

## **Let's Talk About Canadian Citizenship**

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Canada's successful approach to citizenship is being threatened by current trends in immigration policy.

Last weekend, German Chancellor Angela Merkel summed up her country's failure to integrate a large number of Turkish "guest workers" and their children with a stark statement: she announced that multiculturalism in Germany had "failed utterly." It would be understandable if this remark agitated Canadians. Canadian society, arguably more than any other, has adopted "multiculturalism" not just as a policy framework but as a cornerstone of our national identity. When Canadians are asked to state, in their own words, sources of their pride in Canada, multiculturalism comes in fourth – tied with health care and in line behind our democracy, our quality of life, and a caring/humanitarian outlook.

Does the fact that Germany's Turkish guest workers (and even their German-born children) are isolated and frustrated hold lessons for Canada? It certainly does. The crux of Germany's current challenge, however, is not multiculturalism. It's citizenship. Germany's Turkish guest workers had no path to citizenship and were thus excluded from many important aspects of German life, from educational opportunities to entrepreneurship (not to mention political rights). They lived in ethnic ghettos, and their children, even those born in Germany, were also denied citizenship. (Germany has changed its citizenship policies in recent years, but Merkel's speech addressed the social conditions that have resulted from the policies of the foregoing decades.) In contrast, Canada has encouraged its newcomers to acquire citizenship after three years of permanent residence, and any child born in the country is automatically granted citizenship. Approximately 84 per cent of all eligible immigrants to Canada have attained citizenship.

These high rates of citizenship acquisition have enabled immigrants' political participation. It is not a mere coincidence that Canada has proportionally more foreign-born legislators than any other society and that Calgary recently became the first large Canadian city to elect a foreign-born, visible-minority mayor. Broad citizenship uptake has ensured that immigrants have equal access to public life and social services, and it has produced an atmosphere of formal equality that is far from universal among countries with substantial immigrant populations.

But Canada's approach to citizenship, while broadly successful to date, remains a work in progress and is being threatened by current trends in immigration policy. In 2009, temporary workers living in Canada outnumbered permanent residents arriving in the

country. Many of these temporary workers will have access to permanent residency, but a significant and growing proportion will not.

The assumption of the temporary foreign worker program is that the workers who arrive under its auspices will leave when Canadians no longer need their labour. The reality in Germany and other European countries tells us that these people do not simply go home. (The Swiss playwright Max Frisch sums up the complications of shifting labour across a map: “We called for workers, and human beings came.”) Many remain in their new country and become part of an unrecognized, undocumented, and vulnerable underclass.

Over time, Canada’s temporary foreign worker program – and especially a pilot program that focuses on drawing low-skilled temporary workers into the country – is creating an ever larger group of people who do not have access to permanent residence and who may end up living within our borders as undocumented workers. Even those who do have access to permanent residence will have to wait longer than previous cohorts to gain citizenship, since their years spent in Canada as temporary workers or students will not count toward residency requirements. The delay – and especially the denial – of citizenship acquisition are worrisome trends because seeking citizenship is both a sign of integration and an enabler of engagement, contribution, and participation.

At the very least, Canada needs to make sure that no one living in this country ends up in permanent citizenship limbo – especially not the kind of intergenerational limbo that the children of guest workers in Germany have experienced. To let this happen would be to replicate Germany’s failures at precisely the moment some German leaders are resolving to replicate Canada’s successes by adopting a real policy of integrative multiculturalism (by whatever name).

But we need to do more than merely avoid the obvious problems of guest-worker marginalization: we need to talk frankly about the nature of citizenship in a world increasingly defined by mobility and migration.

Some Canadians were dismayed when, in the summer of 2006, thousands of Lebanese Canadians who had been living in Lebanon or visiting for extended periods were evacuated at Canadian expense amid Israeli bombing in the region. If these people were Canadian, why were they living abroad? Were they “Canadians of convenience” as some commentators alleged, or can good Canadians spend time outside Canada – as thousands of “snowbirds” do each winter in Florida and Arizona? Is citizenship about taxes for services? Voting? Residence? Military service? Speaking French or English (or French and English)? Is citizenship a passport or is it a sensibility – a feeling of belonging and a willingness to contribute?

A robust national conversation about the nature of Canadian citizenship and how people can act as good citizens is overdue. This conversation has important implications for newcomers and the Canadian-born alike.

We believe Canadians should be talking seriously about what is working and not working when it comes to the integration of immigrants and their children. But we must work hard to avoid the trap of attacking or defending a nebulous notion of “multiculturalism.” Canadian multiculturalism is not a single, static practice that we can declare to have succeeded or failed. It has been evolving since it was adopted from “celebrating differences” to successful integration and will continue to evolve. Part of helping it evolve toward greater success and effectiveness is to talk openly about how Canadians live, work, and govern themselves and how our policies and institutions can promote full participation in this society, which has already cast its lot with diversity and immigration.

A thoughtful conversation about citizenship is a great place to start.

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