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The Construction of Migrant Work and Workers by Alberta Legislators, 2000-2011

Abstract

This paper uses narrative analysis to explore how government members of the Alberta Legislative Assembly (MLAs) "constructed" migrant work and migrant workers in legislature and media statements between 2000 and 2011. Government MLAs asserted that migrant work (1) was economically necessary and (2) posed no threat to Canadian workers. Government MLAs also asserted that international migrant workers (3) had questionable occupational, linguistic or cultural skills and (4) caused negative social and economic impacts in Canada. Taken individually, these narratives appear contradictory, casting migrant work as good but migrant workers as bad. Viewed together, these narratives comprise an effort to dehumanize temporary and permanent international migrant workers. This (sometimes racialized) "othering" of migrant workers justifies migrant workers' partial citizenship and suppresses criticism of their poor treatment.

Keywords: migrant workers, Canada, Alberta, political economy, narrative analysis

Word count: 8362

Introduction

Like many jurisdictions, the Canadian province of Alberta saw significant growth in its population of international migrant workers—as well as rampant mistreatment of these workers—between 2000 and 2011. Provincial government legislators frequently made demonstrably false statements justifying this growth and discounting this mistreatment (Barnetson & Foster 2013). The Alberta discourse around temporary and permanent international migrant workers hinted at a seeming contradiction: government members of the Legislative Assembly (MLAs) of Alberta often seemed bullish on migrant work, but critical of migrant workers.

Through narrative analysis of MLA statements in the legislature and in the media, this study sought to fully identify, develop and analyze this seeming contradiction in how MLAs "constructed" migrant work and migrant workers. Ultimately, four narratives were found. MLAs were supportive of migrant work, asserting it (1) was economically necessary and (2) did not pose not threat to Canadian workers. By contrast, MLAs were critical of international migrant workers, asserting they (3) had questionable occupational, linguistic or cultural skills and (4) caused negative social and economic impacts in Canada. These apparently contradictory narratives can be reconciled when viewed as part of a broader legitimation project.

Migrant Workers and Labour Markets

Canada is a relative newcomer to large-scale migrant labour programs. In comparison with Europe and the U.S., Canada has traditionally brought in relatively few international migrant workers (Castles & Miller 2009), amounting to under one percent of the work force. Presently, the Seasonal Agricultural Worker Program (SAWP) brings approximately 18,000 farm workers from Mexico, Caribbean and Central America to Canada each year (Preibisch 2010).

The Live-in Caregiver Program (LCP) deals with nannies and in-home caregivers, who number fewer than 7,000 (Kelly et al. 2011). The most significant program is the Temporary Foreign Worker Program (TFWP) that, until the early 2000s, was restricted to select high-skilled occupations with international labour markets. During the 1990s, about 90,000 workers were present in Canada via the TFWP in any given year (Citizenship and Immigration Canada 2013).

Changes to the TFWP in 2002 and 2006 expanded the program to include low- and medium-skilled occupations, including construction, retail, hospitality and general labour (Fudge & McPhail 2009). Subsequently, the number of international migrant workers present in Canada under the TFWP skyrocketed, reaching 338,000 by 2012 (Citizenship and Immigration Canada 2013). The greatest increases were among low-skill occupations and workers from developing nations such as Philippines, India, China and Mexico. During the period covered by this study TFWP rules limited international migrant workers—called temporary foreign workers (TFWs) in Canada—to a maximum of four years of residency. Their work permits stipulated the occupation, geographic region and employer for which they were allowed to work, thereby significantly curtailing TFWs' labour-market mobility and increasing their dependency upon their employers. As well, TFWs were ineligible for most permanent immigration streams and are not allowed to access settlement services provided to permanent immigrants (Fudge & McPhail 2009).

Due to growing criticism of employer abuse of program rules, especially in the restaurant and hospitality industries, and concern about increasing employer dependence on TFWs, the government announced an overhaul of the program in mid-2014. The changes split the program into higher and lower skilled streams, significantly curtailed employer access to lower-skilled TFWs, and reduced maximum residency to two years. No changes to work permit restrictions or

access to permanent immigration were made (Citizenship and Immigration Canada 2014). At the time of writing the effects of the changes on the scope and size of the program are unknown.

Policymakers attribute the need for additional TFWs in Canada to labour shortages, particularly in western Canada (Sorenson 2013). Scholars have questioned the validity of this "labour shortage" rationale, recognizing that labour shortages are often relative, rather than absolute, phenomena (Sassen 1988; Gross 2014). That is to say, labour shortages reflect the (un)willingness of workers to make themselves available for prevailing wages and working conditions. In this way, what employers are short of is not workers, but workers prepared to work given prevailing wages and/or working conditions (Basok 2002; Wall 1992). Rather than raise wages and improve working conditions (thereby heightening the cost and labour-market power of Canadian workers), employers have sought government assistance in recruiting workers from abroad (Sharma 2006).

Rejecting the "labour shortage" rationale reveals an alternate perspective on Canada's migrant worker programs: as employer tools that create a vulnerable and docile labour force due to the structural limits they impose upon international migrant workers' labour mobility and ability to exercise their statutory and contractual employment rights. In this view, international migrant worker programs create a pool of low-cost workers that can expand and contract as needed. They also externalize much of the cost of producing and maintaining the workforce to other countries (Samers 2001; Sassen-Koob 1981). In keeping with the neoliberal prescription for the labour market, international labour migrancy is a way to increase labour 'flexibility' (Standing 1997; 2012).

