

# Clanging shut our doors for refugees . (1987, February 28). *The Toronto Star*.

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## Clanging shut our doors for refugees

*Canadians like to believe racism doesn't happen here. That's a myth*

By Irving Abella  
Special to The Star

There was a joke current in the 1930s that summarized the lot of the refugees of the era.

A Jew desperate to get out of Germany goes to a travel office and pleads: "What do you have?" The travel agent puts a globe in front of him, whirls it and says choose.

The Jew studies the globe for a few moments and then, with a pained expression on his face, looks up and asks: "Do you have anything else?"

Today, the people with pained expressions are different, but the question remains the same: "Do you have anything else?" Sadly for refugees around the world, the answer is increasingly becoming a definitive No.

One by one, doors are closing before them.

First it was Western Europe that shut itself off from the hapless Third World refugees trying to find a haven there. Then it was the United States, which began tightening up its immigration laws and started deporting illegal immigrants.

### Tarnished glory

Finally, the refugees' last hope, Canada, has apparently clanged shut its gates.

How ironic it is that the Canadian government should suddenly snatch away its welcoming mat.

Only last year, many Canadians were basking in the reflected glory of being awarded the coveted Nansen medal by the United Nations for all that we had done for the world's refugees.

Today, the medal is tarnished, the glory turned to embarrassment.

Only six months ago, many Canadians were inspired by a government that instantly opened its arms to several hundred Tamil boat people. Today, they are bitterly disappointed in a government that can turn its back just as quickly on several

### Opinion

thousand Central American bus people.

It is one of our great national myths that Canada has a long history of welcoming refugees and dissidents, that our country has from the beginning been in the forefront in accepting the world's dispossessed and oppressed, and that Canadians have always opened their country's gates to those proverbial huddled masses yearning to be free.

Racism and bigotry, Canadians like to believe, are European — or at least U.S. — inventions that have played little role in our history. Nothing could be further from the truth.

For most of our history, both our immigration and refugee policies have been racist and exclusionary. We knew what kind of people we wanted and how to keep out those we did not.

Thus, when the first boat people appeared off our shores — a group of Indians from Hong Kong in 1914 — we surrounded their ship in Vancouver harbor, starved them into submission and forced them home.

Similarly, 25 years later, when a boatload of German Jews fleeing Nazi terror attempted to break through our immigration barriers, our response was the same. We had no room.

Indeed, of all the nations in the Western world, Canada had by far the worst record in the 1930s and '40s in providing sanctuary to Jewish refugees.

Over the past generation, however, our policies have changed dramatically. Succeeding waves of refugees from Hungary,

Czechoslovakia, Uganda, Viet Nam and elsewhere have made their way to Canada, have prospered and have contributed enormously to their new country.

Now, in the face of several thousand Latin Americans, the Canadian government has apparently panicked. It has introduced a tough series of measures to ensure that the flow of refugees into this country be reduced to a trickle.

Why has this happened?

### Mean spirited

Obviously, the government of Prime Minister Brian Mulroney was taken aback by the frightening backlash that greeted the Tamil boat people. Refugees, the government learned, are not a popular political item.

Apparently, more votes are to be won by keeping them out than by letting them in — or so the government believes.

But what most concerns fair-minded Canadians are the implications of the decision to tighten up our refugee policy. It is clear that there are some genuine progressives in the Conservative administration. Earlier policies and appointments of the Mulroney government are evidence of their importance and vitality.

Unfortunately, their influence is rapidly waning. Over the past year, they have suffered loss after loss. Many of them, including apparently some key cabinet members and officials of the Prime Minister's own staff, lobbied hard and long for a more humane refugee policy.

But in the end they were beaten back by an alliance of hard-nosed bureaucrats and mean-spirited backbenchers. Increasingly, this has become a govern-

ment run by caucus committees, and providing havens for refugees is not very high on their political agenda.

But it should be! Even from a selfish point of view, accepting refugees has been good for this country. All of the evidence, including that from studies commissioned by the federal employment and immigration department, indicates that immigration has benefited this country enormously.

For the most part, refugees are young, healthy, ambitious and patently possess much initiative. These are precisely the people we

want. Why keep them out?

Only two weeks ago, Gerry Weiner, minister of state for immigration, proudly announced that the Tamil boat people whom he had allowed into Canada six months earlier all had jobs — some even employ other Canadians — and had just banded together to donate money to the needy in Montreal.

At the same time, he claimed accurately that offering refugees a new home in Canada was, because of our falling birthrate and need for economic growth, in our best interest. Unhappily, Weiner could not persuade his colleagues.

What disturbs many Canadians is that so far only one shoe has fallen. The government has indicated that it will shortly introduce legislation to repair an immigration policy that is in tatters after many years of neglect.

### Profound fear

Already immigration officials have introduced some useful measures to control the flow of fraudulent refugees. Introducing visas for non-refugee-producing countries such as Portugal and Turkey was as much a step in the right direction as last week's measures were in the wrong direction.

There is a profound fear among many groups in Canada that the new government policy will be even more restrictive.

Last September, at the time of the arrival of the Tamils, the Prime Minister made it clear that from now on if Canada were to err in its refugee policy it would be on the side of humanity.

For the sake of those hapless refugees desperately seeking to rebuild their shattered lives in Canada as well for our own self-esteem as a nation, we owe it to ourselves to remind him of that commitment.



Brian Mulroney: A commitment in September to err on the side of humanity.

□ Irving Abella is a professor of history at York University and co-author of *None Is Too Many*.