

Where brain drains lead

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And Canada thought it had a brain drain? Eight of every 10 Haitians and Jamaicans with college or university degrees live outside the country of their birth, the World Bank says in a new report. In five African countries, more than 50 per cent of skilled workers have left. (The figures aren't precise; they include those who emigrated as children and went on to university in their new homeland.) Now that's a brain drain.

Canada has no overall brain drain. Its net gain of those with postsecondary education was 2.25 million people in 2000, up from 1.5 million 10 years earlier, the World Bank says. The bank says Canada and the West are draining poor countries of their best minds. By giving hope and opportunity to individuals, this country and other rich countries deprive entire nations of those qualities. Countries fail when their institutions are weak; strong institutions need smart, trained people. "When a Humpty Dumpty falls and cracks, just who is going to put it together?" ask John McHale, a Queen's University economist, and Devesh Kapur, a development expert at the University of Texas, in their recent book *Give Us Your Best and Brightest*.

The question is what, if anything, rich countries should do about it. One answer, say Professors McHale and Kapur, is not to recruit doctors and nurses from poor African countries where those people are desperately needed for the fight against AIDS. That seems reasonable enough.

Other options are to bar educated people from leaving, impose exit taxes on them, make them pay taxes to their homeland once they begin earning money in their new country, and have their new country set aside a share of immigrant taxes to compensate their countries of origin. These suggestions range from the impractical to the offensive. The right to leave one's homeland is basic; the world needs no more Berlin Walls, whether of bricks or exit taxes. The idea that a Canadian citizen such as Ottawa software engineer Maher Arar would need to pay his birthplace of Syria a portion of his income earned in this country (or that Canada would have to pay part of its take from him) seems bizarre. Freedom of movement implies the right to shed obligations to the nation in which, through no fault of the migrant, he was born.

It is hard to see where Canada offers unfair inducements to educated people in poor countries. Immigration Minister Joseph Volpe announced pilot projects in the spring to entice more international students, but the decision to stay or return home is the student's. The streets, alas, are not paved with gold. Immigrants need to cover great distances, learn new languages and survive in a climate or social setting that may be very different from the ones they are accustomed to. Only a powerful inner need could take them that far. It is the same need -- the yearning to be free from war, or corruption, or poverty, or hopelessness -- that has driven the movement of peoples throughout history. (Roughly 175 million people now live outside the country of their birth, about twice the number of 25 years ago, but that's still only about 3 per cent of the world's population.) More and more, it is the middle classes rather than the huddled masses who are moving. But they, like the poor, have the right to build better lives for themselves and their families.

The First World is not feasting on the misery of the Third. It is, slowly, realizing that discriminatory barriers only hurt itself in the growing international competition for skilled labour. It is a happy coincidence that an end to discrimination is in the West's interest. But there are costs to absorbing immigrants (language training, housing, security) and benefits to countries of origin (immigrants worldwide sent back remittances of \$225-billion in 2005). Educated people do not

rush to leave prosperous, safe democracies in which their skills can be put to work. The loss of talent, say Professors McHale and Kapur, is a wake-up call to poorer countries. The West's obligation is to help those countries build the infrastructure they need to prosper.