

## Canada passes Tamil tolerance test

How has Canada done in the Tamil test?

It would be hard to set up a better trial of this nation's basic tolerance than the arrival of 155 Tamils.

It might have been planned by some galactic inspectors from outer space rather than by the vagaries of immigration brokers, Sri Lankan politics and West German and Canadian refugee laws.

To make the test, you arrange for 155 human beings to be found drifting aimlessly in two overcrowded lifeboats off Newfoundland.

You set it up so the people involved are darker-skinned than the average Canadian and do not belong to an ethnic group with power in Canadian society.

You include few women and children to cut down the sympathy factor.

You stack the cards against them by having them lie to their rescuers and the police and government authorities on just about every score, including how long they have been drifting around and where their journey started.

And you make it obvious from the start that they are lying.

Finally, you set it up so the way the castaways can be admitted is to jump the queue and get in ahead of would-be immigrants who have been waiting a long time to have their cases considered.

Given these circumstances, Canada has scored well in the Tamil test.

From the very beginning the Mulroney government has said the Tamils would be allowed to stay.

There was no hesitation on the part of Immigration Minister Benoit Bouchard in telling the Tamils they would get ministerial permits to stay for a year while their refugee status is determined.

Prime Minister Brian Mulroney confirmed Sunday that they "will not be turned away." And there was backing from the Liberals and New Democrats for his claim that no Canadian government would reject the lifeboat people.

John Turner said that if they were genuine refugees "we have to be as compassionate and open as we can." Ed Broadbent said that providing refuge for the Tamils was the only option.

It's easy to say that these are politicians looking for the immigrant vote. But that's too cynical a judgment of Mulroney, Turner and Broadbent in this case.

But even in crass political terms, they would have to be assuming there were more Tamil welcomers than Tamil rejectors among Canadian voters.

Some backbench Tories and commentators did



Don McGillivray  
Southam News

say the Tamils should be shipped back to West Germany. But the stated reason was not the race of the castaways but their lying and flouting of Canada's immigration laws.

"Aha," says the cynic. "The stated reason wasn't the real one. What would these people have said if the lifeboats were filled with Scotsmen or Poles?"

Nobody knows, but perhaps the reaction would have been less, rather than more, sympathetic.

Racism has a bad name in Canada. Rather than being accused of it, people may have toned down their comments on the questionable aspects of what Bouchard calls the Tamil "adventure."

Among these aspects are the queue-jumping, the fear others will flock to our shores, and the suspicion that somebody is making a profit by charging high

prices to dump people near Canada.

All these deserve investigation, especially the delays that seem to face legitimate immigrants.

The Tamils may have done us a favor if their case throws a spotlight on faults in the immigration system and leads to useful changes.

If Mulroney really believes, as he said Sunday, that "we want more immigrants, not fewer," then he should clear the clogged channels.

He should be encouraged to act by the non-racist way Canadians have reacted to the Tamil castaways.

Particularly striking, among many comments, was a column by Barbara Amiel, who is not exactly known as a softy.

She said Canada cannot take the world's 12 million refugees but does have the ability to absorb thousands without much trouble.

And she added that the Sri Lankans had shown "such tenacity and ingenuity and heart-wrenching desire to get to this land" that they have "fulfilled a good part of their admission requirements by simply getting here."

Amen to that.

And congratulations to Canada on passing the Tamil test.



Sri Lankan refugees arrive in Nfld.