A PRACTITIONER'S VIEW

Integration and Civic Participation

ABSTRACT

Drawing on extensive personal and professional experiences with resettlement and integration, the author argues that integration and civic participation are concepts which are connected and interrelated. Without the active participation of all stakeholders and the political will to facilitate the full integration of newcomers on all levels in our society, civic participation cannot occur. This leads not only to a loss of the vibrancy of Canadian society, but also to long-term social problems for Canada.

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The movement of people across continents and countries can be traced back to the beginnings of human history. Historically, the need to access new resources, live in a more hospitable climate, and find protection from hostile enemies, led to the movement of people around the world leaving their immediate environment for other places. With the development of bands, tribes, chiefdoms, and states, people learned to live with others that they did not share immediate family or tribal ties with and organize themselves based on political and territorial lines. There are many examples of mass movements of a people to new places, hoping to start a new life and wishing for a better future. Moving to new areas/countries did not, however, guarantee the peaceful coexistence of people or their integration into communities.

Historically, newcomers were looked at as alien threatening the cultural and economic fabric of the established society. Foreigners were feared for having different believes, religions, and cultures. Foreigners were often kept in isolation, separated, and controlled. The ruling class often protected the society from the influences of newcomers by limiting their ability to have political, economic or social influence, while at the same time greatly benefiting from their labour. The situation today is fundamentally not that much different than from the distant past. Currently, the same culture of protectionism can be identified in our societal understandings; international border agreements between countries as well as current immigration policies that are based on protectionist attitudes among states. After WWII and with the rise of the American/Canadian civil rights movement, a general push toward the elimination of barriers to integration and participation of minorities began.

Today in North America systemic barriers and challenges to full integration continue to exist. The new socio-economic reality of globalization leads, on the one hand, to the review of international attitudes toward migration, resettlement, and integration while creating, on the other hand, a growing disparity in wealth distribution among countries and political systems. This growing disparity increases global migration; people desire to improve their lives and move to wealthier and freer societies.

In the past few years and especially after the September 11 attacks, a myriad of work has been published trying to get a better understanding of our societies by re-examining the social fabric that currently defines western culture. The lack of attention given to the issue of long-term integration of newcomers into societies has created major problems for policy makers who are struggling to find speedy and careful solutions to this issue, realizing that our existing policies and practices continue to lack genuine attempts to eliminate systemic barriers to the full participation and integration of newcomers in host societies.

Although migration of people is an old phenomenon the development of currently used and related concepts such as civil society, integration and civic participation (all of which are defined in the broadest sense), is new. Our understandings of these concepts and ideas continue to develop and change and are often influenced by historical events. In recent history we have witnessed the rise of nation-states and democratic governments. These are necessary ingredients for the flourishing of ideas and concepts such as civil society, integration, and civic participation; they, however, do not constitute a guarantee for the practical implementation of these concepts. Even with these changes we continue to witness the systemic oppression of various groups in democratic societies.

Canada, although an immigrant country, has shared many of the discriminatory attitudes often associated with Europe when dealing with the immigration/citizenship of non-Europeans to

Canada. In the recent past, systematic efforts by policy makers were made to limit the migration of non-Europeans to Canada (e.g. History of immigration of Indians from India to Canada). Only when severe labour shortages made it necessary to bring non-Europeans to Canada (e.g. history of Chinese immigrants to Canada), was a change in policy implemented. Policies were deliberately designed to insure that migrant workers did not settle permanently or bring their families with them. It is hard to believe that Canada's immigration and integration policies were discriminatory toward non-European immigrants until 1965.

The Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms and Canada's *Multiculturalism Act* provided the opportunity to analyze legislation and policy and to start eliminating/minimizing systemic racism and discrimination embedded within government policies. This has positively impacted Canada's policies on immigration. The changes in immigration policy resulted in massive increases of non-European immigrants. In the past twenty years, almost 75% of immigrants came from non-European countries. The current trend has created a new set of opportunities as well as challenges for Canada in constant need of immigrants.

Thus, Canada's policies have come along way. Comparing existing Canadian policies, practices, and attitudes toward newcomers to that of European countries, Canada seems to be in a much better place. Studies on societal attitudes toward immigration and immigrants comparing Europe to North America indicate that Canadians have by far a more positive attitude toward newcomers than most European countries. There is also a higher sense of 'belonging' among Canadian immigrants. A vast majority of newcomers embrace their Canadian citizenship and are proud to call themselves Canadian.

At the same time, newcomers to Canada continue to face numerous challenges throughout their settlement and integration. Integration is viewed as a one-way street; newcomers are expected to assimilate and adapt into the host community's way of life, leaving the onus to adapt and change on the newcomer. People make personal sacrifices to move to democratic and wealthier societies in exchange for a better economic future and a stable political system; political, economic or cultural adaptation of the host community receiving the newcomer is not expected or viewed as necessary. The host community often does not see a need to embrace the newcomer into the dominant culture. In addition, the lack of civic participation of immigrants/newcomers is viewed as a sign of apathy toward the new realities of the host society. One of the results of this 'one-way street' approach is, that while western societies have become more diverse, groups of legal citizens living in the host country for many generations remain separated from the larger community. In the past few years, policy makers as well as academics have paid more attention to the newcomer's position in society. As a result numerous research studies have been conducted and long-term integration concerns have become salient and are making it onto government and community agendas.

Discussing civic participation in particular requires a better overall understanding of the immigrants and of their host society. We need to recognize that healthy resettlement and integration should lead to civic participation and is a long-term process that requires the partnership of many stakeholders including immigrants, governments, local communities, and institutions. Throughout this process a number of distinct stages or phases can be identified. The model below (Fig. 1) shows the full continuum of services needed and the various stages that immigrants go through to become fully engaged in community life by taking part in civic affairs. It also shows that settlement and integration is a process that involves newcomers and the entire community.