Over time, individually temporary international migrant workers have become a collectively permanent (i.e., structural) feature of Canada's labour market (Sharma 2006). They

are especially prevalent in agriculture, domestic service and the service sector as well as in construction (Citizenship and Immigration Canada 2013) and typically comprise a secondary labour market facing precarious employment conditions (Goldring et al. 2009; Goldring & Landolt 2013). Precarious employment conditions entail some combination of limited job security, low wages, and few statutory or employment benefits (Vosko 2006). This clustering of international migrant workers in the secondary labour market increases the likelihood of higher skilled non-migrants occupying "good jobs" in the primary labour market (Piore 1979). In these ways, international migrant workers have economic value to both employers and certain segments of the non-migrant worker population.

That said, dual labour markets can have paradoxical effects. On the one hand, the presence of temporary migrant workers increases the likelihood of some non-migrant workers holding a position in the primary labour market. Yet, at the same time, the creation of a lower cost secondary labour market creates a ready substitute for the primary labour market, thereby undermining it (Bauder 2006). The use of temporary migrant workers can lead to worker substitution of non-migrant groups traditionally disadvantaged in the Canadian labour market (e.g., racial minorities, aboriginals, youth, women and people with disabilities) and are thus are already more likely to populate the secondary market (Jackson 2010).

For these reasons, governments that facilitate employment-related geographic mobility (ERGM), including international temporary migration and immigration, may face criticism from the electorate. Historically, states restricted temporary international migrant workers' access to full citizenship rights (e.g., labour mobility and permanent residency) and thus minimize their engagement in community and interaction with non-migrants (Vosko 2010). For example, in Alberta Foster and Taylor (2013) found multiple structural barriers to TFWs' participation in

community and access to basic employment and citizenship rights. Governments also employ careful framing of the issue to construct justifications for such a policy.

One way to view citizenship is as a mechanism of differential inclusion, whereby citizens (solely by virtue of their citizenship) can make different (and greater) claims on the state than non-citizens (Castles & Miller 2009; Lister 1997; Stasiulis & Bakan 2005). For example, temporary international migrants may face constraints on their ability to access and move within the labour market, such as limiting their employment to occupations with low rates of unemployment and indenturing them to a specific employer, job and/or location—limits that are unconstitutional for citizens (Sharma 1997). The state may also constrain international migrant workers' access to the full spectrum of social benefits despite compelling international migrant workers to contribute to such schemes. The partial access of international migrants to Employment Insurance benefits is the most notable example (UFCW 2013). In this way, international migrant workers can be said to have partial citizenship—having some but not all the rights of "true" citizens—thereby reducing the perceived labour-market threat posed by international migrant workers to Canadian citizens.

By conceptualizing temporary international migrant workers as "foreigners labouring within a 'foreign labour market' instead of being an integral component of Canadian society" (Sharma 2006, p. 7), policy-makers can avoid difficult questions about whether partial citizenship is socially just. By casting international migrant as "others", state-imposed limits on their rights can be seen as an effort to "protect" the jobs of Canadian workers from the threat posed by international migrant workers. It uncritically accepts the well-established but contestable position that citizens should have preferential access to jobs. As Vosko (2010) notes, this "othering" effect may also be intensified by ethnic and racial prejudices. International

migrants are likely to be viewed differently than inter-provincial migrants, who are both citizens and more likely members of the dominant ethnic group. Similarly, by casting international migrants as "workers" (rather than human beings), the state can legitimize its immigration and labour practices (Bauder 2006), including international migrant workers' partial citizenship. Framing international migrants narrowly as workers implies they are here to perform solely an economic role. Canadians are encouraged to see only the functional utility of international migrants and not the full scope of their humanity.

At the same time, the state may participate in the denigration of international migrants in ways that advantage citizens. For example, credentials are a form of cultural capital—behavioural, physical or organizational attributes of symbolic meaning and value (Bourdieu 1986). International credentials are often devalued in the Canadian labour market, although international migrants with American, Commonwealth or western European credentials are less disadvantaged than other migrants (Thompson 2000). In this way, credential devaluation reinforces racial and ethnic prejudices. It also restricts access to the primary labour by international migrants (Bolaria 1992), thereby further reducing the perceived labour-market threat posed to Canadians by international migrants.

The dynamics governing temporary migration programs can be seen in context of Canada's problematic immigration history. Immigration policies have been highly racialized and serve to both construct and reproduce dominant notions of race (Avery 1995). The creation of immigrant as "other" leads to systematic labour market discrimination (e.g., Calliste 1987). The restrictive rules of the TFWP and other international migrant programs are an extension of this racializing process.

International migrants' ability to resist this framing may be limited in several ways. International migrants are often members of varying ethnic minorities and may not identify themselves as a "class" or speak with a unified voice. Their partial citizenship dramatically reduces their political clout (Bauder 2006). International migrant workers also experience a conflicted transnational identity which acts as a barrier for association with the destination community (Castles & Miller 2009). A recent study found TFW nurses in Alberta were less likely to engage in collective acts of resistance, instead focusing on individual efforts to improve their situation (Taylor, Foster & Cambre 2012). Finally, migrants may focus their attention on the benefits ERGM accrues for them in their country of origin, effectively accepting differential treatment as their best option and disengaging from Canadian political discourse (Anderson 2010; Basok et al. 2013). However, TFWs have sporadically mobilized to protest working conditions (e.g, Dugale 2009) and the emergence of chapters of Migrante Canada in a handful of cities suggests some capacity to resist is forming despite the barriers.

