

# IT'S TIME WE ACCEPT OUR ROLE AS A MAJOR METROPOLIS

EDMONTON JOURNAL

The fastest growing city in Canada needs to redefine itself and become a true leader

9 February 2017



**PAULA SIMONS**

Commentary

Edmonton, it's time for us to put on our "big city" panties.

The new 2016 census data, released Wednesday by Statistics Canada, puts into crisp, cold numbers what we've intuitively known to be true. Our city has changed, radically, in a very short time period.

We need to change with it. We need to put aside small-town thinking and embrace our urban future.

In the last 10 years, we've added more than 200,000 people to the City of Edmonton proper — not including the surrounding region. It's as if the whole city of Regina or Kelowna picked up and moved here.

We're now Canada's fastest-growing major city, easily outstripping not just Vancouver and Toronto, but Calgary, too.

Between 2011 and 2016, the population inside the city limits grew an astonishing 14.8 per cent. That's even more than the healthy 8.2 per cent growth we saw between 2006 and 2011.

We now have an official population within Edmonton city limits of 932,546.

Between 2011 and 2016, Calgary's city population increased by 13 per cent. That's still very healthy growth, of course. But it's not quite as robust as Edmonton's — a natural reflection of the harder hit Calgary's economy

took when oil prices plummeted in 2015.

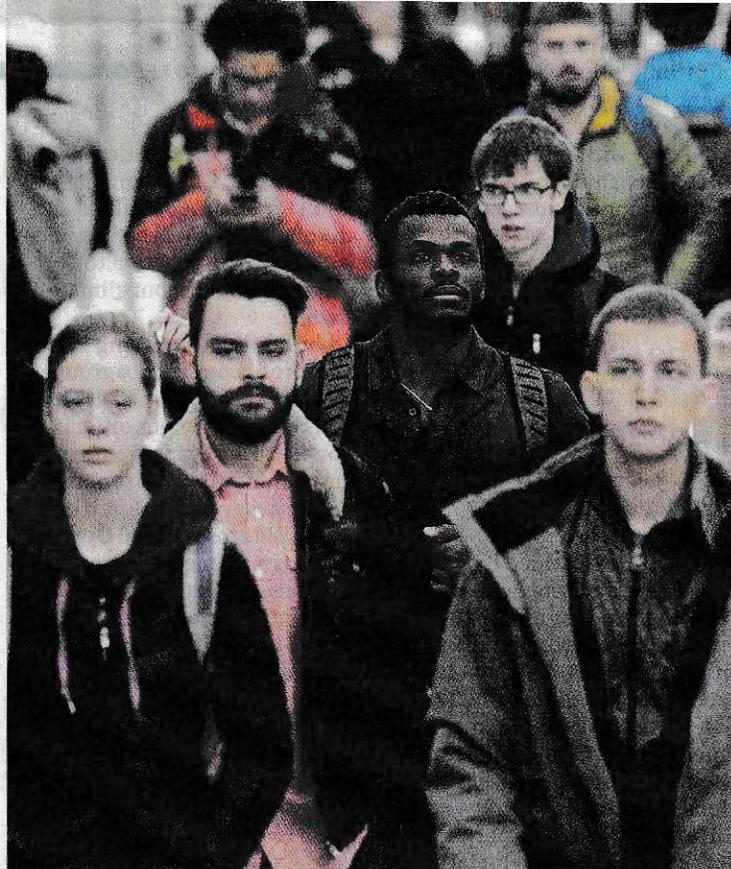
The City of Edmonton proper is now growing faster than the population of suburban "metropolitan Edmonton" — what Statistics Canada calls our "census metropolitan area," which sprawls over 9,400 square kilometres, north to Redwater, west past Seba Beach, and south to the shore of Pigeon Lake.

That's good news. In other parts of Canada, suburbs grew at the expense of their central cities. It's healthy to see Edmonton bucking that trend and drawing people within its own boundaries.

Mind you, Metro Edmonton saw overall growth of 13.9 per cent — which is still pretty spectacular, and up from 12.1 per cent growth in the previous five years. But the growth isn't even. Some of the bedroom communities, such as Beaumont, Leduc, Fort Saskatchewan and Spruce Grove, are still growing explosively, in the range of 25 to 30 per cent. But in St. Albert and Strathcona County, growth has more or less stalled.

The upshot? Metro Edmonton and Metro Calgary are now virtually the same size, with 1.32 million residents in Metro Edmonton versus 1.39 million in Metro Calgary. That means about 65 per cent of Albertans now live in our two largest metro areas.

It isn't just migration, whether it's from India or Innisfail, that's driving Edmonton's growth. We make our own babies, too, with an unusually large population of people aged 25 to 45, in their prime child-bearing years. (We'll learn more demographic details over the next few months, as Sta-



Edmonton's population boom means we should no longer allow ourselves to be treated as Canada's boiler room, Paula Simons says. DAVID BLOOM

istics Canada breaks down the census data in future reports.)

So we're big. And in spite of the softening Alberta economy, our city is getting bigger.

What does that mean?

First, it puts pressure on our public infrastructure, from schools to hospitals to fire halls to libraries to roads. Add 200,000 people to your population in a decade and you need facilities and programs and spaces to support them.

Armed with this newest data, we must fight to ensure Edmonton gets its fair share of things like seats in the House of Commons and the Alberta legislature — and our fair share of infrastructure dollars and other provincial and federal funding.

We shouldn't just use these numbers to complain — but to lead.

Mayor Don Iveson is already doing his part as chairperson of Canada's Big City Mayors' Caucus. But our business, cultural and political leaders need to do even more to get the message out that we're not your grandfather's Edmonton.

Despite the continued status

of Toronto and Montreal as Canada's two largest cities, and of Ontario and Quebec as Canada's two most populous provinces, one-third of all Canadians now live in the West.

In this census period, Calgary overtook Ottawa/Gatineau to become Canada's fourth-largest city. The cities of Edmonton and Ottawa are now virtually the same size and, within five years, Metro Edmonton will certainly be home to more people than Metro Ottawa.

And yet Edmonton still allows itself to be treated as Canada's boiler room. We who've consciously chosen to live in Edmonton grasp its virtues, or we wouldn't be here. But too often I think we carry ourselves too apologetically, as if we ourselves can't quite believe in our right to sit at the big kids' table.

It's time for us to stop accepting stale stereotypes from outsiders of what this city is and is becoming. It's time for us to start changing minds.

Starting with our own.

[psimons@postmedia.com](mailto:psimons@postmedia.com)

[twitter.com/Paulatics](https://twitter.com/Paulatics)

[www.facebook.com/PaulaSimons](https://www.facebook.com/PaulaSimons)