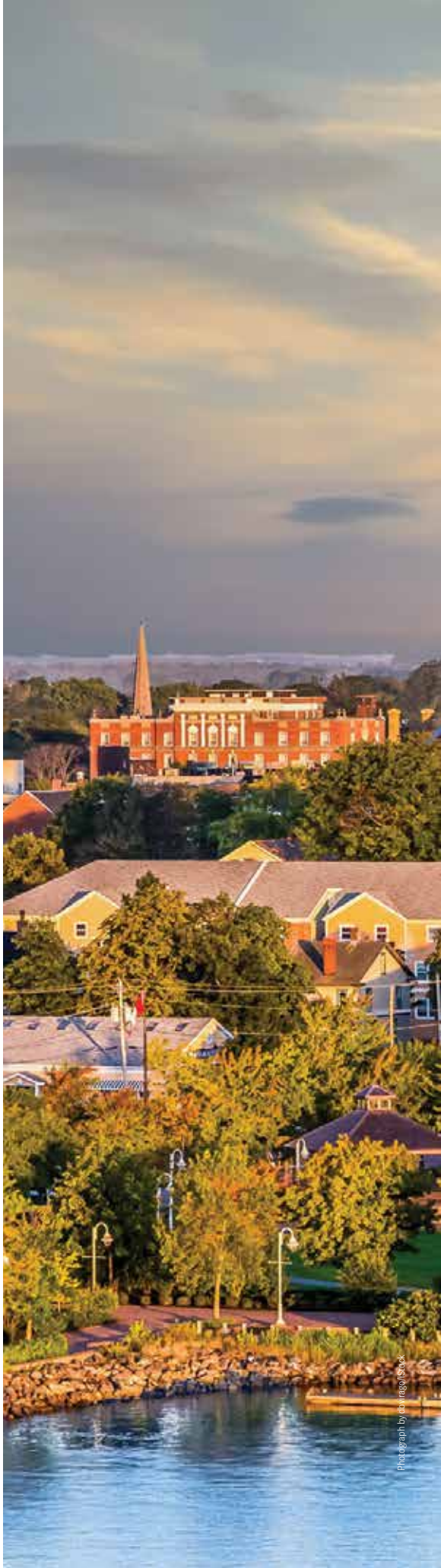
BOOM TOWN

For more than half a decade, Charlottetown has sustained the highest immigration rates in Canada. The influx has saved P.E.I. from demographic oblivion—and made it a case study in the perils of ultra-rapid growth.

By Alex Cyr

Photography by Darren Calabrese



Photograph by iStock

ONE MORNING when I was eight years old, my Grade 3 teacher cut math class short and brought us all to the conference room of the small school I attended in Abram-Village, Prince Edward Island. There, a social worker stood in front of the small student body—about 120 kids—and announced that a new family was coming to our village. The Mazarabakizas were a family of refugees from Burundi who'd fled their home due to civil war. Their four eldest children would attend our school, and the social worker implored us to treat them as we would any other friends—regardless of their cultural background and differences.

If it seems a little extreme to have a full-school intervention on behalf of a single immigrant family, it was warranted in P.E.I. in 2003. Until the Mazarabakiza family arrived, I was the most foreign person in my class (my father is Acadian from New Brunswick). The population of our province was so homogenous that people sometimes identified each other by old family nicknames; on my mother's side, we'd been called the Joe Cannons ever since my great-great-grandfather Joe allegedly killed the last bear on the island with a cannon in the late 19th century. In my village of about 350 people, everyone was white—it is entirely possible that some of the kids I went to school with had never seen a Black person.

It wasn't just that the island lacked diversity—it was also trapped in a demographic death spiral. From my birth in 1995 to my 18th birthday, the island's population increased by only 9,000 people. Immigration was virtually non-existent, and young adults moved away in droves, driving up the median age from 34 to 43. I left for Ontario in 2017, because making a living as a journalist on P.E.I. seemed improbable at best.

