TIME TO TAKE CITIZENSHIP SERIOUSLY

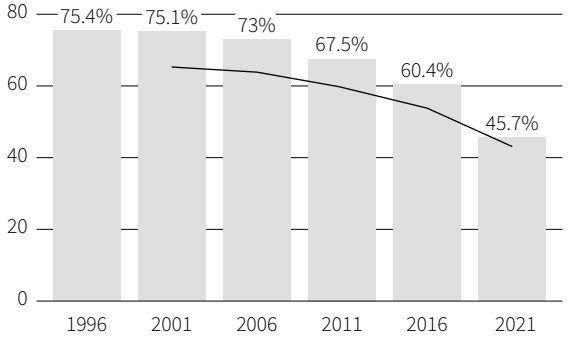
ANDREW GRIFFITH

Andrew Griffith is the author of *"Because it's 2015..." Implementing Diversity and Inclusion, Multiculturalism in Canada: Evidence and Anecdote* and *Policy Arrogance or Innocent Bias: Resetting Citizenship and Multiculturalism* and is a regular media commentator and blogger (Multiculturalism Meanderings). He is the former Director General, Citizenship and Multiculturalism Branch, Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada. He has worked for a variety of government departments in Canada and abroad and is a fellow of the Canadian Global Affairs Institute and Environics Institute.

The Census 2021 revelation that the naturalization rate of recent immigrants (five to nine years) in Canada had plummeted to 45.7 percent in the 2011–15 census period[1] compared 60.4 percent for the equivalent period from the 2016 Census provided a needed shock for the government to take citizenship more seriously. An earlier Statistics Canada study noted a longer-term trend of declining naturalization[2] which reinforced that need. The analysis indicated that the main factors influencing naturalization were family income, knowledge of official languages, and educational attainment (see Figure 1).

Some factors are outside the Canadian government's purview. Whether or not an immigrant source

FIGURE 1. CITIZENSHIP TAKE-UP – PERIOD OF IMMIGRATION, 5–9 YEARS AFTER LANDING



Source: Statistics Canada, General Social Survey, 2020.

1 https://inclusion.ca/article/newcomers-falling-out-of-love-with-canadian-citizenship/#:~:text=Data%252520collected%252520during%252520the%25252021,citizenship%252520uptake%252520over%25252020%252520years

2 www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/11-626-x/11-626-x2019015-eng.htm

country permits or prohibits dual citizenship, and the extent to which it enforces a prohibition, affects naturalization. However, recent analysis by the Institute for Canadian Citizenship indicates the net effect on naturalization is small despite the fact that a larger number of immigrants come from countries that do not permit dual citizenship.

The relative economic and other benefits of Canadian citizenship have changed for some developing countries, resulting in some immigrants returning to their country of origin or keeping their options open. However, there are a number of measures that the government could take to strengthen the efficiency, oversight and meaningfulness of citizenship.

OPERATIONAL EFFICIENCY, OVERSIGHT AND ACCOUNTABILITY

Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada, the federal department responsible for these issues, has made progress in moving to online applications and updates[3] to manage increased numbers and improve applicant service. Investment in AI and automation for routine applications is a logical next step, particularly given that citizenship is straightforward compared to the multitude of immigration pathways, and should result in faster processing. A pilot program integrating citizenship and passport applications[4] is a welcome initiative.

IRCC needs to publish more citizenship statistics on the Open Government Portal[5], as currently the portal only has monthly statistics on countries of birth with no data on citizenship applications (unlike for permanent and temporary residents along with international students). Backlog (inventory) statistics need to be integrated into the portal. Moreover, regular publishing of citizenship proofs (citizenship certificates), broken down by those submitted from within Canada and those submitted from outside Canada, should resume given these provide a reality check on the number of "lost Canadians" from earlier parliamentary testimony.[6]

While broader than citizenship as it will allow for deeper analysis of health and immigration linkages, IRCC, Statistics Canada and the Canadian Institute for Health Information (CIHI) should provide more precise information on birth tourism (women travelling to Canada on visitor visas to obtain Canadian citizenship for their child) by separating out women international students and temporary foreign workers from the overall numbers of "non-resident" births.

