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Global Seagulls and the New Reality of Immigration

By CHRYSTIA FREELAND | REUTERS

BANFF, ALBERTA — [Immigration](#) is always a hot issue when the economy is weak and jobs are scarce, so it should be no surprise that it has jumped to the top of the political agenda in Europe and the United States. But much of the debate today around these centuries-old themes of us vs. them and newcomer vs. old-timer is missing an essential point: In the age of the Internet, the jet airplane and the multinational company, the very concepts of immigration, citizenship and even statehood are changing.

“This is the new wave, the new trend,” Wang Huiyao, founder and president of the Beijing-based Center for China and Globalization, told me. “We had the globalization of trade, we had the globalization of capital, and now we have the globalization of talent.”

Dr. Wang recalled that three decades ago, when he first came to North America as a student, there was only one flight a day to China. Today, he said, “there are two or three dozen, if not more.”

As a result, instead of immigration being a single journey with a fixed starting point and end point, Dr. Wang said many Chinese have become what he calls “seagulls,” going back and forth between San Francisco or Vancouver, British Columbia, and Beijing or Shanghai. He is a seagull himself: I spoke to Dr. Wang on the phone from Washington; he is spending the academic year at the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University in Massachusetts; his institute is in Beijing; and he still owns an apartment in Vancouver, where he once lived.

Airplanes and the continent-hopping professional lives they have made possible are only part of the story. The cheap, instant and often nearly constant communication made possible by the technology revolution has further fundamentally altered the experience of moving away from home.

“Because telecommunications is everywhere and is so cheap, people never really leave their communities,” Mark Podlasly, founder of the Brookmere Management Group, a Vancouver

consulting firm, told me. “You can leave but still have a 24/7 connection with your home community. People are never really gone. You can be a citizen anywhere.”

I met Mr. Podlasly at the Banff Forum, an annual gathering of Canadian business people, politicians and scholars, at which he presented research on global expatriate networks as part of a panel discussion of citizenship and immigration. One of Mr. Podlasly’s conclusions was that governments and government policy need to catch up with the new reality of immigration.

That is very much the view of Professor Mark Boyle, a migration expert at the National University of Ireland, Maynooth. “Citizenship law is struggling to catch up with the new realities of global work,” he told me. “It is still based on the notion of a sedentary population, rather than the nomadic population that many of us have become.”

One of the biggest shifts is in the thinking about what we used to call “brain drain.”

“Increasingly, immigrants who live elsewhere are being viewed as assets,” Mr. Boyle said. “This is a paradigm shift; this is a seismic shift. The notion of brain drain is ridiculed — instead, it is ‘brain circulation.’ The notion is that people can return as tourists, that people can be ambassadors for their home countries, that people can serve as business agents.”

“It is no longer about brain drain, or even brain gain,” Dr. Wang agreed. “It is about global brain circulation.”

One of the countries that uses its diaspora most effectively, Mr. Boyle says, is India. “India is increasingly looking to its diaspora as an asset,” Mr. Boyle said. “Many people argue that India’s technology development would not have happened without the overseas population, particularly in Silicon Valley. So the government has had to rethink its attitudes to its citizens. India has set up a whole government ministry solely to look after the expat Indians.”

Mr. Podlasly said that some countries have figured out how to use their diasporas so effectively that “they aren’t always bringing them back; they want them out there.”

An example he admires is GlobalScot, a publicly funded organization that brings together top Scottish business people working outside the country with Scottish companies hoping to export their goods or services. An outside consulting firm estimated that between 2004-06, GlobalScot added more than £28 million to the Scottish economy.

Attitudes toward these global citizens can get more complicated in the countries they live and work in, even as they retain their ties and emotional connections to their original homes. The

cherished American idea of the melting pot, after all, is largely about cutting ties with the old country.

But Mr. Boyle said that in the age of globalization, a diaspora closely connected with its country of origin could be as economically valuable for its host country as it is for its native one: “Diasporas are a win-win. Silicon Valley wins, and the home country wins.”

That’s a big shift. But some countries and policy makers are predicting our concept of citizenship will soon be stretched even further — that we will go from Dr. Wang’s seagulls to thinking of countries as virtual, rather than physical, communities. In a presentation to the Canadian government in 2008, Alison Loat argued, “Canadians can no longer be thought of as only those living in the territory above North America’s 49th parallel, but more accurately as a potential network of people spanning the globe.”

Mr. Boyle said that New Zealand, with its geographical isolation, small population and large number of expatriates, has taken this idea the furthest: “New Zealand is fundamentally reimagining what it means to talk about the New Zealand nation. New Zealand is saying that it is at once a small island tucked away from the rest of the world and at the same time a globally networked nation with populations sprinkled across the globe.”

Living as we do in the age of Facebook, we shouldn’t be surprised that some countries are starting to imagine themselves more as social networks than as a physical place.

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