Alberta's Experience with Migrant Workers

Alberta has a long history of interprovincial and international ERGM in agriculture, railway construction and domestic service (Danysk 1995; Holland 2007; Hsiung & Nichol 2010; Laliberte 2006; Laliberte & Satzewich 1999; Selby 2012; Thompson 1978; Thompson & Seager 1978). From 1975 to 1982 and beginning again in 1998, Alberta also saw significant ERGM caused by oil-driven economic booms. The majority of migrant workers during these booms came from other Canadian jurisdictions and, when the booms ended, those migrants often returned to their home province (Hiller 2009).

The boom of the 2000s was different in a number of ways. First, while there was still significant interprovincial migration, net interprovincial migration began declining in 2006 and

was effectively zero by 2009 (Alberta 2011a). This decline occurred despite relatively high unemployment (between 7.9% and 14.7%) in Atlantic Canada (a traditional "sending" region) during this time (HRSDC 2012). High unemployment in other provinces has historically been an important "push" factor for interprovincial migration (Hiller 2009). A net decline in such migration during a period of high unemployment suggests that deteriorating "pull" factors reduced Alberta's ability or desire to attract interprovincial migrants. For example, wage growth slowed in 2006 and inflation rose, significantly eroding the potential wage gains interprovincial migrants could realize by moving to Alberta (Alberta 2008a). Alberta also experienced a severe housing shortage at this time, with workers in the province's major cities living in tents in campgrounds and squatting in the river valley. Indeed, as the economy improved, net interprovincial migration picked up again in 2011 (Alberta 2013).

Further, unemployment among traditionally disadvantaged groups in Alberta remained high throughout the 2000s. Youth (15-24) unemployment was approximately double provincial average through the period (Statistics Canada 2013). Time-series data about aboriginal off-reserve unemployment and unemployment among Albertans with disabilities is unobtainable but, where periodic data (e.g., census or special survey) is available, it shows unemployment among these groups to mirror youth unemployment (Alberta 2004a, 2008b, 2012; Luffman & Sussman 2007). All of this suggests there was no absolute shortage of workers during the 2000s, particularly for unskilled jobs. Rather, what Alberta faced was a shortage of Canadian workers prepared to make themselves available at prevailing wage rates and working conditions and, in the case of traditionally disadvantaged workers, perhaps the willingness of employers to hire them.

Second, this reduction in interprovincial migration of Canadian workers was offset by significant growth in temporary international migrants and (to a lesser degree) permanent immigration (Alberta 2011b). Between 2002 and 2012 (inclusive) there were approximately 250,000 TFWs admitted to Alberta, with nearly 165,000 arriving between 2006 and 2010 (see Table 1). Alberta's "stock" of TFWs (i.e., the number of TFWs resident on December 1 of each year; "stock" is the federal government's official term for the number of TFWs residing in Canada) rose from 15,705 in 2005 to 65,572 in 2009 before falling slightly in 2010 and then rebounding to 68,339 in 2012.

Table 1: Alberta TFWs Entries and Stock, 2002-2012 (Citizenship and Immigration Canada 2012)

	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012
TFW Stock	10,730	11,376	13,126	15,705	21,973	37,055	57,544	65,572	57,628	58,193	68,339
TFW Entries	10,011	9,166	10,513	12,645	18,459	29,287	38,990	28,549	22,998	25,573	35,636

Not captured by these numbers is the (according to anecdotal reports) growing number of non-status (i.e., illegal) international migrants in Alberta These include TFWs who stayed on after the expiration of their work permits as well as other non-citizens working without a permit. Estimates of the number of over-staying migrants are sporadic, but one source estimates the number may be as high as 100,000 (Bouzek 2012).

Alberta has experienced a much greater rate of increase in resident TFWs than other Canadian provinces and there has been a significant increase in the use of unskilled TFWs. Before the 2002 and 2006 policy changes, TFWs were found working as university teachers, scientists, specialist technicians and entertainers. TFWs that arrived between 2005 and 2008 were more likely to be coming to work as cooks, clerks, cleaning staff, construction labourers and truck drivers (Foster 2012). In effect, while the number of international migrants has increased, there has been a significant downward shift in the skill level of the jobs to which

TFWs are being recruited. At the same time, more recently recruited migrant workers are more likely to be female and come from the global south, suggesting the ethnic and racial make-up of the program has fundamentally altered (Foster 2012).

While new entries of TFWs declined in 2009 and 2010 following an economic downturn, the overall number of TFWs remained relatively stable. One explanation is that employers, while reducing demand for new TFWs, were retaining existing TFWs despite unemployment among Canadian workers (Alberta 2009a, 2009b). This shift may indicate an important structural change in Alberta's labour market: the addition of a permanent class of guest workers concentrated in the service sector with restricted labour mobility and other rights. This conclusion is further supported by the renewed growth in TFW numbers during the recovery of 2011 and 2012 (Citizenship and Immigration Canada 2013). The growing number and shifting profile of TFWs in Alberta has resulted in increased reports of wide-spread TFW exploitation by employers, including under- and non-payment of wages, excessive hours, unsafe workplaces and deplorable living conditions (AFL 2007, 2009). This treatment reflects TFWs' limited labour mobility due to the program's restrictive work permits. It may also reflect, on an individual basis, language barriers, social isolation and/or limited knowledge of workplace rights.