Moreover, MPs need to challenge those advocating the easing of citizenship requirements and policies given the disparities between claims of the numbers of people affected and actual numbers and the risks that additional complexity brings to citizen service.

While the number of "Lost Canadians" claimed was

3 www.canada.ca/en/immigration-refugees-citizenship/news/2022/01/modernizing-canadas-immigration-system-to-support-economic-recovery-and-improve-client-experience.html

4 www.cicnews.com/2023/08/irccs-citizenship-to-passport-pilot-streamlines-passport-process-for-new-canadians-0836761.html#gs.8imizy

5 Link missing

6 www.ourcommons.ca/DocumentViewer/en/40-2/CIMM/meeting-22/evidence#Int-2826800

around 200,000[7], the actual number was about 20,000[8]. Restrictions on voting rights for Canadian expatriates were lifted in 2019 but out of the estimated 3.6 million adult expatriates[9], fewer than 30,000 voted in the 2021 election[10], a tripling compared to the 2015 election but still a minuscule number. Similarly, while the number of persons subject to the first generation citizenship transmission cut-off will grow[11], it is likely that the numbers of those who have a meaningful connection to Canada will be relatively small and advocates for change[12] have relied more on anecdotes and country comparisons.

More systemically, all MPs need to recognize that not every situation requires a specific legislative solution, which only further complicates overall service delivery, as some are best handled through a discretionary grant in section 5(4) of the *Citizenship Act* or the permanent resident application route.

MEANINGFULNESS

The government needs to issue a revision to *Discover Canada*[13], the citizenship study guide, first announced in 2016 four IRCC ministers ago, and reportedly ready for ministerial sign-off for some time. The current guide, while a significant improvement from its predecessor, is dated in terms of approach, emphasis and examples, and is not aligned with the government's inclusion emphasis.

The government also needs to decide whether it intends to implement, in whole or in part, its election platform's commitment in 2019[14] and 2021[15] to eliminate citizenship fees, currently around $1,400 for a family of four. The high fees contribute to lower citizenship take-up among disadvantaged immigrants[16]. Given that citizenship provides both private benefits such as security and passports and public benefits such as greater inclusion and political participation, halving the current fees would balance private and public benefits.

The government needs to abandon its proposed self-administration of the citizenship oath[17] and revert to in-person citizenship ceremonies for the majority of ceremonies. Moving to "citizenship on a click" combined with virtual ceremonies largely removes the recognition of the immigration journey

7 www.ourcommons.ca/DocumentViewer/en/40-2/CIMM/meeting-22/evidence#Int-2826800

8 www.ourcommons.ca/DocumentViewer/en/44-1/CIMM/meeting-54/evidence

9 www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/91f0015m/91f0015m2022001-eng.htm

10 www.elections.ca/content.aspx?section=med&dir=pre&document=sep2921&lang=e

11 www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/221109/dq221109a-eng.htm

12 www.ourcommons.ca/Content/Committee/441/CIMM/Brief/BR12307891/br-external/CanadianCitizensRightsCouncil-e.pdf

13 www.canada.ca/en/immigration-refugees-citizenship/corporate/publications-manuals/discover-canada.html

14 www2.liberal.ca/wp-content/uploads/sites/292/2019/09/Forward-A-real-plan-for-the-middle-class.pdf

15 https://liberal.ca/wp-content/uploads/sites/292/2021/09/Platform-Forward-For-Everyone.pdf

16 www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/11-626-x/11-626-x2019015-eng.htm

17 https://canadagazette.gc.ca/rp-pr/p1/2023/2023-02-25/html/reg1-eng.html

and its celebration by family and friends. The government's justifications for the proposed change focusses on saving three months and unspecified savings given that "participation in ceremonies would be lower than it is currently, and there would likely be fewer ceremonies overall[18]". However, it is silent on the more substantive impact that being in a room together with other new (and already) Canadians brings in terms of belonging and inclusion. Efficiency should focus on application processing, not the ceremonial and celebratory moment.

Treating citizenship as transactional, much as a driver's licence, undermines the fundamental objective of reinforcing integration, a fundamental objective of the *Citizenship Act* since 1947[19]. Public commentary has been highly negative, as have the majority responses to the Gazette notice, and a parliamentary petition[20] was launched to oppose the change. The government should shift the relatively small needed funds from the integration program (about one billion dollars outside Quebec[21]) to maintain the in-person citizenship oath and ceremonies.

