

Bestselling author discusses economics of immigration, population declines

John Ibbitson: World population growing older quickly, which could affect global economies



Noi Mahoney • Wednesday, November 02, 2022



📷 John Ibbitson, right, journalist and co-author of “Empty Planet: The Shock of Global Population Decline,” delivers a keynote address Wednesday at the FreightWaves F3: Future of Freight Festival in Chattanooga, Tennessee. Joining Ibbitson onstage was FreightWaves’ John Kingston. (Photo: Jim Allen/FreightWaves)

Veteran journalist [John Ibbitson](#) said the pandemic caused disruptions around the world, including revealing just how fragile global labor markets are.

Ibbitson, a writer at large at Canadian newspaper The Globe and Mail, co-authored the book “Empty Planet: The Shock of Global Population Decline” along with Darrell Bricker. The 2019 book argues that the global population will soon begin to decline, dramatically reshaping the social, political and economic landscapes.

“In Canada, our immigration point system [which was invented in the 1960s] was designed to bring in doctors, engineers, software people, entrepreneurs and others who we thought would fill in the job shortages,” Ibbitson said Wednesday during his keynote presentation to open the second day of the FreightWaves F3: Future of Freight Festival in Chattanooga, Tennessee.

“The pandemic revealed to [Canada] the same thing that it revealed to the [United States] — its agricultural workers, people harvesting our crops, personal support workers, long-term care workers, truckers, construction workers — these are where the shortages suddenly loomed, when we were forced to close our doors because of the pandemic.”

Ibbitson, 67, said over the next several decades that demographics will be the key driver of the global economy as more baby boomers age and birth rates around the world decline. He used India and China as examples of countries with declining populations that will need to find solutions for their labor markets.

Population declines will directly affect economic growth, prosperity, resource demand and labor, according to the journalist. Ibbitson said the global economic system will have to adapt to these demographic changes, and countries should adopt immigration policies that could bring in more workers.

“One of the big differences between Canada and the U.S. is the way we think about immigration,” he said. “I think the reason, quite simply, is because we’ve had so much immigration for so long — that you can look at Toronto, Vancouver, Montreal or Ottawa — and say, ‘If we didn’t have these immigrants, these cities would be dying.’ We need them.”

About 25% of Canada’s current population was not born in the country, Ibbitson said.

“You couldn’t get elected for office in Canada if you opposed immigration because immigrants are now the core voting bloc in the country,” he said.

Unlike India, China and other nations that could struggle to maintain their future labor markets, the U.S. should be prospering, Ibbitson said. The United States' fertility rate, while falling, is likely to remain higher than other countries. The key for the U.S. will be maintaining reasonably high levels of immigration, he said.

"The politics [of immigration] are fraught, the degree of polarization in the United States between Republicans and Democrats, between conservatives and progressives, is huge," Ibbitson said. "But I'm not here to talk [about] politics. I'm only here to talk [about] demographics. It's not a question of ideology. If you believe in low taxes, if you believe in balanced budgets, if you consider yourself a good conservative, you must be pro-immigration. If you're not, if you don't accept immigrants, then you can't balance your budget, you can't have low taxes, you can only have escalating taxes to pay for declining quality of services needed to pay for an aging society."

Ibbitson doesn't understand an economic argument that maintains nations can prosper without immigration.

"If you're a progressive in a union, and you believe in public health care, public education, believe in investments in roads, highways and transportation on the government level, you also have to support immigration because they are the people who will come in and pay the taxes that will support the social agenda that you desire," he said.

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