on Economic Growth, October 20, 2016 (<https://www.budget.gc.ca/aceg-ccce/pdf/immigration-eng.pdf>).

the regionally decentralized and exclusionary accreditation processes that create obstacles for current immigrants in upgrading their technical and professional training. Finally, he addresses the possibilities of a rising anti-immigrant backlash in the absence of sufficient institutional preparation, but is optimistic about the ways that racism and exclusion can be moderated. He candidly admits that in the absence of sufficient institutional preparation and investment, even immigrants' historic inventiveness and ambition might not make the risks of increased immigration worthwhile.

The concluding chapter asks how Canada can establish a supportive context for significant population growth. Saunders makes a persuasive case for expanded, subsidized child-care, supplemented by more flexible family leave and work programs. Other proposals include increasing investments in immigrant settlement and employment opportunities through appropriate Federal and Provincial ministries. Following *Arrival City*, he argues that the key is fostering urban homeownership, small business, and employment opportunities for immigrants in a variety of urban growth poles, as well as in Canada's three major reception cities. Increasing population concentrations provides opportunities for newcomers, enhances environmental stewardship, and has widespread, long-term benefits.

*Maximum Canada* deserves to be widely read and debated. It is readable, convincing, and (with important exceptions) draws on a considerable, selected research literature. It is notable in making population history central to public policy debates. In my view, it could serve as a starting text in senior undergraduate and graduate courses in social demography, population history, social change, or political sociology. But it needs to be complemented by alternative research studies and critical assessments. The book's ambition and concision invite criticism of its historical accounts and leave a number of nagging questions.

Saunders' representation of the Canadian national experience in terms of two conflicting "impulses" lends the book a dramatic and engaging story-line. Like most historical typifications, however, they greatly simplify complex historical processes, including a tendency to exaggerate the organic, self-adjusting character of the formations described. The nineteenth- and early twentieth-century "minimizing impulse" is simplistically presented as a set of governing ideologies, imposed from above on seemingly passive ordinary folk, almost without resistance (p. 25–27, 39).<sup>5</sup>

By contrast, the "maximizing impulse" erupts in the 1960s "from below," catching political elites by surprise (p. 115–16, 127). Absent is a convincing account of this historic turnabout. The absence partly arises from a questionable stereotype about Canada's rural past as peopled by self-sufficient, isolated, non-commercial "traditional" folk (in Saunders' unfortunate terms, "a self-selected group who didn't want much from life" [p. 49]).<sup>6</sup>

A related, deep flaw is Saunders' repeated notion that continuing emigration to the US throughout most of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was a powerful filter, selecting out the most knowledgeable, ambitious, inventive, entrepreneurial, and talented (p. 38, 46, 49, and elsewhere). Saunders cites a useful body of migration research, but none warrants this speculation and many other studies complicate it (McInnis 1994; Ramirez 2001; Widdis 1998).<sup>7</sup> Migration

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5. The resistances were readily defeated, as in the rebellions of 1830s.

6. For revisionist interpretations, see Craig (2009) or McCalla (2015) regarding the routine involvement of early Canadian rural households in local markets and their "deep engagement in the international world of goods" (McCalla 2015: 153).

7. McInnis (1994) gives some evidence that significant numbers of nineteenth-century emigrants from Canada to the US were simply sojourners, those who found it easier or cheaper to travel through Canada before moving on, as they originally intended. Saunders cites the many studies of the historical French-

flows are always selective, with selectivity varying widely. The differences in the character of migrants and non-migrants are complex and difficult to address with historical evidence. The closest Saunders comes to systematic evidence is citing Lew and Cater (2012), who indicate that Canadian migrants to the US in the first decades of twentieth century tended to be more literate than those who remained. Research documents a variety of historical conditions under which migrants tend to be more literate or educated than non-migrants (see Long 1973; Ozden and Schiff 2006). But Saunders takes literacy itself to stand in for knowledge, ambition, inventiveness, and talent. Of course, some talented people left. The original authors are more nuanced, however, interpreting literacy differentials in the context of chain and career migration, differing employment opportunities, and the likely effects of US literacy tests after 1917.

I find curious, too, Saunders' notion about the determinative role of the "minimizing impulse" in the history of racialization and brutality toward Canada's indigenous peoples. He fails to note how this relationship has been paralleled in the US and the antipodal settler societies, despite many historical differences. The author also ignores some less sanguine research about the limited effect of immigration on wages and employment even in the longer term—or, for that matter, on solving the ageing population problem (see Riddell et al. 2016; this review was probably not available in time for Saunders' publication, but the research cited was).

Two nagging questions about Quebec arise. Saunders usefully cites the province's experience of support for cultural institutions and the relative success of its childcare policies. But Quebec is not Canada. One wonders about the capacity of our very different regional cultures to pursue similar political initiatives, especially among the low-tax political cultures. And unaddressed is the larger question about how to manage ramped-up national immigration without it being perceived as culturally threatening in Quebec or as upsetting the historical balance of population, political influence and economic well-being between the province and the rest of Canada.

*Maximum Canada* is an unusual attempt at public education and intervention in public policy. Saunders constructs a compelling and intentionally provocative combination of a simplified but engaging historical narrative and a set of policy proposals. The book's central virtue lies in its potential to invite public consideration of the many social and political implications of our population history and future.

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Canadian emigration to New England as if they confirmed his idea that this bled the province of its best and brightest. No evidence supports this claim. Even the work he mainly cites, Bélanger and Bélanger (2000), reiterates the importance to emigration decisions of prior migrants, family networks, channels of information, chain migration, and the opportunities for employment in not-too-distant mills, including employment of family members, especially of women. The emigrants were self- and family-selected, but not by some sieve that strained talent, risk-taking, or initiative and left the dregs behind.

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