

REVIEW • FORUM

Doug Saunders' *Maximum Canada*¹

Does size really matter?

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The book by the *Globe and Mail's* columnist Doug Saunders, *Maximum Canada*, proposes to encourage a substantial increase in the population of Canada. Indeed, according to the author, the current population of Canada, about 35 million inhabitants, is not enough, and immigration and fertility policies should seek to strongly increase the size to 100 million by 2100, in order to improve the overall living conditions of the people and to have more opportunities to deal with the consequences of population aging. In other words, according to the author, the size of the population matters. Reading this book leaves me with mixed impressions, as it includes several very interesting parts but also has many deficiencies that, when summed up, do not manage to convince this reviewer as to how an increase in population size would really change the daily life of the average Canadian citizen.

The first two parts of the book are the most interesting. Through a rigorous and concise overview of the history of Canada since the British conquest of 1760, the author presents a summary of the debate around two geopolitical views of Canada. For most of its history and until the end of the 19th century, a *minimalist* view influenced most government policies. Canada then had the role of a colony, with the economy oriented toward providing resources for England, and immigration was restrained to assure that Canada's population profile remained white, British, loyalist, and rural. And thus, entrepreneurial thinking and education were not promoted, trade with other nations was constrained by taxes and fees, and emigration toward the USA was high. Consequently, the overall population growth was small.

Starting in the early 20th century, mentalities gradually changed and a *maximalist* view took over the minimalist one. Canada switched from British dependency to North American integration, seeing the emerging US as its main trade partner, which culminated in the free trade deal in the 1980s. Among other important changes at the time, ethnic diversity became recognized and accepted by every class. Indeed, as the author aptly notes, today even the harshest critics of immigration to Canada would be considered by most other countries as favouring immigration.

Although this reviewer is not an expert in political history, these parts of Saunders' book appear accurate, even the statements related to the Quebec situation. Indeed, Saunders accurately states that the unloved Bill 101, far from being an excessively oppressive regulation, does not differ that much from the Canadian vision of immigrant integration. While Canada's *multiculturalism* policy encourages allophones to adopt English or French (but de facto English) at work and in public institutions, Quebec's *interculturalism* opts for French only. In both cases, it is not possible for allophone immigrants to work, go to school, or receive public services in their maternal language.

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.

Although I appreciated the first two parts of *Maximum Canada*, it's unclear how they are related to the main thesis of the book. Most of Saunders' arguments in favour of a strong increase of the Canadian population are in the third part. Unfortunately, this last section is much less convincing than the preceding ones. Compared to the first two parts, where the statements are supported by rigorous research and relevant references, the final section is a bit disappointing. Summing up, one can divide Saunders' arguments in this section into three broad categories.

In the first category of argument I place those which rely on little empirical evidence or are trivial. For instance, according to Saunders, the small size of the Canadian population is a day-to-day costly experience for most Canadians. To support this statement, he writes that “[m]any international products cost considerably more in Canada than they do a few kilometres to the south, because of the higher cost of distributing them across a thinly populated geography” (p. 160). Maybe it is true for some products, but overall, purchasing parity indexes show that the cost of living in Canada is comparable to the USA, and generally more advantageous than many more populated Western nations, such as the United Kingdom (OECD 2018). In addition, without providing any evidence, Saunders says that some products are not available in Canada because the population would be too small to develop a market. I do not have the expertise to invalidate this statement, but it is doubtful that this hypothetical lack of products is a major concern for many Canadians. In addition, the author also argues that discounts are less exciting in Canada because of the lack of competition. Is this really an issue on which public policies should focus? If so, then a better policy than increasing population might be to assure that seeming competitors such as Provigo and Loblaws are not the same company with two different names.

Many statements in the book are based on preconceptions and anecdotes, or are simply slogans, without any empirical evidence to support them. For instance, Saunders writes that “anyone in business will tell you that there are real limits to what can be accomplished in Canada’s low-density population” (p.160) or that “[f]or [the] individual Canadian, the most familiar experience of underpopulation is the discovery, at some point in your career, that you need to leave the country” (p. 150). In fact, when looking at emigration rates, fewer people leave Canada than most other developed nations (Abel 2016).

In my second category are arguments based on a confusion of concepts, as well as those based on doubtful reasoning. Indeed, all over this part of the book, Saunders mixes different demographic dynamics that are not necessarily related, such as population aging, population growth, population density, and population size. For instance, he uses an erroneous statement related to population growth to pose an argument, saying that “[a]s a result (of low fertility), Canada’s population growth currently depends entirely on immigration” (p.156),² and then briefly summarizes the economic consequences of population aging. However, a fast-growing population does not always imply a much younger age structure, and similarly, an aging population does not necessarily lead to a population decline. Furthermore, at the same time as the author says that the low population of Canada is a major issue that is responsible for a lack of opportunities, and is at the root of the country’s presumed vulnerability and unpreparedness for a more challenging economic future (why?), he also says that it is density that matters rather than absolute size. Actually, it is not quite clear whether the author is arguing for a more populated country, a younger country, or for better redistribution of the population over the national territory.