Ongoing work by the Institute for Canadian Citizenship[22] is focused on understanding the link between dual citizenship prohibitions and Canadian naturalization, disaggregating average time between permanent residency and becoming a citizen by gender, immigration category and place of birth. To further understand the reasons behind declining naturalization, a detailed comparison between Census 2021 and Census 2016 citizenship data will assess the relative impact of income, labour force participation and education.

The government also needs to set meaningful performance standards. The current standard is an 85-per-cent naturalization rate for all immigrants[23], whether recent or many years ago, essentially meaning no accountability for the government given that until the 2021 census, it always met this meaningless standard. A more valid approach, consistent with Statistics Canada methodology, would be to set the standard for recent immigrants (five to nine years) rather than all. Recent data suggests a benchmark of 75 per cent of recent immigrants would be appropriate.

Just as the government needs to strike a balance between easing the path to becoming a citizen and operational efficiency, the government needs to ensure that citizenship reinforces the sense of belonging and inclusion that citizenship brings. Efficiency improvements in application processes are needed and welcome but should not be to the detriment to the one moment in immigration journeys that celebrates and honours this achievement

18 https://canadagazette.gc.ca/rp-pr/p1/2023/2023-02-25/html/reg1-eng.html

19 https://parl.canadiana.ca/view/oop.debates_HOC2001_02/99

20 www.ourcommons.ca/petitions/en/Petition/Details?Petition=e-4511

21 www.canada.ca/en/immigration-refugees-citizenship/corporate/transparency/transition-binders/deputy-minister-2022/settling-canada-settlement-integration-overview-july-2022.html

22 inclusion.ca

23 www.canada.ca/content/dam/ircc/documents/pdf/english/corporate/publications-manuals/drr-2021-2022-en.pdf

by new Canadians. Prime ministers, immigration ministers and MPs all treasure these celebratory moments, as do the vast majority of new Canadians. It is important that this in-person moment not be limited to the few but provided to all.

REFERENCES

"Newcomers falling out of love with Canadian citizenship," Institute for Canadian Citizenship, Feb. 15, 2023.

"Trends in the Citizenship Rate Among New Immigrants to Canada," by Feng Hou and Garnett Picot, Statistics Canada, Nov. 13, 2019.

"Modernizing Canada's immigration system to support economic recovery and improve client experience," Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada, Jan. 31, 2022.

"IRCC's Citizenship to Passport Pilot streamlines passport process for new Canadians," by Julia Hornstein, *CIC News*, Aug. 16, 2023.

"Minutes of Proceedings," House of Commons Standing Committee on Citizenship and Immigration, June 11, 2009. No. 22, Second Session, 40th Parliament.

"The Canadian diaspora: Estimating the number of Canadian citizens who live abroad," by Julien Bérard-Chagnon and Lorena Canon, Statistics Canada, April 13, 2022.

"Study: A portrait of citizenship in Canada from the 2021 Census," Statistics Canada, Nov. 9, 2022.

"Study of Bill S-245," J. Randall Emery, Executive Director, Canadian Citizens Rights Council, 2022.

"Study Guide – Discover Canada – The Rights and Responsibilities of Citizenship," Citizenship and Immigration Canada, 2021.

"Forward: A Real Plan For the Middle Class," Liberal Party of Canada, Election Platform, 2019.

"Forward: For Everyone," Liberal Party of Canada, Election Platform, 2021.

"Regulations Amending the Citizenship Regulations (Oath of Citizenship)," *Canada Gazette*, Part I, Volume 157, Number 8, Government of Canada, Feb. 25, 2023.

"Canadian Citizenship: Nationality, Naturalization and Status of Aliens," House of Commons Debates, 20th Parliament, 1st Session : Vol. 2, Oct. 22, 1945.

"Petition to the Minister of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship," E4511, House of Commons Petitions, 2023.

"IRCC Deputy Minister Transition Binder 2022: Settling in Canada: Settlement and Integration – Overview," Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada, July 2022.

"Departmental Results Report 2021-22," Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada, 2022.