Those days now feel very long ago. Around 2015, P.E.I.'s provincial government began juicing its lacklustre immigration numbers in a last-ditch bid to secure a prosperous future for the province—and it worked better than they could have imagined. Today, when I tell my teenage cousins that the arrival of an African family warranted a school-wide town hall, they're both amused and horrified. They go to school with students from Cameroon, Germany and elsewhere. For most Canadians, that's unremarkable, and has been for a long time. But on P.E.I., it's a very recent phenomenon. In the past 18 months, the province added 9,000 people, as many as it did during the first two decades of my life. That pace was not a one-off. Over the past eight years, Charlottetown has experienced the highest per-capita immigration rate of any Canadian urban region. It's not an exaggeration to say that P.E.I. and its capital city have undergone some of the highest immigration levels, and fastest demographic changes, in North America, if not the developed world. Last year, Charlottetown's five per cent annual growth rate put to shame the U.S.'s fastest-growing large metro, Dallas, which grew at a comparatively paltry two per cent. (In addition to immigration, a post-pandemic influx of Canadians from other provinces has spiked the population even more.)

It's not only the sheer amount of growth that's transformative. Between the 2016 and 2021 censuses, the number of non-white Charlottetonians more than doubled thanks to newcomers from China, India, the Philippines, the Middle East and elsewhere—and that pace has almost certainly quickened since the last census. There are new Islamic, Buddhist and Sikh religious centres. There are Asian supermarkets and Indian bakeries. Mandarin has overtaken French, my mother tongue, as the city's second-most-spoken language (Punjabi is third). Maybe most importantly, the city's median age has dropped by three years, from 41.4 to 38.5. Charlottetown now has one of the most youthful urban populations in Canada, and P.E.I. is the only province besides Nova Scotia and New Brunswick where the number of births has trended up, not down, over the past half-decade.

In other words, the province's immigration gambit paid off spectacularly. On my visits home in the past few years, I've dined at new sushi restaurants, taken in a cricket game and met new Islanders who hail from all over the world. But I've also found a place buckling under the stress of its ultra-fast growth. The number of unhoused people almost doubled between 2018 and 2021. Apartments rent for twice what they did a few years ago, and the vacancy rate is the lowest in the country, at only 0.5 per cent. Housing development isn't keeping up with demand. The health-care system is on the brink of collapse; the province had just 24 ICU beds as of 2020, and a dearth of family doctors. It outsources many complex medical procedures, like kidney transplants, heart surgeries and some cancer treatments, to Halifax and Moncton.

In the past year, Canadians have been embroiled in debate about whether our country's soaring immigration rates are sustainable and what should be done about it. Nowhere is that tension more evident than in my home province, where all of these trends have been more extreme. And its small size has made the rapid change more striking and more difficult to manage. As Charlottetown especially grows to look less like its old self and more like the rest of Canada, it will have to resist the pressure to crumble under the weight of its own success.

While reporting this story, I spoke to new Islanders who are unsure whether they'll be able to make a life for themselves in a place where the scale of everything—the housing market, the job market, the health system—is small and beyond maxed out. Most want to stay, but aren't sure if they can. And while few locals want P.E.I. to return to its stagnant past, tensions are rising around the pace of change. The unmanaged burst of growth today risks undermining the benefits it's already brought—in the worst case, sending another generation of Islanders out of province and off to the mainland.

CHARLOTTETOWN ONCE HAD a blueprint for welcoming newcomers—it's just that the last time it did so in large numbers was more than a century ago. Most of those new Islanders hailed from the same part of the world: Ireland and the U.K. There were scant exceptions, including a trickle of Chinese immigrants in the 1880s to help build the Grand Trunk Railway and hundreds of Lebanese people in the same decade escaping a military occupation of their country by the Turks. But that was about it for more than a century. While Toronto grew into one of the world's most multicultural metropolises, and a decades-long resources boom turned prairie outposts into bustling cities, P.E.I. remained tiny and ethnically one-dimensional as immigrants chose brighter lights and bigger cities.

