Political Liberalism in Canada: The Case of Syrian Refugees

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Why Refugee Matter for Political Liberalism in Canada?

Refugees are a consequence of the harmful nature of humanity. Consequently, it leads to the attraction of the international community, especially to the entity that placed humanism as the central part of its identity (Helton, 2002: 7). Arthur Helton argued that the ostentation of a moral obligation toward the refugee issue has mainly inspired by the connectivity between humanity and negative human nature. Conflict is human nature based on the realist perspective. Because human nature is always about the struggle of power, conflict is unavoidable in terms of human nature. Accordingly, the problem of the refugee is also about conflict. It also considered as the causality between conflict and refugees. As one of the pillars in liberalism, humanism is the primary value that attracts the refugee issue as a significant phenomenon for liberalism. Humanism will be derived from the moral obligation for any Liberalism entity to impulse help or salvation for refugees (Helton, 2002: 8).

Canada, in this issue, is the representation of the country that implements political liberalism. It is essential to analyses why Canada admit Syrian refugee in order to understand why refugee matter for liberalism. The notion of liberalism towards refugee policy is the most appealing issue on the development of political liberalism in Canada (CBC News, 2016). Progressive policy by accepting many Syrian refugees is representing the promotion of liberalism value that becomes the concern of the Liberal Party as the ruling party. The aspiration of accepting asylum came from the root of liberalism itself, which are civil liberties, freedom, equality, and justice (CBC News, 2016). The asylum in this context can be seen as the protection of helpless people, such as refugees — a state in these circumstances, protecting
helpless and stateless people in coherence with humanism and equality frameworks. Asylum status sometimes tends to become problematic, especially regarding the Syrian refugee. At this crucial moment, refugees that have been helped by the state could become an enemy of the state (Helton, 2002: 9). With the extensive fears toward domestic security threats that increase accordingly with the number of the refugee admitted in a country, policymakers in most of the Western states will be reluctant to admit high numbers of refugee and tighten the refugee admittance regulations. However, Canada, as one of the Western countries, does not seem frustrated by the negative impact of refugee policy. It can be seen from the massive numbers of the refugee that have already landed in Canada (See figure 1).

27,190 Syrian refugees have arrived in Canada since November 4, 2015

15,355 government-assisted refugees
2,341 blended visa office-referred refugees
9,494 privately sponsored refugees

Figure 1 (Source: Department of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship, 2016)

The milestone of a Liberal government like Canada is intertwined between humanitarianism and human rights (Helton, 2002: 10). It could be seen that Canada has consistently preserved the political liberalism that is coherent with the Canadian refugee policy. Why Canadian refugee policy so important? What is the problematic aspect that connected between Canadian refugee policy and Canadian political philosophy? In order to answer those questions, I applied the comparison between Western Europe countries policy toward Syrian refugee admittance. As the central representation of liberalism, political philosophy Western European countries ideally must have the same policy and mutual understanding regarding Syrian refugees. However, the figure showed that only two countries that are embracing
political liberalism implemented progressive policy toward Syrian refugee policy, which are Canada and Germany, respectively (See Figure 2).

![Germany Leads the Way in Syrian Refugee Resettlement](image)

In the figure two, we can see how most Western Europe countries still have a different approach to the Syrian refugee policy. Even though, the political liberalism has been massively influencing policymakers, leaders, and citizen, the extent to which liberalism political philosophy embodied in the country identity and policy still vary based on the value that incorporated in the liberalism political philosophy. The value of humanitarianism and human rights are the values that could be differently interpreted and implemented by the countries. In this sense, liberalism political philosophy is not only showing a progressive change in the public policy but also, it has demonstrated the tremendous output toward political leadership.
in Canada. The leadership in Canada, which diverse by race, ethnicity, and professional experience, successfully justifies the liberal policy regarding refugees (Troper and Weinfeld, 1999: 5). The diverse leadership in Canada support the argument that immigrant is always negative, conversely it could provide tremendous opportunities for the state. Canada has a vast territory, and if compared with the population, and Canada could receive more refugees and increase the population in order to boost economic advancement (Gilmore, 2015). The realization of progressive Canadian policy toward immigration issues shown by the ratification of the law regarding immigration. The latest change regarding immigration demonstrated in the Protecting Canada’s Immigration System Act in 2012 (Elliot and Payton, 2012). The act was underlining several aspects of political liberalism, such as engagement of human rights in the decision-making process of immigration and humanitarian consideration. The act also made Canada the most receptive toward refugees compared to other Western countries.

