

Affordability, flex work prompting Ontarians to move to Quebec

CLARRIE FEINSTEIN
STAFF REPORTER

For the first time, longtime Torontonian Andrew Usher is considering buying a home. The reason? He moved to Montreal.

In March 2021, Usher uprooted his decade-long life in Toronto's west end to pursue a degree at Concordia University while continuing to work full-time remotely at his Toronto IT job.

Noticing condo prices were drastically lower in his new city, Usher decided to house hunt and is now preapproved for a \$450,000 mortgage, which can buy him a one- or two-bedroom apartment.

"I don't think these prices exist in Toronto," he said.

The average cost of a condo apartment in Toronto was more than \$820,000 in April, compared to Montreal, which is around \$410,000.

Affordability is one of the reasons experts say they're seeing a shifting trend of Ontarians moving to its eastern neighbour. For the first time since the early 1970s, more Ontarians moved to Quebec in 2020-2021 than Quebecers to Ontario, according to Statistics Canada.

Flexible work arrangements is another driving force behind the shift, as is Quebec's booming economy that is catching up to Ontario's.

"The pandemic helped expand remote work and caused housing prices to run up significantly (in Ontario)," said Marc Desormeaux, a senior economist at Scotiabank. It's part of the reason why it pushed record numbers of people to leave Ontario, he said.

Back in Toronto, Usher paid

\$1,300 for his share of an apartment he split with three people. But in Montreal, he pays \$1,200 a month in rent for his entire one-bedroom plus den apartment.

"I get to see how far my dollar goes here and how much easier it is to live. Being in Montreal has me rethinking my trajectory of where I want to live," he said.

While the migration to Quebec from Ontario is significant, the number is small, Desormeaux said.

In 2020-2021, 16,469 people moved from Ontario to Quebec while 16,370 moved from Quebec to Ontario, resulting in a net gain of 99 people, Statistics Canada said. By comparison during the five years before the pandemic, almost 6,000 more people were moving from Quebec to Ontario on average each year.

Two regions that saw significant migration were Ottawa and the border city of Gatineau. In 2020-2021, 367 people moved to Ottawa while 1,175 moved to Gatineau, said Marc Termote, an associate professor in the department of demography at the Université de Montréal.

At the beginning of the pandemic, home prices in the nation's capital, which attracts workers globally, accelerated and the number of Ottawa residents buying homes in cheaper Gatineau nearly doubled, representing about 11 per cent of the market, according to the Canadian Mortgage and Housing Corp.

Previous migrations to Ontario from Quebec were led by Ontario's stronger economy, Quebec's political unrest, and language laws that pushed out anglophones. According to a 2016 study by the Fraser Institute, between 1971 and 2015, about 600,000 people left Quebec



For the first time since the 1970s, more Ontarians are moving to Quebec than Quebecers heading to Ontario. Andrew Usher is one of them, and is now home shopping in Montreal due to the lower cost of living and condo prices.

PETER MCCABE
FOR THE
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for other parts of Canada. But the pandemic triggered a reversal.

"We're still in a period of transition. The remote work phenomenon has grown exponentially and gives further incentive for people to move," said Jack Jedwab, president of the Association for Canadian Studies. Remote work also allows Ontarians to continue working in English, insulating them from the language barrier.

Jedwab said three of his colleagues are from Ontario and enjoy the Montreal lifestyle.

One of those colleagues, Gillian Aitken, moved for a job with the association in 2019. Moving back to Toronto isn't on her radar. "I don't want to pay higher rent than I am now. I would need a pay raise to move back Toronto."

On Tuesday, Quebec adopted Bill 96 which limits the use of English in the courts and public services, imposing tougher language requirements.

But Termote said Bill 96 won't significantly hinder Ontarians moving to Quebec, as English can be used easily in Montreal. People are also more willing to adapt to French-speaking regions if the lifestyle is better, he added.

Usher, who doesn't speak French, agreed with Termote's sentiment.

"I'm more willing to learn the language just given the life I'm able to have here," he said.

There is another controversial Quebec law, however, that is making the province less attractive for some, according to a March study out of McGill and Concordia universities.

Bill 21, enacted in 2019, bars people wearing religious symbols from holding certain public-sector jobs, such as teaching and law. It has been slammed by anti-racism activists for disproportionately affecting Muslim women and creating a "second-class citizenship" for some religious minorities.

More than half of students surveyed for the study plan on leaving Quebec because of the bill, which they say led to increased harassment and discrimination. Seventy per cent of respondents said they have a more negative perception of the province since Bill 21 passed, including those who do not wear religious symbols.

On the economic front, for the first time in history, growth in Quebec last year outpaced every other province, with a GDP growth of more than six per cent.

"There is low unemployment and rapid wage increases," Termote said.

Quebec isn't the only province to profit off Ontario's migration losses in the past year, said Desormeaux. In a report, he said a record number of people left Ontario — more than 100,000 — for different provinces.

In 2021, about 9,000 Ontarians moved to Nova Scotia and about 6,000 to New Brunswick.

But Ontario, especially the GTA, will continue to remain a work destination for many. More than 198,500 immigrants arrived in Ontario last year, up sharply from 153,000 in pre-pandemic 2019, according to the province.

"Toronto is a cosmopolitan city, and a financial and a tech hub. It's a city that will always be attractive to people globally," Desormeaux said. "We need to focus on having more housing supply and ensuring policy-makers focus on making housing a priority."

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