This is how things were when Rosa and Joe Byrne moved to P.E.I. in 1993. People of colour were rare in Charlottetown; the 2001 census counted only 750 out of a metro population then numbering nearly 60,000.

In the past 18 months alone, P.E.I. added 9,000 people, nearly as many as it did during my entire childhood

Rosa was born in the Dominican Republic, where she met Joe, a Quebecer who spent seven years as a Catholic missionary there. Joe had studied at the University of Prince Edward Island in the early 1980s and loved Charlottetown's small-town appeal. When he and Rosa relocated there in the '90s, she found the city charming but also jarringly homogeneous. Mixed-race couples like Rosa and Joe were almost non-existent.

Joe and Rosa Byrne moved to Charlottetown in 1993. At the time, they were one of the only mixed-race couples in the city, and their children were among the only students of colour in their school.

Her colleagues snapped at her at work because her accent was hard for them to understand. Their son, Daniel, faced racial comments at school, being called "chocolate." Discussions about racism were frequent around the family dinner table. "I had conversations with my children about that," says Joe, "and that it was okay to look different from most people on the Island."

There wasn't even anywhere to buy staples of Dominican cooking, like plantains—Joe helped the tiny Latino community ship them from Halifax by inter-city bus. The Byrnes almost jetted for Halifax or Quebec, until Joe landed a job with the PEI Association of Newcomers to Canada.

At the time, just after the turn of the 21st century, the province was facing a brain drain on two fronts. Young people like the Byrnes were leaving, and the oldest baby boomers were reaching retirement age. Jim Sentance, an economics professor at the University of Prince Edward Island, remembers that the halls of government and academia were anxious about the fact that the province would soon be starved for working-age people. The province's long-time population growth strategy—luring expats back home—was floundering. Immigration, the government decided, was a better fix.

The province signed on to the federal government's provincial nominee program, or PNP, in 2001. It had been created just three years earlier in an effort to encourage immigrants to settle in greater numbers outside of the country's biggest cities and provide provinces more autonomy to select immigrants based on their labour and demographic needs. P.E.I.'s program set its bar lower than other provinces, offering permanent residency in exchange for a $200,000 investment in local businesses. The program led to a brief surge of newcomers, until criticisms arose that funds were being doled out to friends and families of provincial officials. In 2008 the program was changed so that newcomers would have to actively run their business, not just invest passively.

In 2012, the province also set up a new stream aimed at immigrant entrepreneurs, whom the government was counting on to jump-start the economy with new ventures. They could receive permanent-resident status immediately, provided they gave the province a $200,000 deposit, to be returned after operating a business for one year. But it was shut down in 2018 amid allegations that hundreds of would-be permanent residents had used false local addresses to make it look like they were living on P.E.I. No wrongdoing was ultimately found, but the debacle highlighted anxieties around the nominee program—i.e., that its low barriers to entry drew in people who used it to secure PR, then decamped for larger centres as soon as they could.

That stream was suspended, but the PNP system overall has maintained a reputation as an easy entry point to Canada. Unlike in most other provinces, newcomers in low-skilled jobs, like fast food and retail, can live and work in P.E.I. for two years before getting permanent-resident status. That's helped create a surge in newcomers in the past several years, while doing little to address labour-market shortages in the most needed fields. Additional paths to residency have brought in even more people, including a critical-workers stream


Korean and Japanese Food
Mr. Sushi


BRITS FISH & CHIPS


JAMAICAN FLAVOURS


CANTON
CAFE
CHINESE & CANADIAN FOOD
Take Out Service
LICENSED DINING RO
PUB


PUNJABI BITES


China Garden
of Green Gables
Chocolates

to fill low-skilled occupations like food service and agriculture, and an express entry stream for more highly skilled workers, which offers permanent residency after six months. All the while, the federal government's own immigration targets have risen, bringing in more people through standard federal streams and boosting international-student enrolment at the province's two main post-secondary institutions, the University of Prince Edward Island and Holland College.