**What make Canada Difference?**

A poll that conducted by Angus Reid Institute shows how Canadian people have diverse opinions regarding Syrian refugee policy from the Liberal Party and Prime Minister Justin Trudeau. The poll showed that majority of Canadian support the government policy to accept more refugee. However, there is a significant number that opposes the Liberal Party policy regarding Syrian refugee (See figure 3). On the other survey, the main cause of the partition of Canadian public is because of the ambitious target that Liberal Party decided regarding Syrian refugee admission. Majority Canadian public that opposes the government plan triggered by the duration of the Syrian refugee admission (See figure 4). The Angus Reid Institute indicate that Canadian people feel obligation to accept Syrian refugee. The notion of moral obligation toward Canadian public rooted from the Liberal value that embodied as political philosophy.
and identity. The polls also could become strong indication that Canadian people are more attached to the value of humanitarianism and human rights, which realized through public support toward Liberal Party Syrian refugee policy.

![Pie chart showing support and opposition to the Syrian refugee resettlement plan.](image)

**Figure 3** (Source: Angus Reid Institute, 2016: 1)

The majority of the Canadian public views are positive, with the government plan to admit vast numbers of Syrian refugees. The cause of opinion difference is

![Bar chart showing reasons for opposition to the Syrian refugee resettlement plan.](image)

**Figure 4** (Source: Angus Reid Institute, 2015: 4)

It can be concluded that the majority of the Canadian public views are positive, with the government plan to admit vast numbers of Syrian refugees. The cause of opinion difference is
mainly because of the duration of the program and the number of refugees that could be admitted into Canada. It can become the foundation for the populism and embodiment of the political liberalism in Canadian political leaders, also to the Canadian people. Unpredictably, Canadian people support the government policy regarding Syrian refugees and voluntarily become a private sponsor for the Syrian refugees (Mas, 2016). Canadian people in this issue were aware of the political identity of Canada itself, which is the Liberal Party always pointed out that immigrations are the thing that builds Canada. Immigrants and Canada are inseparable because genealogically, the majority of Canadian citizen was the immigrants (Troper and Weinfeld, 1999: 3). Liberal Party is aware of the history of Canadian demographics and commits to improving immigration law. It could be seen by the role of the Liberal Party toward legislation of Canadian immigration law, such as the Immigration Act in 1976, Immigration and Refugee Protection Act in 2002, and Protecting Canada's Immigration System Act in 2012 (Hamlin, 2014: 49). These laws have advocated by the Liberal Party and become the core of the campaign for the Liberal Party. Liberal Party has promised throughout the campaign that it will continually accept refugees during Justin Trudeau's leadership.

**Syrian Refugee Policy Implementation and the Justification**

Liberal Party and PM Justin Trudeau have pledged to accept and resettle 25,000 Syrian refugees by the end of the year (Liberal Party, 2015). This ambitious program has become the most progressive policy that PM ever took since officially took the position in 2015. During his campaign, PM Trudeau had a concern about the migrant crisis caused by political and security instability in the Middle East. Liberal Party through Ministers McCallum launched “Welcome Refugee Initiative” explicitly designed to respond Syrian refugee crisis (Department of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship, 2015). This program so far, has tremendously brought over 27,000 refugees by the end of 2015. The budget prepared by the government
reaches $245 million (Zilio, 2016). The Liberal Party considers the issue of the Syrian refugees as the main priorities in reforming immigration and creating economic opportunities.

Historically, the reason for the Liberal Party to concern about refugee policy had come from the development of Political liberalism. The Liberal Party took the bold step through the leadership of Pierre Trudeau in 1971. Pierre Trudeau passed the law that adopted multiculturalism as the official policy of Canada (Bauder, 2011: 49). From this step, Canada has implemented progressive changes toward the acquisition of several programs that concern the issue of multiculturalism, including refugee and immigration policy. In 1976, the more liberalized immigration policy had implemented by the Canadian government (Bauder, 2011: 50). This policy was the manifestations of liberal democratic value about the refugee and stateless people. In the smaller context, the Canadian government had implemented the recognition of the aspects of family reunion, humanitarian responsibilities, working specialties, and business in the immigration policy. The aspect of humanitarian responsibilities is the most fundamental framework for the development of refugee policy in Canada. As follows, the government focuses on the massive accepting number of refugees as the part of Liberal Party priority when Justin Trudeau becomes the Prime Minister of Canada (Wherry, 2015).