Between 2000 and 2011, government members of the Legislative Assembly (MLAs) used three narratives to justify the growth in TFWs: (1) labour shortages require migrant workers, (2) migrant workers do not threaten Canadian jobs and (3) migrants are not being exploited (Barnetson & Foster 2013). Analysis indicates these narratives are largely false. As set out above, it appears Alberta's labour shortage was relative, rather than absolute. Further, there was clear evidence the TFWP did not adequately assess whether there was a shortage of Canadian workers resulting in migrant workers displacing Canadian workers (Auditor General 2009,

Foster & Taylor 2011). Finally, as noted above, there was plentiful evidence that employers were exploiting migrant workers.

Methodology

This study uses narrative analysis to determine how government MLAs constructed migrant work and migrant workers in Alberta between 2000 and 2011. MLA statements were selected for analysis because they can indicate the outcomes and norms desired by powerful actors and provide insight into the how politicians justify such outcomes to maintain legitimacy with the electorate (Sharma 2006). The study of such public rituals can be useful in understanding the underlying political economy of an issue. This study focuses on the narratives advanced by government MLAs because these MLAs are the decision makers. Opposition MLAs may well seek to advance alternative narratives, but the nature of legislative discourse in Alberta (which largely confines opposition MLAs to asking questions without preamble) is that there are few instances in the dataset where opposition MLAs have advanced a different narrative. Also, in the time period studied, the government held a substantial majority in the assembly, upwards of three-quarters of MLAs, reducing further any opportunity for alternative narratives.

A narrative is an ordered, temporally sequenced account of events with an intention to communicate (or construct) a particular meaning for the audience (Bryman et al. 2011; Prasad 2005). Because narratives are constructed, narrative analysis allows us to examine both the story and how the story serves the interests of the teller while preserving the teller's context (Smith 2000). The intentionality of narrative construction means the teller, the audience and the context all become an important component of the analysis (Czarniawska-Joerges 2004). Narrative analysis draws out the intricacies of the interaction between teller, audience and context, permitting a fuller, richer understanding of the text than would be the case through other

analytical approaches (Reissman 2008). Given the nature of the data, this study conducts a thematic form of narrative analysis to assess how MLAs frame migrant work and migrant workers, which emphasizes the content of the story and how it serves specific interests (Reissman 2008).

The data for this study comprises all statements recorded in transcripts of the Legislative Assembly of Alberta (Hansard) and in 8 daily and 95 rural and urban weekly newspapers by government MLAs about migrant work and migrant workers between January 1, 2000 and December 31, 2011. Such data is appropriate for narrative analysis because it is intended to communicate a message (White & Marsh 2005). This study excludes government policy documents. Examples of these documents were reviewed and not found to articulate a policy rationale suitable for analysis.

Data collection and analysis occurred in two phases. Initially, key word searches (worker, labour, (im)migrant, foreign, temporary, mobility, (im)migration, personnel, shortage, McMurray, supply) of Hansard (2000 to 2011) yielded 1083 potentially relevant passages. For the media dataset, Boolean key word searches ("foreign+worker" and "interprovincial+migrant+worker") of the FPInfomart database of media reports (2000 to 2011) yielded 395 potentially relevant articles (duplicates were excluded). Independent reviews by the researchers narrowed the data sets to 79 relevant passages. The researchers then independently reviewed and thematically hand-coded both datasets. The independent codings were then compared and minor discrepancies resolved.

A thematic narrative analysis was then conducted in three stages. At each stage, the researchers worked independently and then pooled their results to address a small number of discrepancies. First, an initial reading of all the statements surfaced four main themes, two each

about international migrant work and international migrant workers. Second, each theme was further analyzed to tease out its details in greater depth. Finally the analytic focus moved to the context in which each set of justifications was constructed to draw out additional insights about the framing of international migrant work and international migrant workers.

The Construction of International Migrant Work

Two narratives emerge from MLA comments about international migrant work: international migrant work (1) was economically necessary and (2) posed no threat to Canadian workers. MLAs framed the tightening of Alberta's labour market caused by an oil-driven economic boom as a threat to economic growth as early as 2001. For example, then-Minister of Learning Lyle Oberg called for an immediate increase in the number of temporary and permanent international workers available to employers to avoid delays in oil-sector construction projects:

> "We want to fill the shortage as quickly as we can," Oberg said. "When projects are being delayed, it is critical. We're drawing attention to it because business is not aware of it.' … The whole (idea) is, we don't want business to slow down.… We can get (foreign workers) through faster." (Hagan 2001, p.1).

According to MLAs, such as then-Minister of Human Resources and Employment Clint Dunford, the "causes" of Alberta's labour shortage were a lack of workers and an aging workforce:

> **Mr. Dunford**: This report… clearly recognized the pressure that's created by an aging population and… also tells us that 25 of 53 occupational categories are experiencing skill shortages…. While all of this is happening, of course, our unemployment rate is really the lowest in Canada, and that is very good news (Alberta 2002a).

MLAs ignored the circular nature of this explanation of the labour shortage (i.e., a lack of workers is caused by a lack of workers) and instead declared the labour shortage was "an absolutely phenomenal problem that Alberta is very, very blessed to have" (Alberta 2002b, p. 315). Subsequently, government MLAs uniformly adopted the position that (1) there was a

labour shortage that (2) had to be addressed to maintain economic growth by (3) an increased number of interprovincial and international migrant workers. The "economic necessity of migrant work" meme recurred largely unaltered until early 2009, when an economic downturn raised questions about the continued necessity of international migrant workers in the face of domestic unemployment.