By 2019, word had gotten around that Canada's smallest province was also its quickest entry point—and no one was prepared for the rush that followed. The prospect of overpopulation or ultra-fast growth, says Sentance, was completely off the radar of a government that had for decades been consumed by opposite problems: a declining fertility rate and a workforce drained by retirement and outmigration. Erica Stanley, an immigration consultant from Charlottetown, says the provincial government clearly rushed to invite people into the province without a proper integration plan, nor any idea how to scale up housing, health care, schooling or the job market. "We packed in immigrants to boost the economy," she says, "but we did not have the resources to support them." Sentance is more blunt: "The government probably lost control."

When Lebanon-born chef Pierre El-Hajjar moved to Charlottetown in 2011, his neighbours wouldn't even taste his food; today he runs a successful vegan restaurant

THERE HAS BEEN one major benefit to come out of P.E.I.'s population boom: when immigrants arrive today, there is usually a community waiting for them. Alan Nguyen is a 40-year-old husband, father of two and finance manager who moved from Vietnam to Charlottetown with his family in 2020. His fluency in English and French helped him almost immediately land a sales job at a car dealership.

His experience was dramatically different from Rosa and Joe Byrne's back in the '90s. When I spoke to him, he was one of more than 500 Vietnamese people in Charlottetown, a number that has skyrocketed from a mere 25 in 2016. He lives in a single-family house in East Royalty, a leafy suburban area in the city's northeast, enjoys good Vietnamese and Japanese restaurants within walking distance of his office and, unlike the Byrnes' fruitless plantain quests, can even find staple cooking ingredients from Vietnam in local stores. He doesn't worry about his kids sticking out at school, either. With dozens of Vietnamese children in their neighborhood, they don't have to deal with the burden of being exotic outsiders. And though Charlottetown has nothing on Ho Chi Minh City's nightlife—a regular outing for Nguyen and his wife, Nancy, might be a family dinner at Swiss Chalet—Maritime camaraderie can make up for the quiet nights. "You talk to an Islander and make a joke, and they laugh all the time," he says. One of his clients even brings freshly caught lobster to his office occasionally. It's a stark difference, he says, from when he lived in Montreal for two years in 2011 and 2012 and struggled to make friends.

Pierre El-Hajjar can also attest to the benefits of the maximum-volume approach to immigration. A Lebanon-born chef, he moved to the city in 2011 and was struck by a dearth of diverse cuisine—he struggled even to convince his Islander neighbours to try his barbecue. In 2021 he opened Gaia Urban Eatery on Queen Street downtown, a vegan joint featuring dishes like beet halloumi salad and tofu bibimbap. Business is thriving, which El-Hajjar attributes not so much to P.E.I.'s growing immigrant population as to locals who have come in a short time to embrace newness.

Both El-Hajjar and Nguyen know they've been lucky. El-Hajjar has hosted new immigrants, unable to find a place to live, in his own basement apartment over the years. And Nguyen told me about more recently arrived friends who work at car washes or Tim Hortons, spend their time between shifts scrolling through job listings, and live in cramped, overpriced apartments.

Tejbir Singh moved from Toronto to Charlottetown seeking a faster path to permanent residency through P.E.I.'s provincial nominee program. He wants to stay, but the skyrocketing cost of housing and uncertain job prospects weigh on him.

Even Nguyen's material comforts haven't insulated him from the infrastructure burdens that rapid growth has placed on the city. He's been on the waiting list for a family doctor since he arrived four years ago; he's been told it will take another four years to get off it. Like many newcomers, he's relied on overburdened walk-in clinics and emergency rooms, where visits increased by 20 per cent between 2021 and 2023. Health Minister Mark McLane has blamed rapid immigration and population growth for the health-care system's recent failings, saying the island would need a new physician every 80 days to keep up with the influx. The system was in poor condition even before the pandemic, with fewer physicians per capita than any other province, in large part thanks to the difficulty of attracting new doctors to a small province with relatively low wages. Wait lists were already long in the 2010s, in the early days of the population surge, and the problem has only worsened.

