CITIZENSHIP IS THE WAY A COUNTRY BELIEVES IN ITSELF*

ABSTRACT

This abbreviated version of a speech delivered at The Hague provides context for the aims and activities of the Institute for Canadian Citizenship. It explores how Canada's unique history and geography have shaped our conscious egalitarianism and instinct to help others, reflecting on our experience as a nation of immigrants, in which respect for difference is fundamental to our identity and reflected in our democratic life.

THE RIGHT HONOURABLE ADRIENNE CLARKSON

The Right Honourable Adrienne Clarkson served as Canada's 26th Governor General from 1999 to 2005 and is universally acknowledged as having transformed the office of the Governor General. Ms. Clarkson is the Founder and co-Chair of the Institute for Canadian Citizenship, a national institution mandated to create a new and vital conversation about the rights, obligations and significance of Canadian citizenship.

I was, and am, a child of Diaspora – someone who didn't belong anywhere – and I understand the everlasting anguish of that. When my family made its way from Japanese-occupied Hong Kong to Ottawa in 1942, there was no formal structure and none of the many associations that now exist to integrate newcomers into Canadian society existed at the time. We were very fortunate that a number of people took interest in us: my father's work colleagues, members of the Anglican Church, the local pharmacist, our neighbours.

Helping neighbours was an instinctive Canadian action, and it is part of the explanation for the kind of society we have produced. There is trust and curiosity among our citizens and the longstanding sense that we can help others. When called upon to defend the people in Europe or in Asia, Canadians rushed to take up arms, go overseas and fight on behalf of people they'd never known and from whom they asked nothing in return. Our armies have been almost entirely volunteer armed forces, and at the end of World War II, we had the third largest army in the world.

That nobility of feeling in the volunteer who comes to the rescue of people in distress is something that has coloured our national psyche, making it possible for us to accept others from around the world. Canadians have learned to live with diversity, to respect difference and to be mindful of the vulnerable. Perhaps this is because we were a pioneer society of loss and hardship – poor people coming to a poor country. What did we have to lose?

In contrast, European countries have known invasion, aggression and occupation. Does that loss – not only of land but also of selfhood – feed a sense that somehow if others come and they are not like you, they will take something away from you? I think such questions that go beyond economics and statistics could be examined in a way that would be healthy for nations struggling with immigration.

Canadians welcomed millions of displaced persons arriving from Europe in 1947. We took 60,000 Hungarians after the Uprising in 1956. Two decades later, in the 1970s, when the Vietnamese boat people were adrift on the high seas and needed refuge, our government agreed to take 25,000 of them in. But seeing the suffering of these people and their children and knowing the aftermath of the war in Vietnam, the Canadian public felt that this number was not high enough. Synagogues, churches, volunteer groups and families offered to sponsor and take responsibility for twice as many. Eventually 75,000 boat people came to Canada during that period.

Today, three quarters of Canadians believe that immigrants have a positive influence, compared to only 52% of Americans. We have found that acceptance of immigrants rises as immigration increases, and we have made diversity part of our sense of identity. In 2003, 85% of Canadians said multiculturalism was more central to Canadian identity than either bilingualism or – imagine this – hockey.

Our experience shows that diversity really works best when there are more than two groups. It reminds me of what Voltaire said when he went in exile to England and noticed the many religious sects and varieties of worship there, compared with a very Catholic France. He hypothesized that it was best to have many beliefs and religions so none could be tyrannical.

Conscious egalitarianism is one of the reasons why citizenship has always been encouraged for immigrants to Canada. With a few unfortunate exceptions, we have always wanted them to become citizens and have a stake in the country – whether in the land given to them by the government, or in something more abstract such as the concept of freedom or the ability to learn.

One of our finest philosophers, Charles Taylor, says "A prolonged refusal of recognition between groups in a society can erode the common understanding of equal participation on which a functioning

liberal democracy crucially depends." We have depended upon a knowledge of complexity to become the kind of country we are. In a pluralistic society such as ours, people want to be recognized for what they are, not for what other people often mistakenly see them to be. This is crucial to both an individual's and a nation's sense of identity.