In utilizing this explanation, MLAs purported the labour "shortage" was an absolute phenomenon that could (and should) only be resolved via state intervention to expand the labour pool. This intervention was consistent with neoliberal orthodoxy requiring states to act to loosen labour markets to drive down costs (Stanford & Vosko 2004). Interestingly, MLAs never discussed how labour-market equilibrium might be restored via increased wage rates and improved working conditions to draw more Canadian workers into the market. Instead, they chose to advance the proposition that government intervention to increase the international migrant workforce was economically necessary, a position most fully expressed in the government's throne speech in 2006:

> His Honour: …Alberta will take immediate steps to address labour shortages that threaten economic growth. …The government will develop a new strategy to increase awareness of Alberta as a destination of choice for skilled immigrants, and it will expand immigrant settlement services and language training and make it easier for foreign-trained professionals to work in Alberta (Alberta 2006a).[i]

Government efforts to increase the availability of interprovincial and international migrant workers to employers included entering into a series of interprovincial trade agreements, encouraging the expansion of federal immigration programs, participating in overseas recruiting and expanding international credential evaluation services (Alberta 2006b, 2008c, 2011c). Despite these efforts to increase the size of the migrant workforce, MLAs such as Oberg (then-Minister of Infrastructure) routinely presented international migrant work as a temporary measure:

> **Dr. Oberg:** Lastly, the whole idea behind a temporary foreign worker is… to take these workers, bring them over here for a temporary period of time when they are needed, when there is the workforce boom that is going on, when we can't supply it, and then at the end of three years they have to go home. They cannot stay. They do not become landed immigrants. They must go home at that time (Alberta 2005a).

MLAs also repeatedly expressed a preference for Canadian migrants over international migrants, as exemplified by this statement by then-Minister of Human Resources and Employment Mike Cardinal:

> **Mr. Cardinal**: The first priority for Alberta, our government… is to hire Albertans first wherever possible, Canadians second…. When an employer has exhausted that, then they have an opportunity to apply through the federal government to bring in foreign workers…. It's definitely not a top priority for industries, definitely not a top priority for our government… who like to see our own local people working first (Alberta 2005b).

It is useful to unpack MLAs' continual reiteration of the purported safeguards protecting Canadian workers from displacement by international migrant workers (which forms the second narrative about migrant work). While these statements reduced the apparent labour-market threat of international migrants to Canadian workers, they again suppose that a labour shortage is an absolute phenomenon. In fact, the availability of international migrant workers prepared to accept working conditions that are unacceptable to Canadians creates the "labour shortage" by allowing companies to offer unattractive wages and working conditions that Canadian citizens won't accept. This manufactured labour shortage is then used to justify the use of international migrant workers.

Further, federal efforts to assess the *bona fides* of employer assertions that no Canadians are available were unreliable. Over time, substantial evidence emerged that employers could and did game federal requirements to access international migrant workers (Auditor General 2009, Foster & Taylor 2011) through manipulation of the approval process and targeting TFWs when domestic workers were available. When confronted with this issue, MLAs conveniently (albeit correctly) blamed the federal government for these problems.

Finally, MLAs engaged in obfuscation when discussing the temporary nature of the international migrant workforce. While individual international migrant workers were temporary, as a group, international migrant workers had become a permanent and growing feature of Canada's labour market since the adoption of the Non-Immigrant Employment Authorization Program (NIEAP) in 1973 (Sharma 2006). Indeed, the size of Alberta's international migrant worker cohort rapidly increased from 11,376 in 2003 to 68,339 in 2012 (Citizenship and Immigration Canada 2013). Employer preference for international migrants became so pronounced during the period under study that the recession of 2008 did not significantly reduce the number of TFWs in Alberta and TFWs displaced interprovincial migrants as the main source of additional workers (Alberta 2011a, 2011b).

The Construction of Migrant Workers

Overall, MLAs had relatively little to say about migrant workers. Indeed, it is difficult to find any statement by an MLA about interprovincial migrants in the entire 12 years of data. By contrast, MLAs made numerous comments about international migrants, most of which were negative. Two narratives critical of international migrant workers are evident, wherein MLAs asserted international migrant workers (3) had questionable occupational, linguistic or cultural skills and (4) caused negative social and economic impacts in Canada.

The most frequent comments addressed the competence of international migrant workers. MLAs, such as Mark Norris (then-Minister of Economic Development), Oberg and Thomas Lukaszuk (then-Minister of Employment and Immigration), repeatedly expressed suspicion about these workers' skills and credentials:

> **Mr. Norris**: … I know that you have cab drivers who say: I'm an engineer from a specific country; I can't get a job. Don't believe everything you hear, hon. member, because we make every effort to allow them to get their training certificates upgraded or

> pass to what level they need to be. I don't know if there's a suggestion being made that we should just take things at face value, because I wouldn't do that… (Alberta 2004b).
>
> **Dr. Oberg:** We don't necessarily want someone saying that they are a welder in a particular country, arriving here, and having no usable trades that can be done. So they are going to be certified in the country before they come over here (Alberta 2005a).
>
> **Mr. Lukaszuk:** …This ministry has programs in place that assist foreign credentialed individuals to enter our workforce. At the same time, we have to make sure that we don't jeopardize in any way the standards that we are accustomed to have over here (Alberta 2010a).

