

## Atlantic Canada's Two-Tier Remittance Economy

There was a lot of [ire and eye-rolling](#) on March 7 when New Brunswick Conservative MP John Williamson, in response to a question about labour shortages in meat packing and processing, claimed: “it makes no sense to pay whities to stay home while we bring in brown people to work in these jobs.”

In one fell swoop, Williamson clearly summed up the racialized caricature the Conservative government wants you to believe about Atlantic Canada's workforce: that lazy white locals are living high on the dole (or as we say here, pogeys) while transnational migrants, who are hard-working but not invested locally, [take the jobs they should be doing](#).

This caricature is the ideological backbone of the region's two-tier racialized remittance economy.

### *What to do with a seasonal economy?*

Williamson's “whitie” has a long history in Atlantic Canada.

Since the post-war period, the region's ‘unviable’ seasonal economies have been poked and prodded by federal policy-makers in an attempt to industrialize local industries and eradicate the ‘problem’ of seasonal unemployment.

Historically, many local workers travelled within and outside the region with the ebb and flow of demand for manual labour. But with mechanization of agriculture, forestry, and other natural resource industries, these patterns of work dried up, and unemployment benefits assumed a critical role in the region's economy. The hard-won 1950's era extension of unemployment insurance eligibility to seasonal workers established a basic and reliable level of material security for workers and their families; it also drew national scorn.

Today we are well acquainted with the stereotype of the lazy, government-dependent Maritimer. We can add Williamson's comment to a long list including [Stephen Harper commenting](#) that “there is a dependence in the region that breeds a culture of defeatism” and [Margaret Wente reflecting](#) that EI “traps people and discourages them from moving to areas where their futures (and their kids' futures) might be better.”

While it's true—given the region's [unemployment](#) and [poverty](#) rates—that the future feels grim for many on the east coast, this isn't a geographical or, for that matter, a seasonal problem. Saying so is just a sneaky way of blaming poverty on nature.

The truth is, livelihoods in the region have been undercut by the mismanagement and consolidation of local primary industries, entrenched corporate control [cough, [Irving's](#)], lack of meaningful employment strategies, and neoliberal policy-making that has converted Canada's employment insurance program from primarily a benefit for unemployed workers into a [labour market management tool](#). The decimation of the EI program over the past several years—nudged along by extractive industries in western Canada—was done [with an eye to the cheap and flexible labour available](#) in regions like the Maritimes.

Margaret Wenté is getting her way. Seasonal workers who have the resources have been responding to these pressures in the labour market by seeking [long-distance shift-work](#), largely in the Alberta oil patch.

### ***A seasonal workforce that can't go west***

In 2002 the pilot program that became the low-skill stream of the Temporary Foreign Worker Program (TFWP) was created to allow access to supremely flexible, made-to-order workers across all industries. In the Maritimes, as local workers have left seasonal, low-income industries (in part, many speculate, because of the increasing difficulty of accessing unemployment insurance), seasonal employers have increasingly turned to the Temporary Foreign Worker Program to fulfill their labour needs.

In PEI, which has the [highest growth rate](#) of temporary foreign workers in Atlantic Canada, fish processing plants outstrip even agriculture as employers of transnational migrant workers. The workers are primarily women from China, Thailand, and the Philippines, all of whom leave their families behind to work processing lobster for eight months each year. Although some transnational migrant workers are ferried to and from Canada with the seasons by international labour companies—using practices that would violate human rights laws if Canadians were subjected to them—others wait out the winter months in rural PEI to begin work again in the spring.

In these isolated communities the tired, racist and government sanctioned refrain “foreigners are taking our jobs” is heard less than one might expect. Locals often observe that if it weren't for the foreign workers, the local fish plant would close, and there would be no jobs for anyone. In the workplace, migrant workers take on the harshest parts of the job: longer hours and the more difficult or grisly work that local workers would rather avoid.

Local workers know that the seafood processing industry can be exploitative, and many plants have earned reputations over the years for exploiting workers and scamming them on payday. The low wages, poor conditions, and increasingly unreliable access to EI in the offseason have driven local workers to avoid fish plant work when possible—often leading to outmigration for those with any degree of flexibility. Anyone who's anyone goes west, people say.

### ***Two-tier remittance economy***

But transnational migrant workers coming to the Maritimes have more in common with the many locals who migrate to Alberta for work than the Conservative government would have us believe.

