‘BELONGING IS WHAT MATTERS TO EVERYONE’: HOW THE INSTITUTE FOR CANADIAN CITIZENSHIP NURTURES ‘HOPE, ASPIRATION AND FULFILLMENT’

RIGHT HONROURABLE ADRIENNE CLARKSON

The Right Honourable Adrienne Clarkson, Canada’s 26th Governor General from 1999–2005, is universally acknowledged to have transformed the office during her six years at Rideau Hall and to have left an indelible mark on Canada’s history. She is the bestselling author of the 2014 CBC Massey Lectures, *Belonging: The Paradox of Citizenship, Heart Matters: A Memoir, Room for All of Us: Surprising Stories of Loss and Transformation*, and a biography of Dr. Norman Bethune. She has made the astonishing journey from a penniless child refugee to an accomplished broadcaster and distinguished public servant in a multi-faceted lifetime and has received numerous prestigious awards and honorary degrees in Canada and abroad. In 2005, Madame Clarkson co-founded the Institute for Canadian Citizenship to help new citizens in Canada integrate into Canadian life.

When I was appointed the 26th Governor General of Canada, I was the first refugee and immigrant to hold the office. I was also the second woman. When I left after six years of an exciting and innovative time, I felt that what I wanted to do was to carry on the message that my appointment had inherently advertised – that people coming to Canada could take their place in the foremost office of the land and that Canada was a place of diversity and inclusion.

With John Ralston Saul, we began the Institute for Canadian Citizenship. I wanted it to have that name so that it would reflect what I believe is one of the most important messages that I embodied and that means the most to people living in Canada: being a citizen of this country. And I wanted it to have a certain *gravitas*, which is why it’s called an Institute. I did not want it to be named after me because people can have different opinions about me as a personality or as a historical figure: but I felt that almost everybody in Canada believes in Canadian citizenship and will always believe in it.

I had the idea for the first program many years ago. I have always lived very close to the Royal Ontario Museum and the Art Gallery of Ontario. I would

see the little yellow school buses with the children of every race coming out with their teachers for a tour. And I knew the same thing happened at the Ontario Science Centre. But I always thought: "I'm happy that these kids are having the chance to go into our cultural institutions, but what about their parents? The ones who are working on assembly lines or on shift work. When would they ever have the chance to go to see a painting or to see an Egyptian mummy?" So, one of our first programs that we instituted was called the Cultural Access Pass. It now rejoices in the name CANOO. Quite simply, it gives free access to every new Canadian citizen for one year to over 1,400 cultural institutions in Canada, including provincial and national parks and a trip on Via Rail for a family of up to four children with a 50-per-cent reduction on the fare.

I wanted to make sure that anyone who has chosen to become Canadian has access immediately to all the things that have made us what we are – our art, our historical backgrounds, our continuing discoveries. And it seemed to me to be only fair: everybody working here in Canada pays income tax, and part of those tax dollars go to support our cultural institutions. So, newcomers to Canada should see where their working dollars go. I didn't want them to be intimidated or to feel that they didn't have the right clothing or wouldn't be welcomed. Luckily, the first three institutions we approached – the Art Gallery of Ontario, the Ontario Science Centre and the Royal Ontario Museum – were very enthusiastic and now the rest is history.

The CANOO app is available once you swear your oath for citizenship as an app on your phone and the benefits are tremendous. We never dreamed that CANOO would be such an enormous success and could bring new citizens immediately into the domain of not only of our national and provincial parks and all of our cultural institutions, but into a real sense of belonging. We have 300,000 alumni along with 250,000 active CANOO members. This is our most lively and exciting program, which touches and will continue to touch hundreds of thousands of Canadians. And it all began with my looking at those yellow school buses!

Another program that we had before the COVID-19 pandemic, and which operated very successfully for a long time, was our Enhanced Citizenship Ceremonies. These involved a normal group of citizens being sworn in – usually about 50 – and we would have round tables before the swearing-in where new citizens would sit with established citizens and exchange ideas and discussions. Afterwards there would be cake, coffee and a party. These in-person ceremonies were of a vital nature for everybody – new citizens got to see each other and to see the different countries they came from. And if there are about 50 citizens to be sworn in, they often come from about 20–25 different countries. We were told over and over again how meaningful it was for them to see each other in person and then to share cake, donuts and coffee afterwards.

For a few years we also had a program called 6 Degrees in which we brought together dozens of people from different countries to speak to new citizens in a two-day, free conference setting. We also carried these out in countries that wanted to do what we were doing for new citizens – Mexico and Germany. COVID-19, unfortunately, put a stop to these kinds of in-person forums, but the idea of people exchanging their thoughts about what it is to be a citizen – and what it is to create countries

in which citizenship is meaningful – will never die.

The Institute seeks new directions to help people belong right from the moment they have made the important decision to become Canadian citizens. Belonging is what matters to everybody as a human being and the longing is what we must always try to promote and encourage as a country. There's no other way in which we can continue to be a G7 country with influence far beyond our population. We have the second largest landmass of any country in the world and the weight of that should push us even with our small population into the forefront of all things that matter to human beings, so that they can behave decently and fairly towards others. That is what Canadian citizenship is about and that is what the Institute for Canadian Citizenship is guided by. In the years to come, the Institute will develop even more through its CANOO pass and other programs.

We are now facing enormous challenges in citizenship in Canada. I would never have believed that we would come to a time when people would not immediately become citizens at the end of their permanent residency. But unfortunately, problems such as housing, recognition of professional credentials and misunderstandings about students have led to a precipitous decline in the desirability of Canadian citizenship. Our challenge now is to make Canada the kind of destination it always has been – one of hope, aspiration and fulfillment.

In order to do this, we have to ensure that we are honest with our immigrants and that we can fulfill any promises that we made to them. We have to be able to provide education that they can use to perfect their capabilities, and housing where they can be lodged decently – as all Canadians should be lodged. For the first time, we are seeing that Canadians are not overwhelmingly in favour of immigration. This is a challenge which we have to meet.

We always believed that immigrants could come like us and make a difference to the country. We still have to provide the means by which that can become true. We can't simply pretend that we are the best country in the world if we don't provide a decent living, adequate accommodation and free public education, so that immigrant children can learn English and help their parents fit into their new society. These sound like very simple things, but in fact they have very complicated roots and all of us have to make sure that we work in these different dimensions to make sure that the Canada that we always dreamt of remains the Canada of our dreams.

I feel that our Institute is one which can do the research, develop the programs and be one step ahead of the curve to make sure that Canadian citizenship is maintained as the precious and yet accessible goal it has been since 1947.