The consequences of the lack of foresight are becoming increasingly dire. Erica Stanley says she's seen new Islanders visiting their home countries for eye appointments, dental care and surgical procedures, sometimes even sending children back alone for faster care. "Anyone who has the option is totally bypassing the system here," she says. "It's not what they expected when they came to Canada."

Joy Fajardo and her husband, Francis, are originally from the Philippines. They moved to Canada from Singapore in 2019 because it seemed like a more affordable place to start a family. Francis, a logistics professional, accepted a job as a shift manager at Subway in Charlottetown because the franchise agreed to sponsor him and fast-track his family to permanent residency. The couple moved to the capital without having ever heard of P.E.I. Shortly after receiving PR status, Joy became pregnant. In the first trimester, she began experiencing stomach pains. She was on a waitlist for a family doctor for three years and, without one, she had no regular pre-natal care. Instead she waited up to eight hours in emergency rooms for ad hoc check-ups. The pregnancy ended in miscarriage. "I had those stomach pains and I knew there was something wrong but I couldn't get it treated," she says. "It's not the doctors, it's not the nurses, it's the system."

Fajardo insists that she loves P.E.I. and points out that her family's situation has improved. Her husband has found a job in his field, and she's had a good experience with her second pregnancy. But her first encounter with the health system speaks to the problem of scale that's come with the population influx: everything feels small compared to the extreme pace of growth. The health-care system struggles to reach the critical mass of resources needed to attract specialists in fields like cardiology, oncology and pediatrics. The province even has a formal agreement with Halifax's children's hospital to send Island children there for care they can't receive at home. The economy, long reliant on natural resources, the public sector and tourism, offers meagre growth opportunities for the entrepreneurs the province has recruited, and relatively few job prospects with larger employers. Even housing, which is in critically short supply, is afflicted by this problem of scale. Last year, ground broke

on just 487 new homes in the city, even as Statistics Canada estimated the population grew by more than 4,000 (a single-year record). The building industry has been going full steam for several years, but it needs to ramp up far more. Housing Minister Rob Lantz says that one impediment to building faster is the fact that many of P.E.I.'s developers are mom-and-pop contractors, ill-equipped to tackle larger projects or apply for the CMHC loans they require. Charlottetown is also encumbered by strict zoning by-laws, which recently prevented a developer from building an eight-storey building downtown. It would have had 158 units, including 30 renting below market price. The city's tallest edifice is still the Delta Hotel on Queen Street, built in 1983, and only 10 storeys high.

The consequences of the housing crisis are distressing in a community where homelessness was rare until recently. In 2022, an encampment of unhoused people appeared in the city's east end—an unprecedented sight. (It has since been vacated.) The median rents for new apartment listings surged 10 per cent last year alone, thanks in large part to the paltry vacancy rate. The average two-bedroom is still only $1,166, though new listings tend to go for well over $1,500. The average house price now hovers around $400,000, more than twice what it was seven years ago. That may sound like nothing to transplants from Ontario, but it's a shock for locals and for many young immigrants—especially considering that P.E.I. has recently experienced some of Canada's highest inflation rates and lowest wages. (Charlottetown's median after-tax household income is around $67,000, well below that found in many larger cities; the same figure in Toronto is about $85,000.)

Newcomers flock to social-media groups to swap job and apartment postings and make social connections. "PEI Updates" is an Instagram community started in 2020 by Tejbir Singh, a 25-year-old Punjabi immigrant. It now has more than 12,000 followers; roughly three-quarters of them are new immigrants. The page has become so popular that businesses often ask Singh to post ads for them. He even books halls and organizes social events through the account.

Singh moved from Toronto to P.E.I. in 2020, seeking a faster route to permanent residency. He first took a job at the Delta Hotel downtown and now works as a bus driver. Social integration hasn't been a problem—the city's South Asian community has exploded in size, tripling over the past five years to more than 3,000 people. He's found it easy to meet other Indian immigrants at the local cricket pitch, built in 2018 in Stratford, a suburb of Charlottetown. Fifteen players formed a WhatsApp group where they shared job and apartment postings (that group inspired Tejbir's own Instagram page).