Still in my second category, Saunders surprisingly links a large population with alleviation of the ecological footprint. According to his reasoning, a low population is an ecological cost

2. In 2016–17, the number of births in Canada surpassed the number of deaths by about 110,000.

According to Statistics Canada’s most recent projection (medium scenario), natural growth will not be negative before 2060.

because it implies highly polluted forms of transportation, heating, and energy. And so, according to the author, “by settling in urban areas, the next wave of Canadians will be the country’s most important ecological asset” (p.173). He also says that the poor quality of public transit in cities is caused by the low population of Canada. This reasoning is misleading, as it forgets that the inefficiency of local public transit in Canada does not rely on the population size of cities but rather on the urban development policies that placed the car in the centre of commuting practice (Newman and Kenworthy 1999; Kenworthy and Laube 1999). Many North American metropolises are stuck with even worse public transit systems than Montreal or Toronto, and yet they have higher populations (Los Angeles, Houston, Atlanta, etc.) (Arcadis 2017). Nevertheless, Saunders quickly solves this issue by saying that future population growth in Canadian metropolitan areas will automatically generate higher density. However, there is no empirical evidence showing that this will be the case. Urban sprawl and its consequences have long been acknowledged to be a problem by North American urban planners and governments, yet there have not been any efficient large-scale solutions (Neuman 2005). Indeed, without a drastic change in urban planning—including the destruction of many low-density districts—that is unlikely to happen. Any further population growth would probably just accelerate the urban sprawl on fertile lands, which would raise several issues around food dependency, traffic jams, pollution, and reduction of biodiversity (Nechyba and Walsh 2004; Huard et al. 2010; Roberts 2001). In addition, even if changes in urban planning policies could help turn population growth into an economic incentive for a more efficient public transit system, it is hard to conclude that this would be an asset for the environment. Maybe the ecological footprint per capita would be slightly reduced in Canada, but since population growth would rely either on additional people on Earth (in the case of new births) or on the move of people from low-consumption countries to higher consumption ones (as in the case of most Canadian immigrants), the global ecological footprint would necessarily be negatively affected.

One more thing: Saunders admits, rightly, that most growth in population, especially through immigration, would take place in metropolises rather than in small cities or in the rural areas of Canada. Then, it is hard to understand how an increase in population could resolve issues related to areas that are sparsely populated or experiencing population decline; in fact, none of the major immigration hubs in Canada are facing issues related to population decline. Saunders argues that medium-sized cities would eventually benefit from increased immigration, as the housing cost would be favorable to new settlers when compared to Toronto, Montreal, and Vancouver. However, again, empirical evidence goes against this wishful thinking. For instance, the average housing price in Saguenay is already about half that in Montreal (CMHC 2018), and still the city receives only a few dozen immigrants a year (or about 0.1 per cent of the number that settle every year in Montreal).

In my last category I place those arguments that benefit only a small part of the population, such as businesses or international artists. Indeed, Saunders presents many numbers to show the positive consequences of population increase on economic growth. Obviously, a larger population would lead to a larger economy that would offer more opportunities for companies to grow and develop new markets. However, when considering “per capita” indicators that are more relevant for the prosperity and living conditions of the average Canadian (such as GDP/capita, Human Development Index, etc.), increasing population size has virtually no effect on them (House of Lords 2008; Prettnner 2014). In fact, when looking around the world, the fastest growing countries, or those with large populations, are generally not those with the highest living conditions.

Saunders also states that “[m]any of our largest national companies, once they grow big enough to compete with world markets, are suddenly too big to be owned by Canadians.” Consequently, we have to endure some Canadian companies being bought by foreigners. It is not clear, however, how these issues are caused by the low and sparse population of Canada rather than by the broad consequences of globalization. The examples he provides are not convincing: he cites the purchase of Alcan by a company from Australia, a country that is very similar to Canada in terms of geo-demographic dynamics. Sure, some Canadian companies are bought by foreign ones, but many Canadian companies also buy foreign businesses, such as Jean-Coutu and Couche-Tard. Summing up, the author does not provide evidences that the overall balance for Canada is negative on this topic, or that increasing population size or density would change it positively.

Finally, I would like to add my personal view on some expected consequences of a Canada reaching 100 million inhabitants, mainly through immigration, as proposed by Saunders. First, it would probably imply a strong marginalization of rural areas and of small and medium cities, because most of the future growth would benefit only the metropolitan areas and their surrounding regions. Second, the urbanization required to accommodate such population growth would negatively affect the agricultural lands surrounding most metropolitan areas, and consequently would reduce Canada’s agricultural potential on the whole. We could expect a merger of the urbanized territory within the Great Lakes Region, forming a megacity of something like 40 million inhabitants. A large part of the farms around Montreal would also disappear, and extensive urban sprawl would occur in the metropolitan areas of the Prairies, particularly in Alberta. Third, such strong population growth would exert massive pressure on the real estate market in metropolitan areas. It is hard to see how a city with limited space, such as Vancouver, could manage any additional pressure, knowing that it is already a challenge for middle-class families to find an affordable dwelling there. Fourth, Canada would become increasingly fragmented ethnically, which could raise issues of social cohesion and even economic growth (Patsiurko, Campbell, and Hall 2012). Also, because most newcomers are much more likely to choose English as their language of integration (Quebec is already struggling, with only limited success in integrating their 50,000 annual newcomers to the French environment (Bélanger and Sabourin 2013), the maximum Canada proposed by Saunders would amplify the marginalization of French-speaking Canadians, from a quarter of the Canadian population actually to something like 10 per cent or even less. This is likely to awake linguistic conflicts. Finally, and not least, in the long run it is not demographically possible to maintain an immigration rate of 1.3 per cent of the total population, as suggested by Saunders. With such immigration levels, the population would grow exponentially and would eventually reach an implausible level; meanwhile, sooner or later all countries in the world will have to achieve stationarity of their populations (if not population reduction). Summing up, are all these plausible undesirable consequences of the Canadian population reaching 100 million inhabitants by 2100 really worth it for the average Canadian to receive “more exciting discounts”?

To conclude, although I am not convinced by Saunders’ thesis on maximum Canada, I appreciate the contribution of the author. His book opens up the debate on population policies, which are too often forgotten or ignored in the public space and by policy makers. Thus, while I still believe that population size does not matter, I am more convinced than ever that demography does matter.

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