MLAs also questioned the validity of medical credentials of permanent international migrants. MLAs, such as Iris Evans (then-Minister of Health), Dave Hancock (then-Minister of Health) and Lukaszuk, raised concerns about the level of care such migrants might provide:

> **Ms Evans:** ….First of all, (foreign-trained doctors) have to have met the training standards in Canada. Doctors who are working in nonmedical fields are usually doing so because they are not meeting our licensing standards, and that's a fact. That's a licensing standard that they must meet before they are able to practise (Alberta 2005c).
>
> **Mr. Hancock:** … Some foreign-trained physicians have not practised for a considerable length of time, and their skills and knowledge are not current. Others come, perhaps, from a country or from a school that is very different from what they might have received here, so they need to be retrained. But we do want to make use of the medical talent that's available, and we do want to make sure that all those skills can be used in Alberta (Alberta 2007).
>
> **Mr. Lukaszuk:** At the end of the day – and I'm sure our minister of health would agree – we have to have a balance of recognizing foreign credentials but, at the same time, not jeopardizing the quality of care that Albertans receive in our hospitals. It's a difficult balance to strike, but at the end of the day, again, we will continue to attract immigrants and make sure that they work to the maximum of their ability (Alberta 2011d).

Such concerns appear mediated by migrants' country of origin. For example, medically trained international migrants from South Africa were frequently lauded.

> **Mr. Broda**: … I know in my own constituency the physicians that have come from South Africa are well received within the community, and I don't see them moving into larger centres. I think they have some very viable businesses in the communities (Alberta 2000a).

Concerns about the medical qualifications of UK migrants were also downplayed:

> (Evans) said, for example, there are 10,000 surplus doctors in the U.K. who can't come here because they have no obstetrics training.
>
> "Let's bring them here and tutor them for a few months rather than reject them."
>
> And if a British soldier is stationed at Suffield, his wife should be able to work temporarily as a nurse without fears it's going to dilute our workforce, Evans said. (Edmonton Journal, 2007, p. F1)

One explanation for Alberta's preference of these international migrants is that they were trained in the Commonwealth style of medicine (Alberta 2000b). Yet this does not fully explain the recurring and broader MLA preference for migrants from Anglo-American countries:

> **Mr. Lukaszuk:** (O)ften when we think about foreign workers, we tend to drift away across oceans. I strongly suggest to Alberta employers to give our neighbors to the south first opportunity at any jobs in Alberta. These workers from the United States are not only our partners, our friends, and our allies, but they also have similar occupational health and safety employment standards. There are no language barriers. At the end of the day that's what neighbours do for neighbours. If we have a surplus of jobs – and they obviously have an economy that will take a long time to recover – we should welcome them with open arms (Alberta 2011e).

It is interesting to point out much of the narrative around credentials relates to higher-skilled international migrant workers, who make up a small proportion of TFWs in Alberta and whose living and working conditions vary greatly from lower-skilled TFWs. Two effects emerge. First, the MLAs betray a tendency to conflate the issues arising from migrant work such as poor working conditions for TFWs with the more specific issues of a sub-set of migrant workers. The conflation serves to render lower-skilled TFWs invisible.

A second effect is that high-skill jobs are cast as the purview of Canadian workers or other workers of Anglo-American (i.e., white) extraction. This distinction is further supported by narratives around language and culture, which are directed more purposively at lower-skilled international migrants.While there were no instances of overt racism evident in MLA statements, some MLAs, such as Wayne Cao and Teresa Woo-Paw (then-Parliamentary Assistant to the

Minister of Employment and Immigration), raised questions about international migrant workers' cultural and linguistic fluency:

> **Mr. Cao:** … Of all immigrants to Calgary in 2002 49 per cent knew neither English nor French. This indicates a need for language training. I suggest that Immigration Canada create language training at the departure point where the Canadian way of life is taught along with the language (Alberta 2004c).
>
> **Ms. Woo-Paw:** Many of the skilled immigrants in Alberta have valuable skills and experiences but have difficulty finding employment commensurate with those skills and experiences. Lack of employment networks and unfamiliarity with the Canadian workplace culture and expectations are two of the significant barriers they face (Alberta 2010b).

Related to language and cultural concerns, where international migrant workers ran into difficulty being paid, MLAs such as Hector Goudreau (then-Minister of Employment and Immigration) noted that migrant workers' limited understanding of their rights contributed to the issue:

> "It's tough for somebody that comes from a totally different country and different rules and regulations to feel at home on a short-term basis," Employment and Immigration Minister Hector Goudreau said last week.
>
> "Many, many don't know their rights. They don't know all their responsibilities. They often have a hard time with language" (Calgary Herald 2008).

How international migrant workers' knowledge of their rights is relevant to employer's unwillingness to comply with employment law is unclear. To the degree that Goudreau's comments are valid, they speak more to employer exploitation of international migrant workers than to any fault with the international migrant workers. In addition to questioning the competence of international migrant workers, some MLAs raised concerns about the negative impact that international migrants have on Alberta communities. For example, Lukaszuk noted that international migrant workers typically do not financially or socially invest in Alberta, causing difficulties in both Canada and migrants' countries of origin:

> **Mr. Lukaszuk:** …Well, transient communities would be one answer, individuals who do not purchase houses, cars, who don't invest in our economy but send remittances back home. There is a social impact on families over here, but just having come back from the Philippines, I had the opportunity to see the other, those families who are left behind by temporary foreign workers. The impact is economic and moral, and it's immense (Alberta 2011f).

This concern about the negative impact of transience coupled with the seemingly long-term nature of the labour shortage saw MLAs (such as Lukaszuk) shift their emphasis towards the end of the period under study to seeking more permanent international migrants to capture their wages in the form of local investments:

> "We have to look at business communities, policy makers and as citizens to a more long-term solution that allows us to have predictable, properly trained workforce that allows our communities like Leduc to not to end up with a transient community.
>
> "(We need to) allow these workers to invest in our communities—buy a house, buy a car, and participate in our communities just like many I imagined in this room would have who are not born in Canada.
>
> "I am confident that we will find a solution that will address our needs because after all I believe that Canadian Immigration policies and Alberta Immigration policies primarily have to reflect what is good for Alberta and what is good for Canada" (Leduc Representative 2011, p. 1).

