The Economist

Canadian multiculturalism

The more the merrier

Debates over immigration are often toxic. Not in Canada

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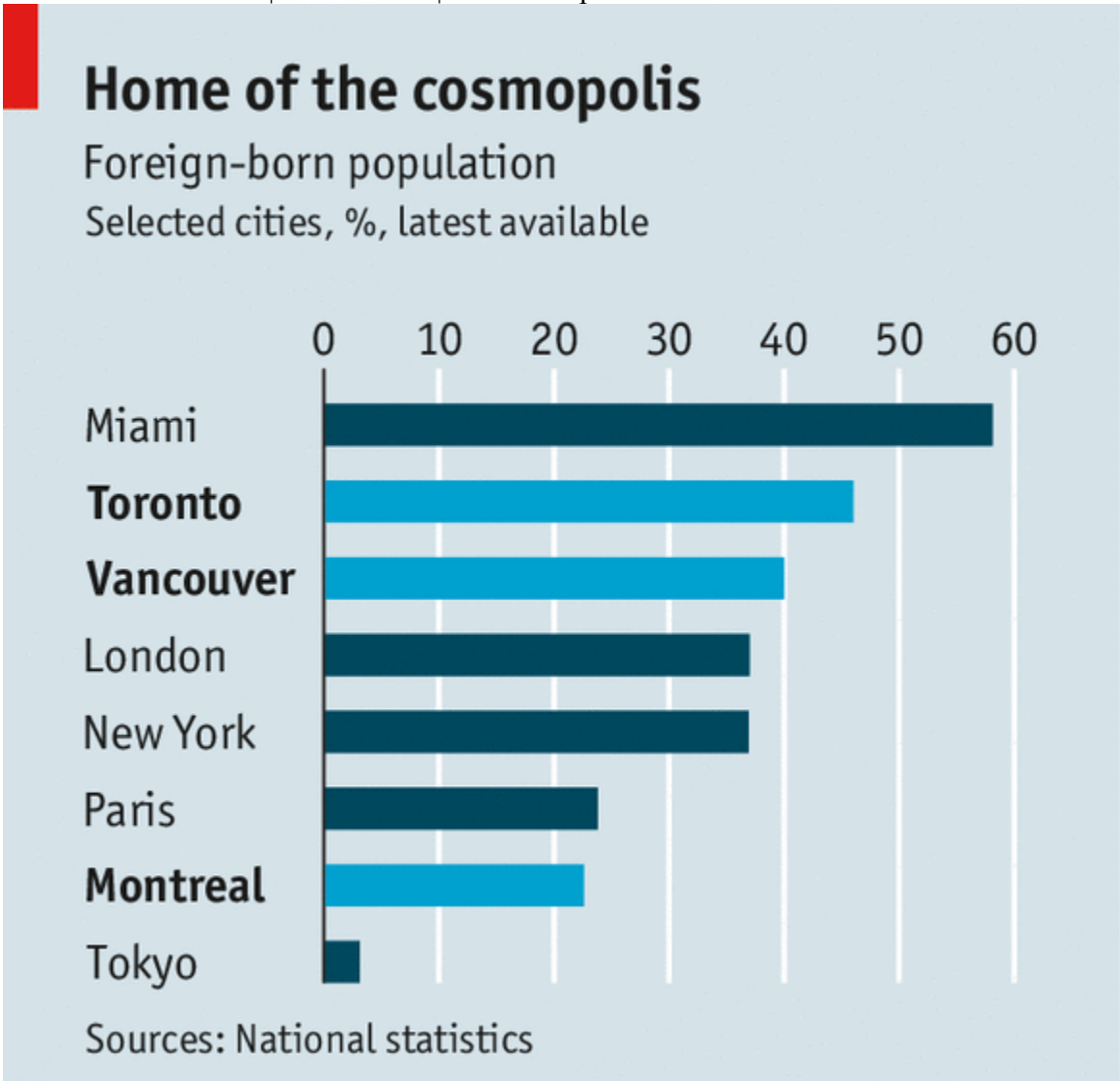

WHEN the government of the French-speaking province of Quebec introduced a bill in November to stop public servants from wearing religious symbols, it gave a community hospital in neighbouring Ontario a chance to grab some new recruits. Lakeridge Health ran an advertisement in a Quebec medical-school newspaper showing a woman wearing a hijab and stethoscope over the caption: "We don't care what's on your head, we care what's in it." Applications doubled, says Kevin Empey, the hospital's boss.

The Quebec government's proposed ban and the Ontario hospital's welcome illustrate the poles in the Canadian debate on multiculturalism. Public hearings on the law began on January 14th. Supporters say that the ban is needed to enshrine state secularism; opponents that it is a cynical appeal to xenophobia by the minority provincial government of the Parti Québécois (PQ). Either way, the prediction of Jean-François Lisée, a PQ minister, that the Quebec battle could be the last stand in Canada's multicultural experiment does not stand up to close scrutiny.

Immigration itself is not in question. Canadians, even in Quebec, overwhelmingly back mass immigration, which adds an average of 250,000 newcomers (roughly 0.8% of the population) each year. First-generation immigrants make up a bigger share of Toronto's and Vancouver's populations than in many of the world's great cosmopolitan cities (see chart).

Unlike many Europeans, Canadians believe that immigrants create jobs rather than steal them, says Jeffrey Reitz, a sociologist who has surveyed attitudes in Europe and Canada. This view is partly based on history. Modern Canada was built by successive waves of immigrants, first from Europe and more recently from Asia.

It is also a result of policies that since the 1970s have focused on admitting the most employable people. The government constantly tweaks its system of awarding points to prospective immigrants for languages, education and skills, in order to match them with labour-market gaps. Younger applicants currently

have an edge. An array of programmes, many of them focused on the ability to speak languages, help immigrants to settle in.

The Quebec dispute is not over numbers of immigrants, but how to accommodate them. In the 1970s Canada officially adopted the creed of "multiculturalism", a murky concept that celebrates cultural differences at the same time as pushing newcomers to integrate. English-speaking Canadians see multiculturalism as central to their national identity, ranking below universal health care and the Canadian flag in a recent survey by Environics, a research firm, but above ice hockey, the Mounties and the Queen.

The governing Conservatives are blunter than opposition parties about the obligation on newcomers to integrate and about cultural practices, such as genital mutilation, that are unacceptable. But their support for multiculturalism is not in question. After the latest federal cabinet reshuffle there was even a tussle over who was the senior multiculturalism minister.

By contrast, French-speaking Quebeckers have long been more tepid about the subject. Many think it undermines their role as one of modern Canada's founding cultures. The government in Quebec prefers the doctrine of "interculturalism", which emphasises assimilation into the dominant culture. This is popular in rural areas, where immigrants are few and PQ support is strong, but extremely unpopular in Montreal, where most of the province's newcomers live.

Canada's multiculturalism is not perfect. There have been rows over whether a Sikh Mountie can wear a turban or whether Muslim women can cover their faces in court. A Toronto university student sparked a furore this month by asking to be excused from group work with female students for religious reasons. The hearings in Quebec threaten to be long and acrimonious. But Canada has largely drawn the sting of a poisonous subject.

From the print edition: The Americas