Several of Singh's friends are in their 20s and want to build a life on P.E.I., but extremely tight job and housing markets threaten to chase them away. Lovepreet Singh (who is not related to Tejbir) graduated with a degree in accounting from the University of Toronto in 2021 and promptly hightailed it to Charlottetown through P.E.I.'s express entry program. He landed a job at a call centre just two weeks after moving and later became a taxi driver. The cost of living was manageable compared to Toronto, and he was well on his way to becoming a Canadian resident. Last year, he lost his job due to a lack of demand for cab drivers and spent months looking for work in a small labour market increasingly crowded with locals and newcomers alike. He was rehired last year—the population surge has created more demand for drivers—but he remains uncertain about the future. Both Lovepreet and Tejbir imagined staying in P.E.I. when they moved there. Both have now secured permanent residency, and both want to stay, but whether they can depends on factors beyond their control: especially the cost of housing and the career opportunities the province can offer. They would like to buy their own homes in the next few years, but neither make close to enough money to make that dream a reality. They've started jobs on the side to boost their cash flow: Tejbir opened his own driving school, and Lovepreet started a cleaning company.

For now, Tejbir lives with two roommates in a two-bedroom house in East Royalty, where more than a quarter of the population are first-generation immigrants. Newcomers also congregate at the apartment complexes in Royal Court, a burgeoning international community nestled between University Avenue and North River Road, the city's two most important north-south thoroughfares. Yet another concentration of new arrivals, many of them students, populate Browns Court, a network of cul-de-sacs across the street from the University of Prince Edward Island. More than half of the residents in these areas are first-generation arrivals, a volume of first-gen residents comparable to areas in Canada's largest cities.

Tejbir pays his share toward the apartment's rent of $1,950. Lovepreet shares a three-bedroom basement in the same neighbourhood with two friends, and pays his share of the $1,800 rent. Those figures are low compared to many other places in Canada, but competition for rentals in Charlottetown is fierce. There was a room full of bunk beds circulating on Facebook Marketplace earlier this year, and family homes are routinely crowded with double the number of people they should hold.

Last year, ground broke on just 487 new homes in Charlottetown, even as the population grew by more than 4,000 people

Tejbir says when he visited an apartment to potentially rent one of its rooms, there were roughly 20 other interested parties.

Tejbir finds the pace of life and the ease of making friends in P.E.I. preferable to Toronto—but he is not convinced that building a life in Charlottetown is much easier than in Canada's largest city. "When I came here, everything was available because there were fewer immigrants," he says. "Nowadays it's difficult."

IF TEJBIR AND LOVEPREET leave, they will have plenty of company. The provincial

nomination program has earned P.E.I. a reputation as a permanent-resident factory—a soft landing point for immigrants who may not intend to stay, or who eventually outgrow its small-scale economy and jet for bigger locales. Many people come in but many go out, leaving in their wake abandoned businesses, wasted investment in settlement resources and a local population constantly adjusting to the flux in their communities. P.E.I.'s five-year retention rate—the percentage of immigrants who remain in the province after five years—was only 31 per cent in 2022, the most recent year for which retention data is available. That's by far the lowest in the country, less than half of neighbouring Nova Scotia and one-third of Ontario's rate. (That said, the trend line is encouraging: the rate has doubled in the past few years.) The sheer volume of newcomers is so high that the province has maintained its high population growth, outmigration notwithstanding, but for locals like Erica Stanley, the constant flow is still demoralizing.

"I think we've become complacent and accepted our status as a starter province," says Stanley. "It's a place for people to do business, learn the language and then move on to their preferred destination. It's disheartening." Sentance, however, isn't concerned about the retention rate, describing the province's strategy as "throwing many at the wall and seeing who sticks."

As I researched this story, I became curious about the Mazarabakiza family: were they still on P.E.I.? And if not, where had they gone? A social media search led me to Joshua, the fourth-eldest child, who is now 26 and lives in Ottawa. He moved in 2022 in search of a tech sales job. He'd wanted to find work in that field on P.E.I., but could only get hired at a car dealership. He didn't think the province would offer enough for his long-term future.

