

John N. Smith's
**Welcome
To Canada**

Earlier this year, Canada instituted a new refugee policy despite vociferous opposition by church and civil liberties groups. Designed to clear up an enormous backlog of refugee claimants, this legislation increased government powers of detention and deportation and represents a major step backwards from Canada's previous policy of universal access.

Given this political context, *Welcome to Canada*, focusing as it does on the sudden arrival of a group of Sri Lankan Tamil refugees off the coast of Newfoundland, might be expected to be a timely and informative addition to the debate. Unfortunately, though, the film ignores the political implications of the subject entirely and chooses to focus only on the human aspect. Despite the undeniable emotional power and integrity of the film, its central thesis – that Canadians should be more understanding of the plight of refugees – is weakened through an absence of political analysis.

Welcome to Canada is a fictional account of the encounter between members of an isolated Newfoundland community and the eight Tamil refugees they rescue, then shelter, before immigration officials arrive. The film chronicles the development of an understanding between the two groups as they learn about each others' religion, culture, and way of life. These scenes are intercut with footage of Sri Lanka, depicting the violence in that country which has led to the flight of over 100,000 of its citizens and the deaths of thousands of others.

In the tradition of the National Film Board's alternative dramas, *Welcome to Canada* was filmed on location (in Brigus South, a tiny Newfoundland town) with non-professional actors speaking improvised dialogue. Like director John N. Smith's two previous films in the genre, *Sitting in Limbo* (1986) and *Train of Dreams* (1987), *Welcome to Canada* has a strong documentary feel to it, reinforced by documentary-style camera work.

Although the film's plot superficially resembles two incidents which actually took place (the arrival of 155 Tamils off Newfoundland's coast in 1986 and the 1987 landing of 174 Sikhs in Nova Scotia), these events serve only as a point of departure. In fact, the movie carefully shies away from the controversies which followed these events, including the vicious public backlash against the refugees and (in the case of the Sikhs), the calling of an emergency session of Parliament. In doing so, *Welcome* fails to do justice to the complex issue it tackles.

Where the film does succeed is in its sensitive



Tamil refugees arrive in Newfoundland, in *Welcome to Canada*

portrayal of the Newfoundlanders and Tamils – their traditions, values, and the problems they face. In a series of low-key scenes, Smith's effort slowly builds up a picture of the Newfoundlanders' struggle to maintain their traditions despite the economic reality of a dying fishing industry. Similarly, the film portrays the Tamils' strong emotions as they try to cope with the death of one of their group, their sense of dislocation, and their uncertainty about their future in Canada.

Improvised dialogue, especially with non-professional actors, is a hit-or-miss affair, and in *Welcome to Canada*, the dialogue tends to be strained and didactic. But the magic of improvisation does sometimes work to the film's advantage, as in the scenes between a young Tamil man and Charlene, a young Newfoundland woman. These two seem to have developed a chemistry that adds to the film's realism. In another effective scene, a young girl earnestly attempts to teach a 12-year-old Tamil boy how to play checkers, failing to notice his bewildered expression. The performances of the Tamils, particularly those in the lead roles (Kasivisanathan and Kumaraselvay Karthigasoo), give one the impression that they are reliving their own experiences rather than acting.

Welcome to Canada gets its message across most effectively when it foregoes dialogue for images and music. The opening sequence, depicting the rescue of the Tamils from stormy waters and the help offered by the townspeople, communicates more about the townspeople's commitment than any of the later dialogue scenes. Similarly,

a scene portraying the Newfoundlanders at a birthday party quickly conveys their strong sense of community and tradition. Even the Sri Lankan footage, despite the fact that it is left unexplained, helps us understand the way of life the Tamils have left behind, as well as their reasons for leaving.

The film uses music – both Newfoundland and Tamil – in an extremely evocative way. A Newfoundland song about a fishing tragedy works in conjunction with footage of men repairing fish nets, underlining the danger that accompanies this way of life. Tamil music is used under the Sri Lankan footage to add to its emotional impact.

Welcome to Canada is strongest in its emotional appeal – its ability to gain the audience's sympathy for its characters. Who can help but feel for the Tamil man whose daughter has perished on the journey, and who desperately wants to arrange for her cremation in keeping with Hindu rituals?

How can one resist the warmheartedness of the Newfoundlanders who accept the Tamils unquestioningly and try their best to communicate despite language barriers? And how is it possible not to feel ennobled and uplifted in the church scene towards the end of the film, when Catholic Newfoundlanders and Tamil Hindus take turns worshipping?

It is difficult not to be moved by these scenes and the humanistic philosophy they communicate. But these emotions do not help us deal with the questions that are at the heart of the refugee issue. If Canadians are so welcoming, then why was there such a backlash after the

arrival of the Tamils in 1986 and the Sri Lankans in 1987? Why is it that Canada has institutionalized such a harsh policy towards refugees, after years of being relatively open? And why does this film – which seems to aim at increasing understanding of the situation of the refugees – back away from these questions at a time when they are crucial to the articulation of future refugee policy?

In the church scene towards the end of the film, the priest says "We pray that Canada will respond to their needs, see their tragic circumstances, and open its doors." Unfortunately, the film fails to tell us that these prayers may not be enough, and that only by coming face to face with all aspects of the issue, will anything change.

Anita Malhotra ●

WELCOME TO CANADA p. Sam Grana d. John N. Smith sc. John N. Smith, Sam Grana cam. op. David de Volpi, Roger Martin assoc. p. Paul Pope comm. relations/costumes Barbara Greene ed. rec. Jacques Drouin cf. John N. Smith, Sam Grana, Martial Ethier gaffer Roger Martin key grip Guy Remillard cam. assi. Dominique Gusset best boys Roy Holloway, Norman Bruff p. a. Wayne Baker, Gerard Hayes St-John's casting Ed Riche Tamil cast. Lois Siegel driver Leonard Power catering Gloria Bruff housekeepers Theresa Baker, Bernadette Hawkins hair Bernadette Hayes p. sec. Josephine Power l. p. (Tamils) Kasivisanathan Karthigasoo, Kumaraselvay Karthigasoo, Pathanjali Anand Prasad, Murugesu Sivanesan, Nirmalan Masilamany, Sinnakli Baskaran, Kumar Singam Nadarajah, Shanmuga Thayaparan, Beatrice Masilamany (Brigus South) Noreen Power, Brendan Foley, Madonna Hawkins, David Sullivan, Charlene Bruff, Des Walsh, Beverly Power, Peter Hawkins, Rosie Power, Ron Rowsell, Francis Power, Edward Baker, Joseph Hawkins, Clarence Hawkins, Lenny Power, Annette Clarke, Paul Pope. An NFB production.