

# Maria just needs a job

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TOM FLANAGAN  
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**M**aria (not her real name) is a young immigrant from a Latin American country.

She earned university degrees in business and petroleum engineering and has work experience in her homeland's national oil company. She came to Alberta looking for professional advancement and a better life.

She knows she has to improve her English and learn about the Canadian work world, so she's been taking courses and working at part-time jobs while she looks for a long-term position.

This fall, she got an interview with Indian Oil and Gas, the agency of the Department of Indian Affairs that manages petroleum resources on Indian reserves. Maria hoped this might be the break she was looking for, a full-time engineering job in the oil industry.

But when she was interviewed, she was told that she could only be hired if no Canadian citizens were available. She was being interviewed "just in case," and she didn't get the job.

Indian Oil and Gas has to follow this personnel policy because it is part of the federal public service. Section 17 of the Public Service Employment Act, which governs the whole civil service, mandates preference for Canadian citizens over landed immigrants.

Prime Minister Paul Martin says he wants to make it easier for highly skilled immigrants to find Canadian jobs that match their training. During the recent election, his campaign website proclaimed that Martin was "committed to reducing barriers for skilled immigrants to pursue employment opportunities in Canada."

Immigration Minister Judy Sgro calls the plight of immigrants the "brain waste." As recently as Oct. 30, Sgro said, "We recognize that it is vital that Canada continues to be a destination of choice for immigrants. To achieve this, we must remove any barriers."

The hypocrisy is stunning. The prime minister and cabinet talk about promoting immigration, and they repeatedly lecture medical associations and other private-sector professional organizations about the need to show more flexibility in recognizing foreign credentials. Yet, the entire federal public service,

over which they preside, has set up a huge barrier to landed immigrants seeking employment.

If the government is serious about helping immigrants integrate into the economy, then let them start with a little house-cleaning. They should re-examine the Public Service Employment Act to see whether there is any good reason to maintain this barrier against hiring landed immigrants who are not (yet) citizens.

Maybe a citizenship requirement is justified for a small number of senior policy-making positions and in certain sensitive areas such as national security, foreign affairs and law enforcement.

But petroleum engineering on Indian reserves? I don't think so. We should be looking for people who can get the job done, not worrying about citizenship. I'm sure the same is true for most jobs in the federal public service.

Maybe I'm touchy about this because I'm an immigrant, too. Fortunately for me, no one demanded citizenship papers when I got my first job here in 1968, so I could get on with making a contribution to my adopted country.

I'm convinced that's how Albertans feel about it. Most of us came here from somewhere else, and all we care about is competence and perseverance.

So, if you're an Alberta employer who's looking for petroleum engineers, send me an e-mail

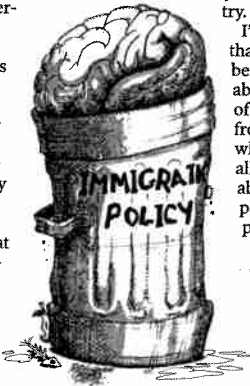
and I can put you in touch with Maria. All she wants is a chance to be judged on her training and ability, without being pigeonholed in Ottawa's legal categories.

The ultimate irony is that, like most Latin Americans, Maria is of partly aboriginal ancestry. But because of the citizenship requirement, Indian Oil and Gas, which should be doing all it can to promote skilled aboriginal people in the workforce, has to discriminate against her.

I wonder if First Nations, to whom the rest of us are all later immigrants, get the joke.



Tom Flanagan



TOM FLANAGAN IS A PROFESSOR OF POLITICAL SCIENCE AT THE UNIVERSITY OF CALGARY. HIS E-MAIL ADDRESS IS TFLANAGAN@UCALGARY.CA