In the sense of Canadian public opinion that pointed out that receptive behavior toward refugees has become the main booster for the Liberal Party to continue “Welcome Refugee Initiative.” The positive attitude toward the Liberal Party policy regarding Syrian refugees is the manifestation of political liberalism in Canada. Most of the Canadian people are aware of the liberal democratic state have more obligation towards refugee, and how human rights become popular among Canadian people (Lippert, 1998: 196-197). The political liberalism in Canada is the most significant reason for the progressive approach of the Canadian government in the context of the Syrian refugee issue. With the coherence between the Canadian public and the Liberal Party as the ruling party, the implementation of Syrian refugees policy will be
optimized. Moreover, in this case, citizen engagement toward private sponsorships also increases the positive attitude toward the Liberal Party policy (The Economist, 2016). The private sponsorships open the opportunities for citizen engagement in the progressive policy such as Syrian refugee policy, with the engagement of the citizen, the legitimacy, and sustainability of the progressive policy could be guaranteed and implemented without any substantial obstacle.

However, it is not only a matter of agreement between political leaders and public opinion. There are also disagreement and fear that mainly triggered by the risk that might be contributed by the refugee, such as the security risk, social and economic risk, also the ignorance toward the root of the Syrian refugee problem, which is the security and political instability in Syria. The debate has become appealing, especially during the 2015 election and Paris Attack in 2015. Liberal Party had concluded that to accept Syrian refugees was beyond the political agenda, but it was the moral obligation and related to humanitarianism and human rights (Liberal Party, 2015). However, Conservative Party believes that accepting Syrian refugees was not the ultimate solution for Syrian refugees crisis, and it could not utilize to become the primary approach to responding to the root problem of the Syrian refugee crisis (Harper, 2015). The debate is always underlining the ideal approach based on each political philosophy. Liberal Party that carefully attach with the humanitarianism and human rights will always be put the refugee admission as one of the political priorities because it is the primary value that embodied in the Liberalism political philosophy. It also said by the Major of Calgary during an interview:

“The fact that we have not even taken the Syrian refugees that we have committed to take, let alone taking many more people who are fleeing the most desperate situation only looking for opportunity in the world, to me is a disgrace.”

(Southwick, 2015)
Conclusion

To conclude, the value of humanitarianism and human rights are the milestone of political liberalism. Through the Liberal Party, we can see the extent to which the advancement of Liberalism in Canada. Liberal Party has regularly eased the regulation to admit more Syrian refugees and set a plan to increase the number of refugees that accepted for each year (Puzic, 2016). Liberal Party concluded that the refugee issues and the fundamental value of liberalism could be separated. A state must protect the helpless people and stateless people because humanism is one of the crucial aspects of the liberalism. The main agenda behind the Syrian refugee admission is the moral obligation that embodied by the idea of liberalism. The international community and Canadian public opinion toward Canadian the Syrian refugee response is appealing. With the bold steps that the Canadian government implemented toward Syrian refugee has caused international criticism toward conservatism that showed by mostly of European states. More importantly, Canadian citizens are very supportive of the Liberal Party plan on Syrian refugees. Also, voluntarily become the private sponsors for the refugee in order to achieve the goal of “Welcome Refugee Initiative.”

It also can be concluded that political liberalism in Canada is very advanced and have a significant influence on the political landscape and decision-making process. By definition, liberal democratic states have more obligation toward accepting refugees following the core value of the liberal democracy itself, which are humanitarianism and human rights (Gibney, 199: 175). In the appealing scenario, the political constellation in Canada supposed to be classified the political groups into two groups, which are oppositions and the ruling party, which is not giving any influence toward the progressive policy of the Canadian government toward refugee policy. In short, the attitude of the government and opposition enormously influenced by the Liberalism political philosophy, and that bolster the political leaders and policymakers endorse the admittance policy of Syrian refugees (Lippert, 1999: 311).
Moral obligations have defined Canadian political identity, which underlines the humanitarianism and human rights as the foundation of the refugee policy. The government, in this case, has got the strong public support that showed through the willingness to participate in the private sponsorships and polls by various institutions (Bauder, 2011: 55). The majority Canadian public corresponds to the policy to admit vast numbers of Syrian refugees. The moral obligation also becomes the most substantial reason for the Canadian public, and the political actors become concurrence with the Syrian refugee policy. The value of humanitarianism and human rights that embodied in Canadian society has prominently implemented toward the positive attitude toward government plan to resettle vast numbers of refugee (Gibney, 1999: 179). This fact is very critical for the decision-making process and becomes the distinct point that Canadian have so far. Compared with the other Western countries, the emphasis on humanitarianism and human rights has been contained by the security and domestic threat issue.

Reference:


