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Increase the number of immigrants and better integrate them: we can achieve both at once

All of Quebec, and the Montréal metropolitan area in particular, needs and will continue to need a larger labour pool: our economic momentum depends on it.

In recent weeks, a number of parties, groups and players on the political scene have recommended reducing the number of immigrants to Quebec, in some cases substantially. In doing so, they are demonstrating their state of denial about Quebec's economic and demographic reality.

We are entering a period in which the population is aging, which will result in labour shortages. In the coming years, more natives of Quebec will be retiring than entering the job market.

Our only option is to rely on immigration to make up in part for this deficiency. If nothing is done, Quebec will see a relative decline in its labour pool, which will have serious consequences on its economic potential.

Stemming the flow of immigration by 5000, 10,000 or 15,000 people for a few years could cause irreparable harm to the job market. Quebec could wind up depriving itself of 30,000, 40,000, or even 50,000 workers, something we can ill afford to do.

While the world's economies are competing to attract a wide range of talent from immigration, why is Quebec partially closing its doors? The contribution of immigrants is even greater in that it increases the diversity of labour available, which is an important asset for businesses in today's open economy.

The Board of Trade of Metropolitan Montreal believes that we need to gradually increase the volumes of immigrants, rather than reducing them. If Quebec were to welcome a number of immigrants that is proportional to its demographic weight in Canada, we would have a target of 65,067 immigrants per year rather than the 50,000 proposed by the government.

The contribution of immigration is even more significant in the metropolitan area. The vast majority of the immigrant population—87%—is found in Montréal. And as we know, Montréal is lagging behind other major Canadian cities in terms of integration. The Board of Trade agrees: we can do better.

But it is a mistake to claim that better integration of immigrants necessitates reducing their numbers. To achieve our objectives and ensure our prosperity, we must do both. And obviously, we have to select newcomers who will be most likely to integrate quickly.

Studies show that successful integration depends in large part upon integration to the job market. Selection criteria should therefore be reviewed to take into account the capacity of immigrants to find and keep a job.

We have to attract young workers to Quebec and retain them, people who have acquired recognized professional expertise and immigrants who are entrepreneurs, investors and innovators.

We must introduce immigrants to business networks, expand mentorship programs and pursue awareness-raising programs. The Board of Trade is making its own efforts in this area with its Interconnection program, which is intended to find corporate internships for qualified immigrants.

Furthermore, the government, universities, businesses and professional orders must work together to speed up the recognition of degrees and the evaluation of the skills and work experience of immigrants.

The keys to successful integration are known; we just have to apply them. Efforts in recent years to retain foreign students who have completed a university degree in Quebec are a step in the right direction.

Just when Quebec wants to develop resources that lie idle in the North and, when for the first time in years, our economic performance rivals that of our neighbours, we must not make the mistake of depriving ourselves of the economic contribution of thousands of immigrants who ask for nothing more than to live here and contribute to the economic development of Quebec.