MLAs also expressed concern that federal immigration programs give provinces too little control over which immigrants are chosen and where they reside. Cardinal noted permanent international migrants exercising labour mobility result in Alberta receiving less than its share of immigrants.

> **Mr. Cardinal:** … As you're aware, the federal government's policies in the past have been to bring at least 250,000 people into Canada. The problem with that is that most of the people settled in Vancouver, Toronto, Ottawa, Montreal, Quebec, and a smaller percentage settled in areas like Alberta. In fact, through the normal immigration process, out of 250,000 I think that we got 16,000 last year, and 3,000 of those moved back to larger centres (Alberta 2006c).

This creates a situation where employers might assist an international migrant worker to immigrate only to see them depart for greener pastures.

> **Mr. Cardinal**: …In other words, (employers) could spend money, bring an employee into Alberta, and the employee could leave immediately and go somewhere else. They're making some good suggestions as to how we could allow companies like that to bring people in, work, and stay at least maybe a year on the job before they can move on to another job. I think that's another thing we need to look at, more flexibility in that area (Alberta 2006c).

Similarly, Lukaszuk expressed concerns about the federal economic immigrant stream, noting it does not give Alberta control over what industries such immigrants would invest or work in.

> **Mr. Lukaszuk**: It requires immigrants to invest $400,000 into the Canadian economy, giving Alberta really no control over what industries or what genres of industries those dollars would be invested in. We want to make sure that when immigrants come to this province, they give value-added to our industry, they help us diversify our economy, and they will benefit Alberta the way we want them to benefit Alberta. We want to have that final choice (Alberta 2010c).

What is interesting about this discussion is that the notion of international migrants having a different set of rights than citizens is accepted as the norm. It is the norm in the sense that international migrants frequently have employment-related restrictions and the consequences of those restrictions are not perceived as problematic or unjust. Further, international migrants were viewed as somewhat undesirable workers, although this was less the case where international migrants heralded from America or Commonwealth countries. This suggests a covert form of racialization occurs in the narratives, where desirability is linked to a migrant worker's country of origin and an effort is made to distinguish between more culturally familiar Anglo-America migrants and less desirable migrants from developing nations. Overall, the narratives construct a notion of international migrant workers as undesirable and problematic for "Albertans".

Discussion

Analysis of MLAs statements reveals four seemingly contradictory narratives. International migrant work was said to be (1) economically necessary and (2) posing no threat to

Canadian workers. By contrast, international migrant workers were said to have (3) questionable occupational, linguistic or cultural skills and (4) cause negative social and economic impacts in Canada. When these narratives are viewed within a broader context, the apparent contradictions can be reconciled. Taken together, the narratives constitute an act of legitimation for the increased use of international migrant labour as part of the neo-liberal project of crafting more flexible labour markets for employers.

It has been shown elsewhere (e.g., Barnetson & Foster 2013; Fudge & McPhail 2009) that arguments for the economic necessity of international migrant labour are problematic and unjustified. There is little evidence that Alberta faced an absolute labour shortage; instead it experienced a relative shortage – a lack of Canadians prepared to accept prevailing wages and conditions. While many policy levers are available to address relative shortages, the MLA narratives privileged one solution – expanding the labour pool through international migrant labour – over others. The assertion that international migrant work was economically necessary acts to persuade MLAs' audience (Alberta voters) of the inevitability of the chosen approach while obscuring the options not pursued.

It is unclear from this study whether MLAs' adoption of the economic necessity narrative was an intentionally deceptive political justification of greater numbers of international workers or whether MLAs are simply uncritical consumers of neoliberal labour-market truisms. Given that employers and employer groups were active in asserting their interests in the corridors of government (Bouzek 2012), it can be speculated that at least some of this framing arises out of a "joint" understanding of the economic situation. That employer representatives presented similar narratives around the economic necessity of international migrant labour suggests a

synchronization of view between government and employers. The origins of the synchronicity cannot be ascertained.

What is clearer is that increased use of international migrant labour under restrictive TFWP rules proves advantageous to employer interests by providing a low-cost and docile labour force. Had the state not allowed employers access to international migrant workers, employers would have had to improve wages and working conditions to attract Canadian workers and/or reduced their operations. In both cases, this would have reduced employers' relative and absolute levels of profit. These alternatives demonstrate MLA assertions that international migrants were economically necessary and did not pose a labour market threat to Canadians were untrue. Further, state policies facilitating international migrant work altered the structure of the labour market by creating a permanent group of lower wage workers whom employers continued to prefer even during the economic downturn of 2008, when Canadian workers were available. The availability of international migrant workers to perform low-skill (or at least low-wage) work may also have made available Canadian workers for high-wage work associated with Alberta's oil boom. The benefits of high-wage work go disproportionately to privileged groups (i.e., "white" and male) and thus an additional effect of increased use of migrant labour is to amplify pre-existing inequities in the labour market.

In these ways, the economic necessity narrative serves to establish a "no alternative" discourse around the use of migrant labour. The no-threat narrative serves to assure Alberta voters that such policies are benign and the use of such labour is "temporary". They offer political justification for the project to increase flexibility and elasticity to the labour market. The danger for politicians in this project is the potential of growing public ire around the exploitative treatment of international migrantworkers. This exploitation reflects that temporary international

migration programs entrench and exacerbate existing racialized biases in the political and economic system by structurally relegating international migrant workers (most often members of a racial or ethnic minority) into sub-citizenship status (Sharma 2006; Vosko 2010). The second set of narratives—questioning the competence and commitment of international migrant workers—politically justify this structural and racialized marginalization by ascribing the marginalization to characteristics and behaviours of international migrant workers themselves.

