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New immigrants to Ontario must wonder how they suddenly went from being valued Canadians, whose skills our economy needs, to being publicly derided as “foreigners.” On day one of a provincial election campaign, no less.

It all stems from a Liberal platform pledge of \$12 million in tax credits for businesses to defray training costs for skilled newcomers so they can get the experience they need to work in the jobs they were invited to this country to do. Progressive Conservative Leader Tim Hudak — conveniently forgetting that his own platform offers tax credits for employers hiring recent immigrants who need language training — is denouncing the Liberal plan as “an affirmative action program for foreigners.”

Hoping for political gain, Hudak is happily stirring up tensions by claiming that unemployed Ontarians will be left behind. His party even rushed out a new campaign ad saying that “Ontarians need not apply” under the Liberal plan.

The reality is that on the basic principle of helping immigrants overcome barriers that hold them back from contributing their full potential, there is little daylight between the two parties' platforms. The Conservatives' section vowing to “create more opportunities for newcomers to Ontario” could have written by Liberal Leader Dalton McGuinty. The Liberal line that “immigration is another Ontario advantage” could fit comfortably in the PC platform.

The two leaders are not alone in any of this. Governments routinely and sensibly target employment programs to specific groups, including recent immigrants. Indeed, on the very same day that Hudak was attacking the Liberal proposal, the federal Conservative government was bragging about funding a program to help “immigrant youth in Calgary prepare for the job market.”

A targeted employment program does not mean that one group is more important than another; it simply acknowledges that different approaches may be necessary. Ontario already spends more than \$1 billion on employment training programs for everyone. On top of that, \$600 million in new programs were targeted specifically to retraining workers who lost jobs in the recession. We have programs aimed at helping low-skill workers, older workers and young workers. Tailoring a program to recent immigrants is not fundamentally different.

It remains to be seen whether McGuinty's tax credit approach, or Hudak's for that matter, would be effective in helping immigrant workers. Both parties have released far too little detail about their plans to assess how useful they might be.

But the controversy that Hudak is stirring up is not about the substance of particular policies. It's about wedge politics. On Tuesday he claimed that the tax breaks offered by the Liberals would help companies hire “anybody but you.”

That kind of language divides Ontarians into an “us” and a “them.” Creating divisions between struggling, unemployed workers and newer immigrants is dangerous to our long-term social cohesion. In Toronto, half of us were born outside Canada. There is no us versus them. They *are* us. And the faster we get newcomers into good jobs in the workforce and paying higher taxes the better for us all.

There's a lot on the line during an election and parties often go a bit overboard to score points on their opponents. Hudak's rhetoric and the PC party's “Ontarians need not apply” ad go too far. It amounts to a thinly veiled attack on immigrants.

There may be political advantage to be had in this approach; we'll find out on Oct. 6. But regardless of the outcome, this is the politics of division. It is angry. It is ugly. And it's not what Ontarians are about.



Progressive Conservative Leader Tim Hudak anti-immigrant rhetoric is pure wedge politics.

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