And that is why citizenship is so central to our immigration policy. When we bring people to Canada as immigrants, *we choose them as future citizens.* They can become legal Canadians within three to five years of arriving, and we assume that they will take on all the same responsibilities as other citizens, obey our laws and pay taxes.

Citizenship is a fixed menu, not a self-serve buffet where you can pick and choose. Once you are adopted in the family of your fellow citizens, you accept the good with the bad. We expect newcomers to buy into a society in a way that is useful to the society but also helpful to them as people. And they can do this only if they are citizens and not kept in some kind of migrant limbo.

Full citizenship begets full participation in society. As a result of this attitude, Canada has the highest proportion of foreign-born legislators in the world. In Canada, 19.3% of people were born outside our borders, and in 2007, 13% of our members of Parliament were foreign born as well. It's impressive that Chinese, Sikh, Muslim and Hindu MPs have been elected in diverse ridings made up of voters who are not predominantly of the same backgrounds as these MPs.

One of our greatest thinkers, Northrop Frye, said "We participate in society by means of our imagination or the quality of our social visions." And Canadians see that the participation of immigrants has made us a better country. Our highest civilian honour – the Order of Canada – has as its motto "They desire a better country." We are always striving for something more; we know we are not finished.

At the last Citizenship Ceremony I presided over as Governor General two years ago in Calgary, there were 51 new citizens. They came from Azerbaijan to Venezuela, from Australia to Vietnam, from Algeria to the United States: 37 different countries in all.

This rich diversity is reflected in Canadian schools, which have always been key to our success in accommodating newcomers into society. Well-funded public education builds a cohesive society with shared values that are internalized and sustained from one generation to the next. Universal access to schools removes barriers to inclusion and provides a democratic structure where all children are treated as equals.

Public libraries have played the same role. During the Depression, jobless men flocked to the public libraries in Regina and Saskatoon to read. Libraries were the foundation for many immigrants' lives, including mine. Canadian librarians have known this: 90 years ago, the Central Library of Toronto started carrying Lithuanian, Ukrainian, Russian and Polish books.

Young people find libraries a great meeting place. Like coeducational schools, they encourage fraternization. Intermarriage becomes inevitable when young people learn, attend dances, play sports and cheer for the same teams together. In the latest Census, 6% of people between the ages of 24 and 35 are intermarrying. That's five times greater than a generation ago.

Education is essential to any discussion of citizenship because our immigration policy has always placed an emphasis on skilled workers and those who have sufficient language skills to participate in the economy. New citizens have a drive to succeed, to make up for any loss they perceive they sustained from leaving their country of origin. Second generation immigrants typically earn more money per year than Canadians who have been here for two or three generations.

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One of our greatest writers, Margaret Laurence, said just before she died, "If I could ask one thing of all of you [other Canadians], it would be to feel in your heart's core the reality of others."

I think that is what we should always be trying to do. When new arrivals have the chance to learn the civic political principles upon which our values are founded and are expected to take their place within our society, it is important that they never fear becoming victims of prejudice or being prevented from making their own choices. They should know that their reality is felt by all of us.

Some immigrants may want to seek shelter and customs within their respective groups, but they should not feel that they are forced to remain in those groups. Our society can help them learn not just the language but how to dress for winter and embrace freedom of choice and speech. I'm convinced that ghettos are created only if ethnic groups feel rejected by the mainstream society.

The Koran says that mankind is "a single soul made by a single Creator." And in Darwinian terms, every human being on this Earth is at exactly the same stage of evolution. We share genes and are equal. We need to know this and make it work for us.

A country like Canada has come out of overtly racist attitudes – in its treatment of the Chinese, in its internment of Canadian-born Japanese during World War II. It is a remarkable thing that we can still regard our relationship with the Aboriginal people with hope, considering that we did not live up to our side of the treaties in which they ceded their land to our settlement. They were here first; they welcomed Europeans and shared the wealth of this country.

We should all listen to Chief John Kelly, an Ojibwa, who said 30 years ago, "As the years go by, the Circle gets bigger and bigger. Canadians of all colours and religions are entering the Circle. You might feel that you have roots somewhere else, but in reality you are right here with us." This metaphor of inclusion is becoming part of our psyche.

