

We need to Get Citizenship Right

Canada, someone once said, is a nation of immigrants that doesn't want any more immigrants. If that was once true, it is likely not so any longer. With its aging society and low birthrate, Canada will need plenty of immigrants in the next decades to do all the jobs – and to pay the taxes that will be needed to support our ever-expanding cadre of seniors.

We want immigrants now, but they are not going to come from the so-called “traditional” sources such as Britain, Europe, and the United States. In fact, our newcomers have not come from the traditional areas for years. Instead, Canada's immigrants will be Asians and Africans, people from the Middle East and Latin America, and we will need to consider carefully how we integrate them into our liberal-democratic and secular society, how, in other words, we make them into Canadians.

Many scholars of immigration and integration maintain that Canada has done a good job thus far. The percentages of immigrants becoming Canadian citizens is very high, and taking citizenship is not – as in some other nations – the end of the process of integration. Canadians trust that new citizens will continue to integrate into Canadian society and that their children will become hockey- and soccer-playing kids just like the native born. It may even be true.

But critics of the present system and situation disagree. To acquire citizenship after only three years is too easy. Would five years be better? To have a system that can be manipulated by immigration “consultants” who train the non-English- or non-French-speaker to pass the ludicrously easy citizenship test is a crime. Should we test language ability before immigrants set foot in Canada? To have permanent non-residents pass their Canadian citizenship on to their children and grandchildren is farcical. Ottawa tightened the rules here, but is further restriction needed? And as happened in Lebanon in 2006, to have passport-holding Canadian citizens demand that Ottawa rescue them from a country they have lived in their whole lives – and to which they return as soon as the crisis is over – turns the rights of citizenship into a bad joke. Should non-resident passport holders be required to pay income tax on their global income if they expect such service from Canada?

The Minister of Citizenship, Immigration and Multiculturalism, Jason Kenney, has been trying to push some reforms through Parliament. The public service in his department, however, is focussed on immigration, not on citizenship, and thus far has seemed completely incapable of turning its gaze to making Canadian citizenship matter. That is too harsh, perhaps. Kenney's department did issue *Discover Canada: The Rights and Responsibilities of Citizenship*, its new study guide for those seeking to become Canadians. This pamphlet (for which I was an unpaid consultant) is full of Canadian history and discussions of rights, responsibilities and values, and it even includes a flat-out condemnation of honour killings. It is a vast improvement over the 1990s study guide that was a vapid embarrassment. Presumably, a new citizenship test will flow from *Discover Canada*. It might even be a real examination that questions applicants about Canada's liberal-democratic values – and helps entrench those values in new citizens.

But let us be blunt. Reforming citizenship, like reforming immigration and the refugee process, is a hugely political issue. Every Member of Parliament from the large immigrant-receiving provinces spends more time on constituents' immigration problems than on any other subject. Every glimmer of a change in the process, rules, or requirements gets subjected to attack by ethnic associations and, even more fiercely, by the immigration lawyers and consultants who will fight to the death to protect their incomes. It is a brave government that will fly in the face of the immigration lobby. Jason Kenney, who seems to attend every single multicultural function across the nation, must know this better than anyone else. That he has actually moved to make changes in the way his portfolio functions is a tribute to his political courage – or devil-may-care foolishness.

But he's right: change is needed. Canada is certain to alter in the next few decades even more than it has over the last generation. We need to consider how to handle this demographic earthquake, and this will require serious study. The government should set up a Royal Commission on the rights and responsibilities of Canadian citizenship, defining that subject as broadly as possible. The government of Jean Charest in Quebec in 2007 created a two-person commission to examine "reasonable accommodation," in effect to study how immigrants could be best integrated into the values of Quebec society. A hot issue, carefully probed and seriously studied, turned into a damp political squib once sound recommendations came forth. A similar commission could look at the national situation whose problems are not all that dissimilar and chart a way forward.

Royal Commissions have shaped our future frequently in the past and can do so again. It will always require courage to implement change, but a serious public examination of citizenship could build a consensus on values, rights, and responsibilities and permit government to act in the national interest.

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