After a decade, the two-tier model of flexible migrant labour in the Maritimes is deeply entrenched, and it is variations on the same economic realities that drive migration for local workers and for transnational migrants. For starters, both groups are staring down staggering wage gaps that have been produced by retrograde economic policy, unfettered resource extraction, the undermining of food-based natural resource industries, and more. Both groups of migrants lack dignified employment options at home and are increasingly encouraged to train for long-distance labour markets. Ultimately, these workers are seeking basic economic security and opportunities for their kids.

In both cases, this fracturing of life and work is a free-market fanatic's dream. For employers, access to workers without the excess baggage of family and community relationships means a cheaper and more compliant workforce. Because of their isolation and many workers' dependence on their employers for housing and mobility, both workforces face heavy regulation and behavioural discipline. Since they are away from their families and "here to work," workers are more willing (and less able to refuse) to work long hours and weeks, or even months, with no time off.

Meanwhile, sending governments benefit from remittances through taxation, fees, and the lucrative recruitment industry, quietly turning a blind eye to the steep social costs of mass labour migration. Receiving governments, similarly, benefit: they are able to externalize the costs of social reproduction—education, healthcare, eldercare, etc.—both for workers, who often only migrate during their productive years, and for their families, who stay behind.

This two-tier remittance economy—Maritimers in Alberta and transnational migrants in the Maritimes—is a wholesale increase in flexibility that ensures employers have access to the right workers, at the right time, with the right skills, willing to work for the right wage. This model of mobile labour also ensures that, when workers are no longer needed, they are easily disposed of. Employers face no long-term accountability to their workforce: rather than retrain workers for changing market conditions, employers fire their workers and send them home.

But, while these commonalities may form the basis of some mutual understanding, the key difference between these two tiers of migrant workers' status should not be understated.

Seasonal workers in the Temporary Foreign Worker Program are always measuring their legal status in the weeks and months remaining on their work permit. When the work permit expires at the end of a season, so does their access to health care, the EI benefits they've paid into, and their access to legal processes without risk of detention and deportation. Citizenship, that is, is Canada's social, legal, and racial basis of exclusion: systematically ensuring access to a low wage, low rights workforce for employers, while preserving the ongoing vulnerability and disposability of transnational migrant workers.

While families and communities of Maritimers working in Alberta lose parents and community members for weeks or months at a time, the transnational seasonal workers in these same communities are separated from their children, spouses, and ageing parents for years on end.

### ***Disposability comes home***

In 2014, after years of ignoring repeated warnings and red flags, several high profile [media scandals](#) made the Temporary Foreign Worker Program a political embarrassment. The solution for the Canadian government, outlined by Immigration turned Employment Minister, Jason Kenney in a document entitled "Putting Canadians First," is to use the out they'd had all along: deportation. After years of work, taxation, and paying into social programs they can never hope to claim, the Canadian government is pushing transnational migrants [out of their jobs](#), and out of the country.

Meanwhile, in the oil industry, falling oil prices mean rising uncertainty for Maritime communities. Amidst the constant talk of layoffs, workers are quietly coming home. As Alberta license plates start to pepper the region, families re-learn how to live together, bills pile up, and the many communities that depend on remittances wait in a suspended state of anticipation for the price of oil to go up again.

### *A circuitous race to the bottom*

Perhaps the most egregious thing about John Williamson's comments about race and work was that what he said about the system rang true. He not only named the racialized system of labour exploitation at work in this region, but he also hitched the 'problem' of the temporary foreign worker program to the 'problem' of undeserving white poverty.

The 2014 changes to the TFWP specifically target [high unemployment regions](#), squeezing temporary foreign workers out of positions they have held for years and dramatically increasing the risk of deportation. The [implication](#) is that workers from the global south are not entitled to any degree of status where they live and work, while local seasonal workers and unemployed people should take any job available.

Whitie and the job thief are two of the Conservative government's favourite—and most mutually productive—villains: one has been used to claw back support for the poor and unemployed; the other, to garner support for racist immigration policies. Together, these caricatures have helped blame people for their poverty, pit workers against each other, and deny people the status and dignity everyone deserves.

Williamson seemed confused about the reaction he drew, but his cartoonish comments made one thing clear: From PEI to Alberta to the Philippines, it's a vicious race to the bottom.