"I love P.E.I. and the community, but I've always wanted to start a company, and I don't think I'll be able to get to the level that I want there," he says. He feels that his youth is better spent in a bigger city, where he has more opportunity to set himself up as an entrepreneur and build something larger than he'd likely be able to on the Island.

He told me that four of his seven siblings did like him and left the Island, all for Ottawa. It pained him to leave the province that took him in as a refugee 20 years ago and where his parents still live—especially after noticing how diverse Charlottetown has become. Yet he doesn't see himself going back until he retires.

P.E.I. is now on pace to reach 200,000 residents by 2027—three years earlier than expected. The influx has become so great that residents and politicians, such as Green Party Leader Karla Bernard, provincial health minister Mark McLane, and outgoing head of the provincial health authority Michael Gardam have renewed their calls to suspend immigration targets and allow infrastructure and services to catch up. They have also advocated for the government to better align its immigration with its labour-market needs, which the province has struggled to do for years. In 2023, more than a third of immigrants to P.E.I. who passed through the PNP and the Atlantic Immigration Program had experience in food, retail and accommodations, as opposed to higher-skilled occupations.

This February, P.E.I.'s Conservative government released an emergency population strategy meant to shift immigrant recruitment to those with skills in health, trades and childcare—and reduce the overall number of provincial nominees by 25 per cent. Premier Dennis King admitted the province would also have to raise the threshold for many newcomers and be more selective when recruiting immigrants. At this point, less may be more: an approach to immigration that targets newcomers with specific skills, rather than indiscriminately opening doors, could improve the doctor-to-patient ratio, supercharge the construction industry and improve living conditions enough to convince more people to stay.

SINCE THE PANDEMIC, my family visits back home have lost all of their routine. Storefronts open and close less predictably than kitchen party doors. The sound of the city has become more polyglot, with people around me speaking Arabic, Mandarin, Punjabi and Hindi. Even the city's stage offerings are more diverse. In addition to old standbys like the *Anne of Green Gables* musical, the Confederation Centre for the Arts' 2024 lineup will feature *Island Steps*, a dance show that combines Island step-dancing with Caribbean and South American dance.

Charlottetown still can't brand itself as a bustling metropolis. On most afternoons, a pedestrian can walk across its downtown streets without stopping traffic. There is still no Uber. People continue to identify one another by old family names and, with only 91,000 people in Charlottetown's metro area last year, it is still among Canada's smallest urban areas.

But it is no longer the small town it was. Pierre El-Hajjar, the Lebanese restaurant owner, thrives in that middle—he calls it the sweet spot. The rising cost of living has made his weekly sushi outing a monthly one, but he likes hunting, fishing and camping with his kids, knowing his neighbours, and driving less than 15 minutes to work. To this day, he recommends Charlottetown as a destination to friends who are looking to move to Canada. "There is opportunity here if you like to be calm and not overrushed," he says.

Joe Byrne at times barely recognizes the city he returned to 31 years ago—and his plantain problem is no more. The difference between now and the '90s, he says, is most evident on his weekly outings to St. Dunstan's Basilica, where an unprecedented diversity of background is revitalizing the congregation.

On the other hand, Nguyen and his family—as happy as they were in Charlottetown—ended up leaving not long after I spoke to them. They sold their house and moved to Vancouver this May, to be closer to Nguyen's sister. B.C.'s warmer winters and relative proximity to Vietnam also nudged them westward.

Today, news stories about runaway mortgages and clogged emergency rooms may ring more alarms than P.E.I.'s more insidious foes: rapid aging and the threat of population decline. But growth still carries more promise than a march toward death, and eschewing youth and immigration would only widen the rift between the Island and Canada's melting-pot mainland. The new island needs Black barbers for Burundian families, Middle Eastern and Asian chefs for locals, and journalists to document it all. If I had grown up in this new version of P.E.I., perhaps I would have stayed. ■