

## **Opening Address**

### **“Canada as Refuge?”**

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It is a real pleasure to welcome you to Edinburgh and to our two-day deliberations on the question of Canada as Refuge. Many of you have travelled a long way to be here – so let me as the director of the UK’s oldest centre of Canadian Studies welcome you to the University, to the School of Social and Political Studies and to the interdisciplinary inquiry ahead of us.

Refuge is a critical thread that links the histories of Scotland and Canada and this is therefore an appropriate place, geographically and historically to host our deliberations in the next two days. But issues of migration, refuge and resettlement are also of contemporary importance here in Scotland, and in Canada, and in this regard I would particularly like to welcome to this conference, Gary Christie from the Scottish Refugee Council and Robert Orr, the Minister for Immigration at the Canadian High Commission in the UK.

Geographical and historical perspectives are just two of the lenses we will employ in our multi-disciplinary deliberations over the next two days and I would like to take the opportunity in these remarks to say a little more about the purpose of this conference and the way it has evolved intellectually. The ideal of Canada as a place of refuge is deeply ingrained in country’s history – in the

colonial period refuge in Canada was critical amongst others for Scots cleared from the highlands, slaves in US seeking freedom via the underground railroad, and Empire Loyalists who sought political refuge in the aftermath of the American revolution. In the mid 20<sup>th</sup> Century questions of refuge became enmeshed in broader issues about the protection of human rights, freedom from religious persecution and in conscientious objection to war. More recently, the continental imperatives of anti-terrorism and the economic demands of globalisation and neo-liberalism have reshaped the dynamics of refuge.

But the purpose of this conference is not solely to chart historical trends in Canada providing different forms of refuge for migrants. It is also to think about contemporary issues of public policy in the field of refugee studies. Questions of immigration policy, border control, asylum, and resettlement. Issues of linguistic, cultural and human rights that not only affect refugees but also impact more broadly on the shape of civil society in Canada. I hope in our deliberations over the next two days we will share research about ways in which policies focusing on refuge and resettlement in Canada have been developed but also consider how these might be enhanced.

Moving beyond questions of history and public policy, this conference is concerned with exploring and questioning the theoretical ideal of Canada as a safe, multicultural, haven. We have papers this morning that explore the theoretical underpinnings of this ideal, and consider its limitations -- both in Quebec and in terms of Canada's treatment of First Nations. Later in the day papers question the limited extent to which issues of

culture have been included in refugee studies in Canada. We look forward, tomorrow, not only to papers that focus on the way theoretical debates about Canada as refuge have been reshaped by the changing priorities of attention to human rights, on the one hand, and to questions of security, on the other but to the keynote address of Professor Howard Adelman, the founder of Canada's Centre for Refugee Studies, who will address the complexities of conceptualising Canada as Refuge.

The legal and institutional frameworks of the Canadian State that shape Canadian responses to issues of refuge, asylum and resettlement are analysed at various stages in the conference programme as are questions about the role of voluntary organisations in this process. Questions relating to the global economic forces that shape both temporary and permanent migration to Canada, historically and in the contemporary period also shape our reflections throughout.

It has been interesting to see how the response to this conference will focus our attention not only on particular regions from which migrants have sought refuge in Canada: Scotland, the United States Eastern Europe, South Asia and Africa, but also on particular groups of migrants. We have papers later this morning that focus on children and refuge; and tomorrow, papers focusing on religious minorities and refuge. Questions about gender, sexuality and refuge run throughout the conference -- as do those relating to American war resisters seeking refuge in Canada both in the 1960s and in the period of more recent hostilities with Iraq.

While the call for papers for this conference, produced, as I hoped, new ways of juxtaposing questions about Canada as a place of economic, humanitarian and cultural refuge, I have been conscious of the way the research on refuge being presented at this conference is shaped by questions of migration to Canada and does not address questions of refuge and social policy within Canada : be these to do with refuge and shelter for vulnerable groups, the social movements that have developed historically to provide refuge from domestic abuse, and broader questions about shelter and public housing. It is interesting too, given the impressive contributions of Canadian writers to the international work of PEN that no proposals were made to consider Canada's critical engagement in this form of cultural refuge.

However, these observations are made not to admonish but rather to make us conscious over the next two days of the way in which questions of refuge could stretch beyond our deliberations on the importance of the economic, political and legal frameworks of forced migration to make greater room for debate on the domestic and cultural dimensions of refuge in Canada which inform the development of civil society in many different ways.

Let me conclude my introduction with a brief word about students and colleagues closer to home. It is the examination season here in Edinburgh and grading goes on apace. But last week when I marked papers for my course on International Indigenous Politics, I was delighted to see how some students had not only used papers from the Centre's previous conference (First Nations/First Thoughts) but also, in some cases, made contact with the authors and interviewed them about their work. So this is

to thank you for making your work available and contributing to the education of students in Canadian Studies here at Edinburgh. All colleagues chairing the sessions ahead are either affiliates of the Centre or have research expertise in the particular focus of the session. May I take this opportunity, therefore, to thank colleagues in the University and beyond for this support, and to say that I hope in that through this conference the Centre of Canadian Studies at Edinburgh will continue to encourage new international research connections that are invaluable for us all.