When the province of Alberta entered confederation in 1905, Sir Wilfrid Laurier – our first Francophone Prime Minister – said "Those who come at the eleventh hour will receive as fair treatment as those who have been here a long time….We do not anticipate and we do not want any individual to forget the land of their origin or their ancestors. Let them look to the past, but let them also look to the future....Let them become Canadians."

When new citizens take their oath to Canada, it is very often with tears in their eyes. A Somali said to me at my last citizenship ceremony, "You know, it's not that we are trading one country for another. We never had a country. And now we have one."

That is what is important about Canada: That it takes in the dispossessed, the homeless, those seeking a better life and gives them not just a country, but full acceptance of their worth as an individual human being.

Much of my life since the end of my period as Governor General has been taken up with my Foundation, the Institute for Canadian Citizenship, which wants to help integrate new Canadians into mainstream Canadian life as quickly as possible. One of our goals is to create more community citizen-ship ceremonies. Ritual is important when changing your nationality. Our aim is to have communities, large and small, welcome new Canadians with human contact right at that point where they can socialize with well-established Canadians, some of them Order of Canada recipients. With 6 million volunteers in Canada – roughly 20% of our population – we have no trouble finding people to attend.

The other thing our Institute does to help citizenship is make it possible for people coming to Canada to understand what has made us Canadians. We are working out a system of giving them free vouchers and tickets to museums, concert halls, operas, art shows. I want new citizens to feel at ease in our culture, to have access to everything, to feel they understand what we are creating in the arts.

I also want to emphasize the relationship to nature, which Canadians grow up with and which perhaps is the most foreign to many of our new citizens. Our relationship with the wilderness is very special and is making us leaders in ecological and environmental matters. Institutions like the Nature Conservancy of Canada, the Canadian Wildlife Federation and a host of others are dedicated to keeping our wilderness in as good a condition as possible. We are aware of the fragility of the ecosystem, the importance of our North and the degradation that may result from the melting of the polar ice cap.

The feeling for the "Other" that we have developed comes, I think, from being more linked to the North than to the South. Our Northern climate has created a character for Canadians that is both sturdy and compassionate. It comes from understanding that you too might be standing outside freezing at –minus 40 degrees, knocking on someone's door – and that they would take you in.

I hope other countries can take something useful out of our experience within the context of their own histories and narratives. We have seen the unfortunate events involving immigrants in the Netherlands, France and Germany, and it surprises us. We very much admire Europeans for their culture, the beauty of their cities, the resilience of their populations. Eighty percent of young Canadians believe that "other cultures have a lot to teach us. Contact with them is enriching for us." For Canadians, the grain of the foreign in our oyster-like mass becomes the pearl.

Recently a poll was conducted among Muslim citizens living in Canada. Ninety-nine percent said they were proud to be Canadian, and 91% said Canada is on the right track as a country. Seventy-seven percent of them said that Muslims are better treated here than in other countries.

This may be because established Canadians don't feel that newcomers are taking their jobs. And when Canadians are asked about false refugee claims, the majority state that they see the system as the problem, not the people. Just as 75% believe that immigrants have a positive effect on the economy, it is commonplace to hear people talk in a matter-of-fact admiring way about how hard immigrants work.

I once saw a 1913 photograph of a group of Scandinavian immigrants in Larchmont, Ontario, wearing as many layers of wool as possible, huddled around a blackboard on which the "Duties of the Citizen" were written. These duties were listed as:

1. Understand our government.
2. Take an active part in politics.
3. Assist all good causes.
4. Lessen intemperance. [i.e., don't drink too much!]
5. Work for others.

I think most new citizens want to follow those precepts and believe that if they do, they will be participating fully in our society. And I believe that this kind of citizenship is the only way in which a country can continue to grow – in its understanding of itself and the world.

References

Adams, M. 2007. *Unlikely Utopia: The Surprising Triumph of Canadian Pluralism*. Toronto: Viking Canada, 240 p.

Note

* The author gratefully acknowledges Michael Adams' 2007 book *Unlikely Utopia – The Surprising Triumph of Canadian Pluralism* as the source of the statistics and factual statements concerning Canadians' attitudes towards immigrants, multiculturalism and diversity, the positive feelings of Muslim Canadians towards Canada and the income levels of second generation immigrants.