For example, by arguing that international migrant workers are less desirable than Canadian workers, MLAs feed into an implied suggestion that international migrant labour is a "choice of last resort", thus bolstering their economic necessity narratives. The message is that employers are not selecting international migrant workers as a preference, but only as stop-gap measure. That the evidence does not necessarily support this assertion is conveniently excluded from the narrative. Further, by raising doubts and questions about the abilities, credentials and skills of international migrant workers, MLAs frame migrant workers as "less than", and therefore deserving of their partially excluded status. This narrative also contributes to the racialization of migrant workers by selectively exempting workers of Anglo origin from the negative discourse.

The duality of the narrative is also evident in MLAs' conflation of issues specific to higher-skilled migrant workers (e.g., credential recognition) with broader concerns about migrant workers. Concern over the validity of (non-Anglo) credentials is used to raise doubts about the abilities of all international migrant workers. This homogenization allows MLAs to ignore the key differences between higher-skilled and lower-skilled migrant workers, who have distinct experiences, motivations and pressures, and to maintain a perception of government as protector of "Canadians".

In the negative-impacts narrative, MLAs have transformed what is an government-imposed barrier to social engagement into a trait endemic to international migrant workers. Migrant workers are less likely to engage in the social, political and economic life of the destination community for reasons linked to their legal status as temporary residents. In the MLA narrative, however, this structural creation becomes a personal choice of the worker. Migrant workers "choose" to not commit to Alberta. This transformation achieves two effects. First, the true reason for the marginalization (i.e., government policies about (im)migration) is obfuscated and any political fallout that may arise is deflected. Second, it justifies seeing international migrant workers as solely economic entities with a narrowly defined utility. There is no need to consider the wholeness of their humanity.

Further, to achieve the desired economic outcome of a flexible labour supply and the political outcome of minimizing criticism, the de-personalization of international migrant workers is a necessary step. This may explain why government MLAs were so effusive in discussion of international migrant labour in the abstract – unspecific and unspecified – and its necessity for economic growth, while so reluctant to characterize international migrant workers as anything more than useful (albeit of poor quality) economic instruments. When acknowledging some degree of international migrant workers' humanity was unavoidable the narrative placed the blame on the worker rather than the broader institutional context. By doing so, the narrative avoids having to "humanize" the international migrant worker by drawing a one-dimensional caricature of an "other".

The two sets of narratives, while at first appearing contradictory, complement each other through selective privileging and excluding of narrative elements. All narratives tell a story in a fashion that serves particular interests and the decisions about what to include and exclude

reflects those interests. In the case of government MLAs in Alberta, the narratives are best seen as advancing employer interests in creating a more flexible, compliant labour force. They provide political justification and construct key actors in a fashion that facilitates labour-market flexibilization while minimizing political threats to legitimacy of the project. Extolling the necessity of international migrant labour while dehumanizing international migrant workers can be seen as part of the process of state legitimation of capital's interests under neo-liberal capitalism. The narratives are an act of constructing a generic, racialized other to justify state and employer actions designed to advance employer interests.

An interesting question warranting further study is the effect of international migrant workers on the labour market trajectory of Canadian workers. For example, did MLA criticism of international migrant workers' skills affect the distribution of opportunities for highly skilled work in a way that benefited Canadian (i.e., white) workers? Further, how does the conflation of low-skilled and high-skilled migrant workers' interests reproduce existing privilege in the Canadian labour market?

Conclusion

As international migrant labour becomes a permanent feature of Alberta's and Canada's labour market, the political pressures surrounding it require governments to justify its use. As part of that political process, Alberta government MLAs constructed narratives about the necessity of international migrant labour as well as the undesirability of international migrant workers. Specifically MLAs asserted that migrant work (1) was economically necessary and (2) posed no threat to Canadian workers. MLAs also asserted that international migrant workers (3) had questionable occupational, linguistic or cultural skills and (4) caused negative social and economic impacts in Canada. This seeming contradiction can be reconciled as an effort to justify

international migrant work (despite the political tensions and problems inherent with it) by "othering" international migrant workers. Specifically, international migrant workers are dehumanized by discussing them in solely economic terms and by characterizing them as undesirable workers who pose a threat to Canadian communities (although not jobs). These framings justify their partial citizenship and poor treatment.

As employers seem unlikely in the foreseeable future to cease using international migrant workers, it is likely that politicians will continue to construct narratives to address threats posed by such programs to their political legitimacy. The sweeping reforms to the TFWP in 2014 and the federal government's rapid abandonment of longstanding justifications for the program suggest there may be a limit to governments' ability and/or willingness to legitimize employer use of international migrant labour. However, the government justifies its turnabout by invoking the widely held view that "Canadians" should receive preferential access to employment opportunities, constructing a new narrative justifying longstanding patterns of privilege in Canada. The evolving nature of the narratives warrants further investigation.

As a final note, justification for international migrant labour in Alberta is similar to that of other jurisdictions globally. We argue the narrative analysis approach has potential in future research to draw out further insights about how governments navigate the political economy of ERGM.

[i] In Canadian tradition, the ceremonial head of state reads the Speech from the Throne, which is written by the government and thus is a direct proxy for direct government MLA narratives.

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