Immigrants who decide to leave their country of origin behind and establish themselves anew in an unfamiliar place are people of courage. Regardless of past experiences, education, and resources, the resettlement process remains a stressful and harsh experience. Learning a new language, establishing basic necessities, managing family life, finding jobs to survive, and connecting to the larger community, are just the beginning steps of a long journey. We need to fully recognize the importance of the sacrifices that immigrants make by investing time, finances, and other resources to come to Canada in the hope to integrate and become full participating members of society. In many cases the desired environment is, however, not created. This is often due to the lack of engagement by all necessary stakeholders in the process of integration. As a result, immigrants become discouraged and amalgamate in smaller communities, separated and alienated from the larger society.

As the above model shows, civic participation should be looked at as the ultimate goal of immigration. We need to recognize that immigrants need to have a fair and positive experience in their settlement and integration process and that these positive experiences lead to the willingness and capacity of the immigrant to participate in civic affairs. The sense of 'belonging' and the willingness to participate is developed only if newcomers are valued, respected, and given opportunities to reach their full potential in the host country.

We in Canada have a relatively positive experience with the participation of newcomers or immigrants in all aspects of our society. Our diversity is reflected in many areas and on many levels in society; however, overall improvement in the area of diversity and diversity representation has been slow. Complex barriers to the full recognition of the newcomer's potential continue to exist and need to be addressed. This includes analysis of possible institutional barriers to immigrant integration in key areas. Key areas in the integration process include, but are not limited to:

- access to initial and long-term settlement services
- language training
- access to employment
- cultural orientation
- orientation to the culture of Canadian workplaces
- recognition of qualification and experience
- anti-racism/anti-discrimination policies
- family reunification
- immigration status, and
- building sustainable communities

Table 1 – Immigration and Integration Continuum

Pre-Immigration	Initial Settlement	Settlement	Transition	Full Participation
	Integration			
Provision of basic information for immigrants to help them know what they are coming to (manage expectations) Experiences will be broad and varied based on individual need Tools for inquiry and research are important (e.g. website information packages)	Minimize anxiety by satisfying basic human needs including housing, food, clothing, health care (e.g. post traumatic stress), and safety High level of dependence May cover a period from a few days to 6 months Variety of initial settlement services	Broad skills and understanding developed in areas such as language, social network (friends), entry job, cultural norms and traditions, parenting, financial matters, etc. Typically one to three years in this stage Strong and clear partnerships required between CCIS and others to meet diversity of needs	Start to achieve self-sufficiency through advanced language skills, training in desired profession/career Securing employment	Make transition to mainstream community services Success in having sustainable employment, health, and family life Reliance on CCIS diminishes Community has capacity for successful integration Becoming part of the community may take form of volunteerism, citizenships, etc.

Source: CCIS Strategic Planning Steering Committe analysis, November 2004.

Research suggests further that immigrants and refugees with academic and professional qualifications, who have been trained outside of Canada, also continue to encounter numerous barriers. These barriers include:

- minimal Canadian employer contacts
- lack of information about available programs and services
- misunderstanding of the culture of Canadian workplaces, and
- impracticable requirements for licensing and accreditation where the final authority for assessing and recognizing foreign credentials resides mainly with employers, professional and regulatory bodies, and education institutions

The failure of countries to find solutions, to the most severe political and social problems associated with immigration, integration, civic, and political participation, combined with lack of a vision for the integration of newcomers, results in serious social problems. A holistic approach to integration is needed to ensure the development of integration policy. This includes the formulation of a common definition of integration/civic participation and the design of short and long-term strategies and measurement tools to deal specifically with integration. Ongoing inter-level government communication and coordination to improve overall services in all areas of integration is a necessity. In addition, policy changes on the federal and provincial level must be implemented more expediently. Fragmented and ad hoc changes have taken place with respect to integration/civic participation processes. While current policies may exist on paper, there has been a lack in practical implementation of these policies. Moreover, there needs to be a redefinition of the process and meaning of 'engagement' that incorporates a better understanding of the changing nature of communities. This redefinition includes taking measures to encourage newcomers to participate in community activities that directly benefit themselves or their families. For example, involvement in community associations, sport leagues, social charitable groups, children and youth activities, community agencies, and school councils are some ways to actively engage and participate in civic life.

Indeed, there is far more to civic participation than political involvement, and meaningful engagement in the political process is in fact often the longer-term outcome of other kinds of civic participation. Civic participation starts at the level of voluntarism and smaller more local organizations. Thus, education and training on volunteerism should be provided for newcomers to facilitate their engagement within larger community organizations.

Capacity must also be built within ethno-cultural communities to encourage larger community engagement, and a strategy must be developed to attract and maintain newcomers as association members and volunteers at all levels.

Last but not least, it is essential that new Canadians become educated on the nature and functioning of the Canadian political system, and that there is a means to facilitate their engagement in the political process at all levels. One specific way to do this is to review current voting eligibility in civic elections in order to allow newcomers to vote at an earlier stage in their resettlement in the community. Currently, it takes an average of 5-6 years for newcomers to become eligible to vote in elections. Paradoxically, newcomers are allowed to become party members and vote for party leaders during party leadership campaigns. Political parties have taken advantage of the immigrant vote to influence leadership races, however, true political participation has been denied to new immigrants.

To conclude, integration and civic participation are concepts that are connected and interrelated. Without the active participation of all stakeholders and the political will to facilitate the full integration of newcomers on all levels in our society, civic participation cannot occur. This leads not only to a loss of the vibrancy of the Canadian society, but also to long-term social problems for Canada.